



Open Innovation in Hospitality

REPORT 2026

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FOREWORD BY ANDREA MONTI

CEO of EHL Next

FOREWORD:

Why Open Innovation matters more than ever

The driving force behind the progress of humanity has always been innovation, and rarely have we felt it to be as crucial as today.

The challenges shaping our times – from geopolitical fragmentation and resource scarcity to climate urgency and exponential technological change – demand that we fundamentally rethink which purpose we are pursuing, what challenges are worth tackling, how the innovation process is designed, and how we implement solutions.

The age of solitary genius and closed research silos is over. The future belongs to those who can turn collaboration into their greatest competitive advantage.

Open innovation, a term popularized by Henry Chesbrough (2003), embodies this new paradigm. It is “the use of purposive inflows and outflows of knowledge to accelerate internal innovation”; the art and discipline of blending internal capabilities with external knowledge from startups, universities, citizens, and governments, to create solutions that no single actor could imagine and implement alone.

The urgency and momentum of open innovation is undeniable: 80% of corporates consider open innovation important or mission critical, up from 67% in 2023 (Sopra Steria, 2025), and 71% plan to increase their investment in open innovation in the next years (Capgemini Research institute, 2023).

In a world where instability reduces resources and increases risk, open innovation offers a pathway to resilience. By pooling expertise and sharing infrastructure, organizations can continue to advance even when budgets disappear, or supply chains are broken (APQC, 2021). It allows nations and industries to strengthen technological sovereignty through intelligent interdependence – an ecosystem where ideas circulate freely and progress accelerates collectively.

Artificial intelligence amplifies this transformation: as an ecosystem technology, AI thrives on collaboration. If used wisely, it can exponentially create value that manifests when data, ethics, and human creativity intertwine across organizations and disciplines (Chin et al., 2024). Open Innovation connects the dots by enabling shared experimentation and responsible deployment.

The story of innovation has always been one of connection – of ideas meeting across boundaries to create something greater. Today, as humanity faces one of its most complex transitions, Open Innovation stands as our most powerful tool for renewal and change, and we should embrace it with boldness, enthusiasm, and altruism.

Andrea Monti,
CEO of EHL Next



Open Innovation by Numbers



80%

of corporates now consider open innovation important or critical (up from 67% in 2023)



75%

say open innovation is critical to addressing complex business issues



65%

success rate in open innovation initiatives (up from 58% in 2023)



65%

of organizations report improvements in environmental sustainability indicators as a direct result of open innovation initiatives

An abstract graphic design featuring several overlapping circles and curved lines in a light blue color. The lines are thin and some have small circular dots at their ends, creating a network-like or orbital pattern. The background is a dark blue gradient.

INTRODUCTION

A Natural Fit: Open Innovation and Hospitality DNA

Open Innovation has become a cornerstone of strategic renewal across industries (Bogers, Chesbrough, & Moedas, 2018), and nowhere does it resonate more naturally than in hospitality.

At its essence, Open Innovation is the practice of listening to other experiences and merging contributions from all stakeholders, be they employees, guests, startups, technology providers, research institutions, or even competitors.

In the same vein, the hospitality industry has always been grounded in human-centric thinking and anticipating needs (EHL Insights, 2024). Designing and delivering meaningful experiences is impossible without empowering individuals to deliver authentic care in real time.

This alignment makes Open Innovation a natural extension and complement of the DNA of hospitality. The core principles of hospitality, empathy, anticipation, adaptability, and trust, mirror open innovation's own foundations of transparency, collaboration, and shared learning (Chesbrough, 2003; Bogers et al., 2018). Both philosophies thrive on the belief that the best experiences emerge when people connect, exchange ideas, and co-create value.

In practice, this affinity means that innovation in hospitality extends beyond technology or product improvement and rather revolves around improving the quality of human interactions, between guests, employees, partners, and communities. Open Innovation magnifies this potential by turning the hotel, cruise ship, restaurant, or event venue into a living laboratory where insights flow across boundaries.



Beyond Hospitality: Human-centricity in the service economy

While hospitality exemplifies human centric business, its principles extend naturally to all service driven industries, from healthcare and education to mobility and wellness, from retail to tourism and more.

These sectors share the common ambition of delivering value through empathy and meaningful engagement (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Open Innovation provides these industries with the mechanisms to translate their human-centric ideals into structured collaboration with tangible impact. Including everyone from customers to partners in the innovation process results in more agility in responding to shifting expectations. Put simply, the focus moves from creating products for users and customers to co-creating experiences with them (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).



Technology, AI, and the next challenges of Open Innovation

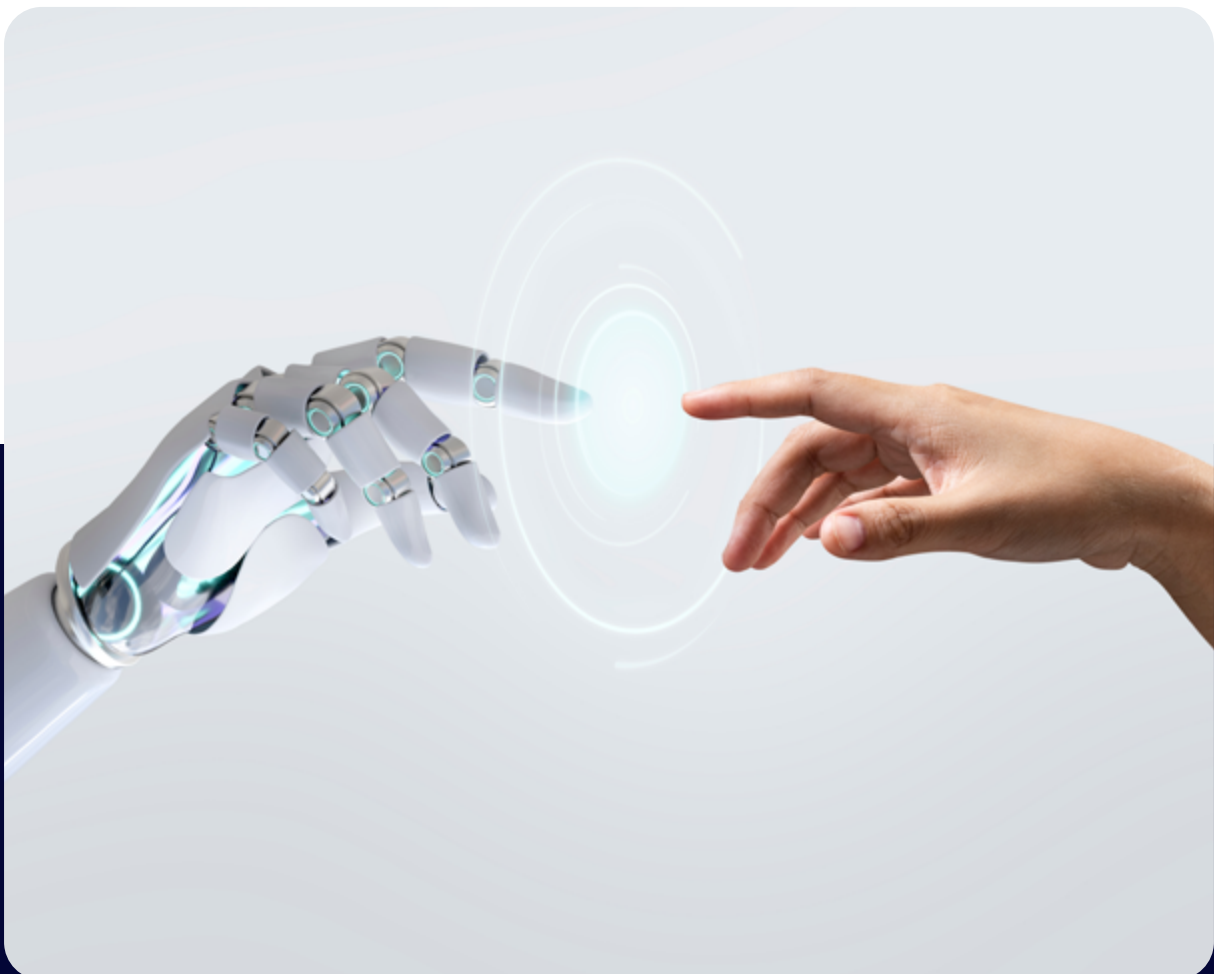
Artificial intelligence represents both the biggest opportunity and the greatest test for the hospitality industry.

It is in many ways already a part of operations from predictive maintenance and revenue management to digital concierge services (Kim et al., 2025). While it is not equipped to create differentiation on its own, it can do so when used to enhance empathy and creativity (Filimonau et al., 2025).

Open Innovation can contribute to ensure that AI adoption in hospitality remains aligned with human values and keeps ethical consideration in

the equation. 57% of corporates have completed AI-focused Open Innovation projects over the last two years, and 70% of corporates who have run AI collaborations view startups as vital to their AI strategy (Sopra Steria, 2025).

The industry does not need a replacement of human interaction. Instead, by co-developing solutions with all stakeholders – staff, guests, and technology partners – allows businesses to make new tools that serve as invisible enablers, allowing employees regain time and freedom to create moments of genuine hospitality and the emotional high points that define memorable experiences (Wang et al., 2025).



EHL BUSINESS SCHOOL AS A CATALYST FOR HUMAN-CENTRIC INNOVATION:

Building the platform for Open Innovation in hospitality and service economy

Embedding open innovation in the hospitality and service economy ecosystem requires new structures and mindsets

Many forward-looking organizations are already developing open innovation labs and collaborative platforms that allow experimentation with startups, tech firms, and academia.

Open innovation techniques such as innovation sprints and crowdsourced ideas platforms, alongside other methodologies, need to become a standard, as all such practices constitute the foundations to fruitful innovation.

This openness, however, cannot be sustained without organizational frameworks adapting, as collaboration requires intentional structure. Research shows that corporates with dedicated open innovation departments achieve success rates of 73%, compared to just 51% for those without formal structures (Sopra Steria, 2025)

With its platform of 35,000 Alumni, 4,000 yearly students, 50+ corporate partners, 40+ researchers, and a growing innovation community of hundreds of founders, professionals and investors, EHL is uniquely positioned to serve as orchestrators of an open innovation ecosystem in hospitality and other human-centric industries. We connect industry, government, and technology partners in precompetitive collaborations that accelerate sustainable transformation. Our innovation and academic programs in hospitality innovation and sustainability already act as playgrounds for future leaders who blend data fluency with empathy and design thinking.

By serving as a neutral platform to gather researchers, talent, innovators, and industry, we help ensure that technology adoption and the collaboration of stakeholders remains both fair and human centered. Our aim is, through experimentation, to turn ideas into scalable solutions that benefit businesses, people, and the planet at the same time.



35,000

Alumni



4,000

yearly students



50

corporate partners



40+

researchers

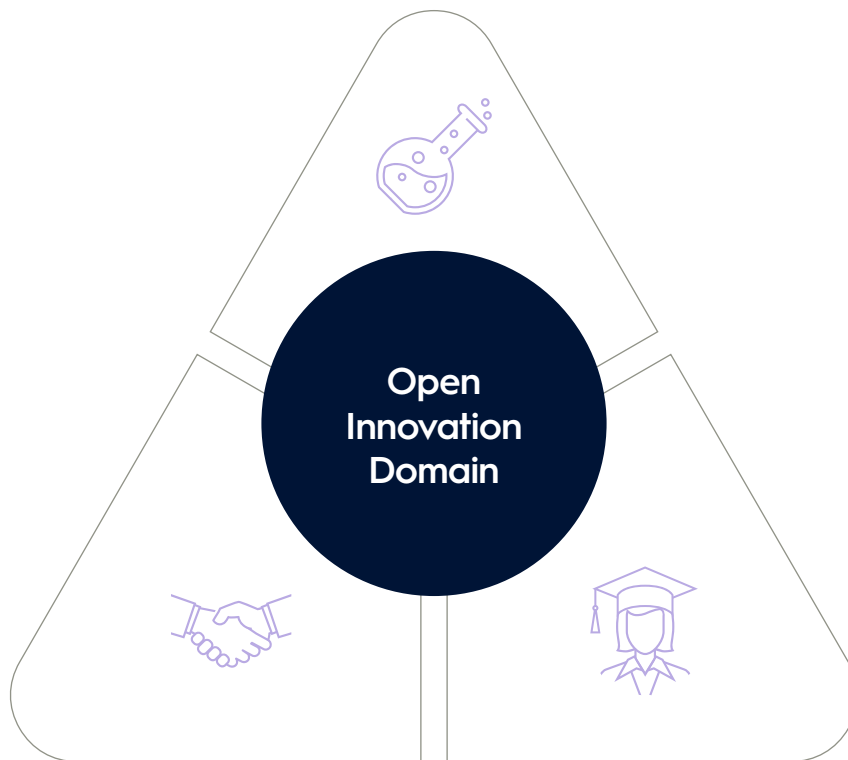


The Open
THE OPEN INNOVATION
Innovation
SUMMIT IN BRIEF
Summit in Brief

Why are we different: The Knowledge Triangle

Research

Active with several institutes and more than 40 professionals able to step into new research fields when needed.



Industry

Working with more than 50 corporate partners in our alliance and with up to 200 joining us for specific events. Up to 800 of start-ups mapped or engaged with every year.

Education

Influencing and exchanging with more than 4,000 people yearly, from their very young age to their later executive studies.

The Open Innovation Summit in brief

With this mission in mind, the inaugural EHL Open Innovation Summit took place in May 2025 in Lausanne and brought together over 400 participants and 48 speakers from more than 20 countries to innovate and co-create.

In true open innovation spirit, the represented industries went beyond the global hospitality ecosystem, creating a rare space for cross-pollination of knowledge and perspectives. A total of 45 sessions including keynote speeches, panel discussions, workshops, creative immersions, and innovation challenges engaged industry leaders, startups, and students alike.



A unique opportunity such as this was not to be wasted on best practice sharing or networking only. Instead, the summit was designed as a collective sense-making exercise. Fostering dialogue and collaboration was made the priority, bringing participants to grapple together with fundamental questions about an industry in flux: How do we nourish people and planet through reimagined food systems? How can we move regenerative business from theory to practice? How can luxury evolve to create genuine impact without compromising the experiences that define it?

The three thematic pillars of the Summit – **Future of Food, Regenerative Economies, and Luxury with Impact** – were a deliberate choice. Each represents a domain where hospitality is affected by urgent societal and business challenges but

also presents meaningful opportunities. Food systems, for instance, connect agriculture, climate, health, and economics, with hospitality affecting every link in that chain. Regenerative thinking demands that businesses evolve from a mindset of reducing harm to the active restoration of the social and ecological systems they depend on – a natural evolution for an industry that is built on the quality of place and human connection. And luxury, an industry often dismissed as frivolous, has the unique power to shift norms and demonstrate that excellence and sustainable behaviors do not have to be mutually exclusive.

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive and revealed a collective hunger for the kind of cross-sector dialogue enabled by the Summit.

An abstract graphic consisting of several overlapping circles and curved lines in a light blue color, creating a network-like pattern. The lines are thin and the circles are semi-transparent, allowing them to overlap and create a sense of depth and connectivity.

Key Learnings KEY LEARNINGS FROM THE SUMMIT Summit

Key Learnings from the Summit

The EHL Open Innovation Summit provided an entirely unique platform for bringing hospitality and open innovation together for the first time. The gathered insights were plentiful, sparked through in-cross-sector panel discussions, use case presentations, and innovation challenges.



Innovation challenges turn complex problems into actionable solutions

Innovation Challenges are solution-oriented high-intensity collaborative workshops where real business problems meet diverse problem-solvers. The Summit serves as a focal point for these solution-oriented projects.

Organizations bring their toughest strategic questions that their internal teams have wrestled with for months, and within hours, carefully curated participants ranging from students, startups,

academics, industry practitioners, and investors create multidimensional solutions that no single perspective could reach alone.

At the 2025 Summit, 10 partner organizations brought live challenges spanning sustainable food systems, destination management, AI integration, circular luxury, and regenerative business models, and walked away with concrete next steps they couldn't have reached independently.

Here is what we learned.

1. The urgency of cross-sector innovation

For real, impactful progress to happen, innovation cannot be siloed, as challenges do not respect industry boundaries. Technology and changing consumer expectations are disrupting multiple sectors simultaneously.

At the Summit, participants did not only include hospitality professionals, but a wide array of professionals, including sustainable agriculture experts, circular economy consultants, AI developers, destination management specialists, and regenerative business strategists. The open innovation approach works because it is rare that a challenge faced by one industry is not affecting another. Yes, hospitality is balancing automation with human touch, but this mirrors healthcare's challenge with the implementation of telemedicine and navigating AI-assisted learning in education.



“What I found most valuable about participating as a challenge giver was the opportunity to work on the future of tourism – and, in a way, humanity – not in theory but in practice, by engaging a diverse group of experts to co-create actionable ideas toward a regenerative future for Swiss tourism. The Open Innovation Summit brings together remarkable minds through EHL’s ecosystem and the organizers’ strong network, creating a disciplined yet creative space that unites energy, openness, and out-of-the-box thinking to design future-ready solutions”



Tatyana Goncharenko,
Regenerative Hospitality Lead and
Strategic Foresight Consultant

The implications:

Organizations that are serious about innovation must build ecosystems that deliberately bring together different expertise. Competitive advantage comes from learning to integrate what others know into what may already be deemed perfected.

2. AI and tech are enablers, not solutions in themselves

One consensus that emerged across every technology discussion was that AI and digital tools solve nothing on their own.

They only matter when they amplify human capability by freeing people to focus on what machines cannot do. While 57% of corporates have completed AI-focused open innovation projects over the last two years, the success of those initiatives comes from having human experience as the starting point (Sopra Steria, 2025).

Four Seasons challenged summit-goers to reimagine what luxury hospitality means in the age of AI. Anything from check-in to room service can be automated, but nuance is required: AI should not replace human touchpoints.¹

Arguably, the human touch that hospitality is uniquely positioned to deliver has become the ultimate luxury. When AI helps staff be more present – for instance, by providing instant access to guest preferences and AI-assisted pronunciation of guest names – it enhances the value that is uniquely human.

A key caveat challenge participants noted was that the line between personalization and intrusion is a fine one. Guests must consent to data collection, including location tracking and personal preference. In fact, data transparency can be framed as a luxury offering that proves respect towards guests.

As our industry continues to navigate rapid technological transformation, human experience, human-centric excellence, and experimentation need to be put at the forefront. The hospitality industry is inextricably human, regardless of tech advances.

¹ A detailed look at the Four Seasons Innovation Challenge can be found in ANNEX 1

“The Open Innovation Summit was a balance of experience in addition to cutting edge thought process from students and professors. The discussions circled around the “Art of Possible” which in my eyes helps to move the needle forward”



Philipp Blaser,
Senior Vice President Food & Beverage, Global at Four Seasons Hotels

The implications:

AI can automate to a certain extent, but suggestions should be discerned by humans who, at the end of the day, make experiences worth returning to. Before deploying new technology, organizations must define the human experience they are protecting or enhancing. Efficiency gains should not be the sole measure of success, but how the quality of an experience is maintained or improved.

3. Regeneration as the new frontier of hospitality

Sustainability has come to mean reducing harm and operating within planetary boundaries. Conversations at the Summit showed that this philosophy may be undermining the impact the industry could have.

The business case for environmental action through open innovation is clear, with 63% of organizations reporting measurable improvements in environmental sustainability indicators as a direct result of their open innovation initiatives (Capgemini Research Institute, 2023).

Regenerative hospitality is the vision and practice of tourism and hospitality actively restoring ecosystems, both societal and natural. The sentiment is to contribute to flourishing rather than to minimize damage.

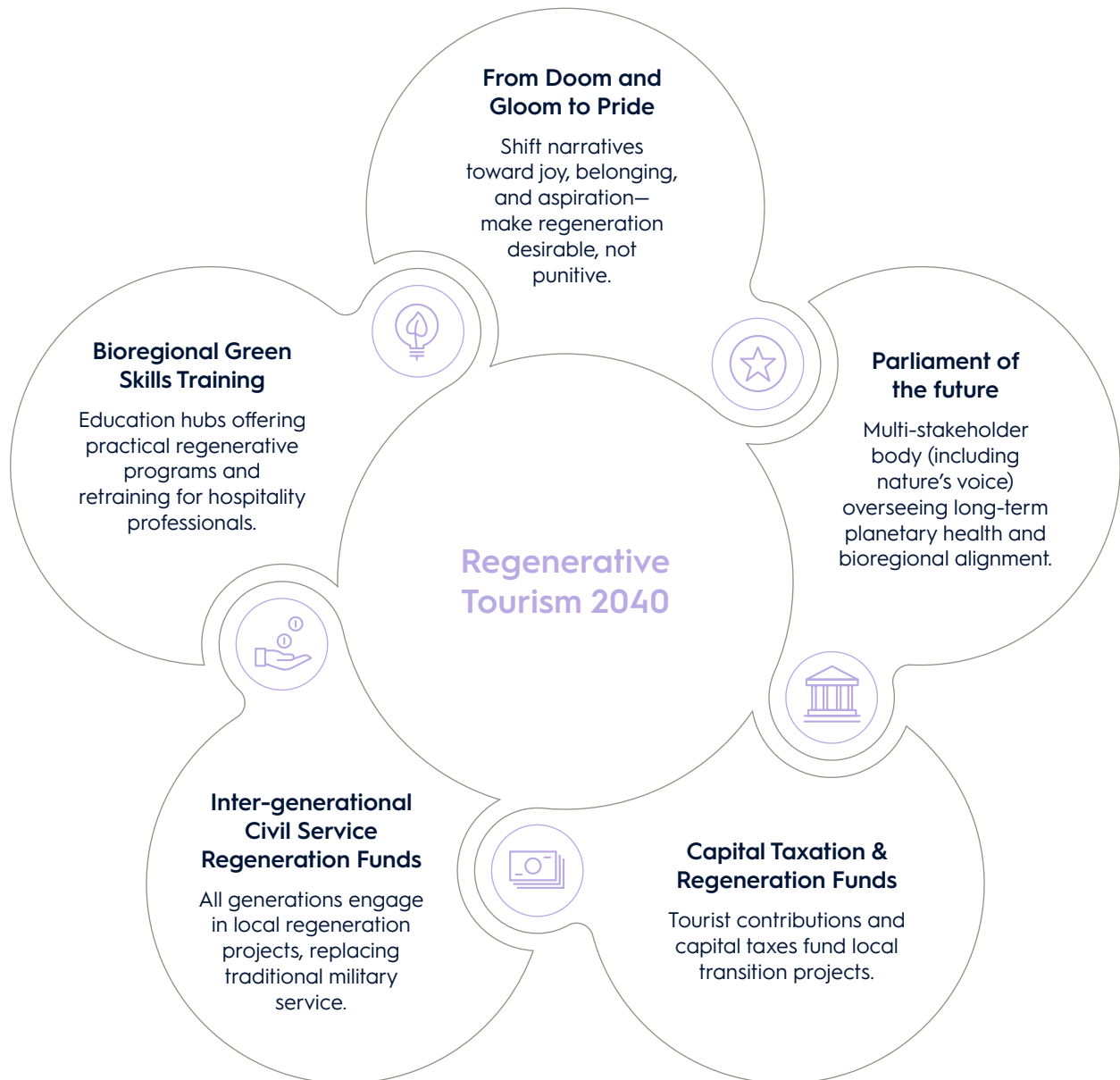
The Regenerative Travel Futures challenge session, facilitated by Tatyana Goncharenko (HES-SO), Dr. Alessandro Inversini (EHL), and Lionel Saul (EHL), engaged participants from private, academic, and public sectors to ask: What could Swiss tourism look like in 2040?

The scenarios that emerged ranged from dystopian (a world where travel is reserved for the elite and enforced through biometric restrictions) to more optimistic outlooks. The scenario named BioRegional Renaissance envisions a future where success is measured by biodiversity, well-being, and “smiles per hectare”. Guests arrived via free electrified trains and left places better than they found them.

In luxury hospitality, Discover Collection presented the challenge of how a legacy resort could embody the sentiment of regeneration. Challenge participants envisioned resorts of the future as learning campuses, where guests, staff, and local communities all come together to co-create knowledge, true to open innovation. In this scenario, wildlife and surrounding landscapes are considered key stakeholders, and regeneration is made a legacy project that connects one generation to another.

Regenerative travel futures: pathways to 2040

24 stakeholders co-created systemic pathways toward regenerative tourism in Switzerland by 2040.



“What really impressed me most about the challenge was the fresh perspective the participants brought to a very complex, future-facing concept. Their ideas showed us that the next generation doesn’t just understand luxury hospitality; they genuinely want to reshape it with purpose and positive impact as a central focus. It was an inspiring reminder that bold thinking and open dialogue are exactly what will carry Discover Collection’s membership model into the future.”



Bernhard Bohnenberger,
Bernhard Bohnenberger, CEO, Discover Collection

The implications:

Hospitality must move from minimizing harm to doing net good. Long-term regeneration must be prioritized over value extraction in the short term. Success must be measured by entirely new metrics, such as biodiversity revitalization and social impact, alongside traditional financial performance.

4. Food as an interconnector: bringing together agriculture, community, health, and climate

Food is the true interconnector; the connective tissue that takes on a myriad of meanings through agriculture, climate, public health, cultural identity, and economic resilience. Nourishing well is so integral that organizations can impact entire systems by getting food right.

However, fixing the links in the chains is easier said than done. **BachserMärt**, an ultra-local Swiss food cooperation that sources from regional farms, wanted to find out how food can be sourced sustainably at scale and when faced with competition from big brands monopolizing the market.

Streamlining operations by leveraging technology is part of the solution, as AI can forecast demand and apps used for subscriptions. Still, the insight challenge participants arrived at was that centralization is not necessary for scaling through shared infrastructure. Local federations would oversee community relationships and would communicate ingredient needs to farmers, thereby increasing demand certainty.

In institutional dining, the **ZVF** challenge explored how workplace canteens could better fuel workers with an improved daily meal, keywords including healthy, diverse, and sustainable. Conversations revealed that menu design could include seasonal considerations and theme weeks, and the experience could be focused on the human warmth created by the staff - again, something tech can enhance but not replace.

“Participating in the Open Innovation Summit at EHL was a rewarding experience. As a challenge giver, I had the opportunity to test assumptions and validate solution hypotheses related to company initiatives. I highly recommend the summit to innovators, business leaders, entrepreneurs and creators from various fields, who want to challenge their ideas, connect with like-minded individuals, and gain new perspectives on their work”.



Nour El-Gourany,
Nour El-Gourany, Senior Cross-Industry Leader

The implications:

Food encompasses so much, from culture and health to pleasure and identity. Organizations can unlock unprecedented results in staff, community, and environmental well-being by tackling the food question.

5. Collaboration is the new competitive advantage

The overarching theme and *raison d'être* of the 2025 Summit was co-operation across all boundaries – even those of competitors.

The systemic challenges that the hospitality industry is facing, from talent skill gaps to climate pressure and technology integration, are too complex for any organization to solve alone, making collaboration a strategic necessity.

Breaking competitive barriers enables innovation on a destination level. **Canton de Vaud** presented a challenge regarding the UNESCO wine region of Lavaux, which is an area affected by common pressures faced by iconic destinations, such as overtourism and climate change, all colored by the tension between preservation and economics.²

Summit participants explored implementing a neutral governing body with all stakeholders represented and highlighted the importance of crafting a common narrative for finding a strategy that the entirety of the destination with its multitude of actors can align with. The challenge results were a testament to how Open Innovation does not only benefit for-profit organizations but is an equally high-yielding tool for governments.

Circular economy is closely tied to this rationale. **NVH Studios and Global Fashion and Footwear Collective** challenges proved that singular brands are unable to solve systemic problems such as post-consumer waste or supply chain transparency. What is needed instead are collaborative solutions such as joint pre-competitive research into regenerative materials and industry-wide traceability standards.

At the Summit, this was modeled by the corporate sponsors bringing genuine questions to the table to work alongside representatives from different industries and backgrounds.

The implications:

When competitors can align on shared values, they can create an ecosystem where all thrive more than they could have on their own. The winners would be the organizations that collaborate the most effectively.

² A detailed look at the Canton de Vaud Innovation Challenge can be found in ANNEX 2

6. Luxury must evolve beyond exclusivity to create genuine demand

The luxury sector is grappling with its identity, and this tension became apparent in Summit conversations. Traditional luxury is built on creating scarcity and exclusivity, but premium positioning is at risk of becoming futile if rising expectations around sustainability and authenticity are not met.

NVH set out to redefine luxury with Summit-goers. The presented challenge, “Circular by Design”, asked how the luxury shoe brand **Zeferino** could radically reimagine its product lifecycle to be truly circular. The breakthrough insight was that circularity, when done with the excellence characteristic of luxury, enhances luxury. Participants presented a modular design (naturally made from regenerative and biodegradable materials) that would allow for repair and extend the product’s lifespan. A transparent supply chain can, at its best, be a story of rich craftsmanship and social impact.

This mindset shift is imperative from a strategic perspective, as growing affluent segments, particularly younger generations, actively seek out brands whose values align with theirs.

The implications:

Undermining sustainability will not enhance a luxury product. In fact, the opposite is true. Genuine luxury that is better for the environment is made for longevity, to stay with owners for decades.

7. Talent is central, and future leaders need new skills and mindsets

Threading through every conversation at the Summit was the confirmation that innovation will remain on the drawing board without skillful talent to execute it. As the challenges we face become more complex, the diversity of human resources should reflect it.

EHL's Start-Up Pre-Acceleration Program (SUPA) supports students turning ideas into MVPs through workshops, coaching, and practical tools. Over 2024-2025, SUPA supported 30 student projects, awarded 8 prizes, and brought in more than 20 expert mentors, culminating in public presentations at events like the Summit.

Entrepreneurship today cannot be taught without fostering an open-innovation mindset. Future leaders need to be comfortable with ambiguity and experimentation, and to commit to creating the circumstances in which stakeholders thrive.

Talent needs a growing skill set and must be encouraged to think critically and to bring forth innovative solutions. In AI, for instance, staff need data literacy to understand what different systems do and how they can be used as tools to enhance judgment.

The implications:

Skilled talent is key to tackling complex, systemic industry challenges. Human resources that are predisposed to open innovation will bring insights to life through dedicated action.



OPPORTUNITIES

OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD:

Open Innovation continues at the 2026 EHL HumanX Summit

The first edition of the Summit proved to be as fruitful as a platform as it was unique. It proved that open innovation is not just a theory but delivers real results when a mix of different backgrounds converge around pressing challenges.

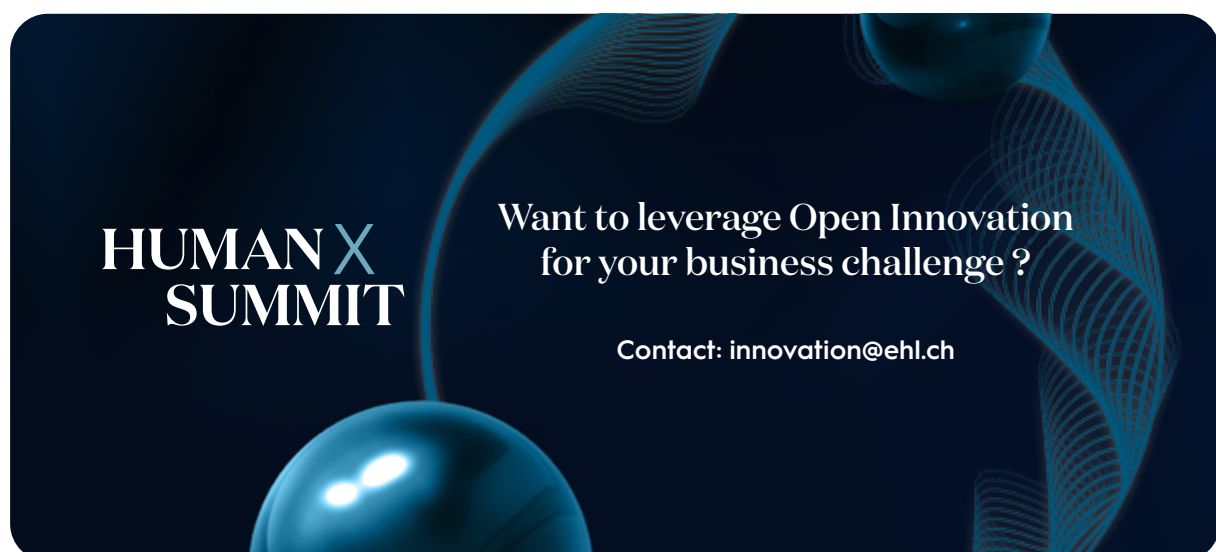
This year, The EHL HumanX Summit returns with greater ambition. Centered around Human Experience, Human-centric Excellence, and Experimentation, the 2026 edition will explore how human-centric thinking can guide us through rapid technological and social transformation.

The environment remains crafted in the spirit of open innovation to immerse professionals across industries in solving real challenges. With partners from last year gaining measurable value from their participation, we now extend the invitation for more organizations to submit a use case or challenge to be explored and framed with the EHL Innovation Hub and culminate in a workshop for summit participants to tackle.

Last year's event delivered exceptional results by creating unprecedented opportunities for collaboration. The EHL Innovation Hub commits to continuing this work: giving visibility to the innovators reshaping our industries and creating the conditions for open innovation to thrive.

The Summit becomes an Open Innovation platform in the truest sense, as it is only through co-creating, joint testing, showcasing, and storytelling that we can find what to improve and how to move forward together. As we prepare for the 2026 Summit, we seek to gather a broader understanding of how organizations are approaching these challenges.

Open innovation is not merely an idealistic theory, as it may be the single most important paradigm shift in ensuring that the future is one of flourishing. The challenges ahead are far too complex for any single actor to solve, and the 2026 EHL HumanX Summit is an invitation to intentionally partake in building the future we want to inhabit.



An abstract graphic design featuring several overlapping circles and curved lines in a light blue color. The lines are thin and some have small circular dots at their ends, creating a network-like or orbital pattern. The overall effect is modern and technical.

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PARTNERS

Summit Partners



Canton de Vaud

Canton de Vaud's partnership with the EHL Open Innovation Summit reflects the region's commitment to positioning itself as a hub for collaborative innovation. Home to a dynamic network of innovation parks supporting 760 companies and 8,500+ jobs, the Canton has built an environment where everyone from public institutions, academia, and industry can

work together to address complex challenges. By partnering with the Summit, Canton de Vaud helped bring together over 400 participants from 20 countries, creating the conditions for meaningful cross-sector dialogue. Canton de Vaud's role made the Summit possible while showcasing the region as a place where entrepreneurship and innovation are enabled."



Summit Partners



Aceup

Aceup is a global corporate accelerator platform connecting organizations with startups and innovation ecosystems. Specializing in designing and executing corporate accelerators and open innovation challenges, Aceup helps companies access external innovation efficiently.

REGIONE
TOSCANA



Regione Toscana

Regione Toscana represents one of the world's most iconic heritage destinations, balancing preservation of historical sites and culinary traditions with tourism industry vitality.

nvh studios

SÃO PAULO | NEW YORK

NVH Studios

NVH Studios is a venture studio focused on circular business models in fashion and luxury. With expertise in regenerative materials and circular design, NVH Studios partners with brands to transform linear production into systems prioritizing longevity and environmental responsibility. The studio brought luxury footwear brand Zeferino as a Summit case study, challenging participants to reimagine circularity in fashion.



Solskin

Solskin is a Swiss wellness and sustainable hospitality consultancy specializing in integrating health, wellbeing, and regenerative

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HOTEL INSIDE
Insights. Thinktank. Club.





ANNEXES



ANNEX 1: FOUR SEASONS INNOVATION CHALLENGE

Four Seasons: Reimagining luxury in the age of AI

Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts has built its global reputation on service that encompasses both personal touch and the art of knowing what guests need before they ask. As AI capabilities as well as guest expectations continue to evolve, the brand is grappling with what genuine luxury means in an era of predictive algorithms and automated interactions.

The challenge question

How can data and emerging tech create deeply personalized, emotionally resonant guest experiences, without sacrificing the human touch?

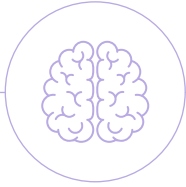
The future of proactive service design was a central question for Four Seasons, specifically what the role of the human will be. Is technology able to make staff more present, or would it create distance between people and the moments that matter.

The sprint format

- 14 participants
- Cross-sector representation included students, hotel industry members such as CEOs and hotel managers, and startups in AI and hospitality, guest experience optimization, and data science consulting.
- Moderated by Diana ElAzar and Tamara Tovisi

ANNEX 1: FOUR SEASONS INNOVATION CHALLENGE

What emerged



Key shifts in thinking

The question of AI should not be one of capabilities but of values. A dichotomous viewing of technology as either a savior or threat prevents value-driven implementation and positioning the role of AI to be the cognitive support that frees staff to focus on emotional intelligence that cannot be replicated by machines.



Breakthrough insights

AI is best suited to handle the administrative burden that is invisible to the luxury guest. Current technology is able to effectively access and use guest history and, for instance, flag potential moments where service recovery is needed. In this function, it enhances the guest experience. However, if guests are directly interacting with the interface, it can evoke a sense of commodification of something what should feel personal. One of the core promises of luxury hospitality is knowing the guest, and that should not be made a matter of manufactured efficiency.



ANNEX 1: FOUR SEASONS INNOVATION CHALLENGE

Opportunity areas identified

1. Map the AI-augmented guest journey:

Rather than deploying AI broadly, Four Seasons should identify 3-5 of the most critical moments across the guest experience where technology enhances the human touch will lead to the most immediate impact. It is equally important to conversely pinpoint where human leadership is non-negotiable. Workshop participants prototyped hybrid service flows (AI suggesting spa availability with the concierge adding personal context) and established that AI adds value through personalization and speed while humans must remain in charge of reading emotional cues and crisis support.

2. Permission-based personalization:

Four Seasons can launch pilots where guest actively opt into specific services such as scent choices and pillow types. These pilot projects would test how personalization that is explicitly consent-driven would enhance guest satisfaction.

3. Empowering staff with AI support tools:

Equipping the frontline teams with mobile assistants that present relevant information can support staff memory without replacing their unique personality. The goal is human plus AI service, where the emotional intelligence that defines Four Seasons is made the utmost priority of any tech implementation.

Why this matters beyond one organization

As AI is increasingly capable, the temptation to automate increases. However, this always comes with the risk of commodifying the very element what makes luxury experiences worth paying for, namely, attention and knowing the guest. The broader implication is that technology should make humans more capable of human work.

When healthcare uses AI to free doctors for more engagement and connection with patients or when education uses it to personalize learning paths so that teachers can focus on mentorship and pedagogy, technology is in service of human capability. Automation should not become the experience itself.



ANNEX 2: CANTON DE VAUD INNOVATION CHALLENGE

Preserving heritage while enabling transformation

Canton de Vaud oversees Lavaux, a UNESCO World Heritage wine region that is facing many tensions inherent to iconic destinations worldwide, namely, balancing the preservation of cultural identity with economic vitality. With increasing climate pressure and overtourism, the Canton recognized that incremental adjustments are not enough and everything from governance to regional collaboration need to be reimaged.

The challenge question

How can we preserve and enhance the site's identity as an economic area centered on dynamic, innovative, sustainable and profitable wine growing? and How can we encourage a wide range of stakeholders to live together on the site?

The challenge questions presented by Canton de Vaud touch on the many simultaneous balancing acts that the Canton must tackle, including heritage versus innovation, individual vintner autonomy versus collective action, premium positioning versus accessibility, and short-term economic survival versus economic longevity.

The sprint format

- 30+ participants
- 4 working teams
- Cross-sector representation: winemakers, tourism operators, government, sustainability experts
- 2-hour intensive workshop
- Challenge mapping and solution co-creation facilitated by the EHL Innovation Hub

ANNEX 1: FOUR SEASONS INNOVATION CHALLENGE

What emerged



Key shifts in thinking

Initially, participants viewed Lavaux' UNESCO status as a constraint but soon came to see it as an underutilized asset. True heritage is becoming rare, and it can be leveraged as an advantage for premium positioning. Still, the competitiveness should not be overprioritized, as participants recognized that systemic challenges require responses on the ecosystem-level, as Lavaux is not an isolated case with the tensions it is facing.



Breakthrough insights

Lavaux is not lacking in quality or demand. Rather, the challenge is one of crafting a coherent narrative of the wine region's collective identity and moving from fragmented value capture and governance to collective coordinating mechanisms, marrying social and economic considerations.



Opportunity areas identified

1. Collective governance

Establishing a neutral governing body with all stakeholders represented that is focused on facilitating pre-competitive collaboration with an aligned regional strategy and representing collective interests.

2. Premium positioning

UNESCO designation should be used for luxury positioning and seen not as a bureaucratic constraint but as a competitive asset. Experience and storytelling should take precedent over visitor volume or transaction.

3. Knowledge economy:

The area's rich winemaking expertise can be monetized through education programs and wine tourism academies. This diversifies revenue streams and strengthens ties to the surrounding community.

4. Capital access and scale:

Regional investment mechanisms such as regeneration funds and investor platforms should be created to allow for collective infrastructure investment and access to export market.

5. Circular ecosystems:

Building formal partnerships with local hotels, restaurants, and other tourism operators to help the region's winemakers in customer service delivery. This could also take the form of collaborating on climate change solutions and supporting with innovation to attract external capital.

From ideas to action

Workshop teams developed three immediately actionable takeaways: a stakeholder coordination platform that agrees on a shared purpose, investing into educating tourists and the surrounding community about Lavaux's Outstanding Universal Value, and focusing on

co-creating with the actors that are, like the wine region, already rooted in the territory. Improved multibody governance and a shared narrative are needed to implement the available solutions.

Why this matters beyond one organization

The challenge Lavaux faces is a shared one with other heritage sites, and there is a collective need to move from optimizing the performance of individual actors to ecosystem awareness. All other solutions stem

from recognizing that tackling destination-level challenges requires destination-level governance. Open innovation moved a fragmented picture into actionable pathways.

