

DuPont's New Troy Innovation Center Connects Its Engineers Globally

by Jim Stickford

DuPont opened its first United States Innovation Center in Troy on Oct. 18, representing a significant investment in Michigan.

To kick off the event at the company's facility in Troy, DuPont officials invited many of their customers and partners to see just what the new Innovation Center can do.

Chris Murphy, global industry director - Automotive, spoke about the philosophy behind the Innovation Center and why the first American one opened up in metro Detroit.

"DuPont has four innovation centers around the world," Murphy said.

"They are in emerging Asian markets. There was recognition that while there is a need for such centers in those markets, they were ultimately information receivers.

"We in Detroit thought that there was a need to recognize knowledge generators or hubs here."

Basically, Murphy said, having an innovation center in Detroit allows scientists and engineers to collaborate with colleagues across the world in real time.

Using the latest in communications technology allows a Detroit-based engineer here to teleconference with other engineers in places like Germany, Japan - and simultaneously.

The Detroit engineer can draw a design on a special board and that design will be transmitted directly to his colleagues in those countries.

He can talk to them "face-to-face" and they can trade ideas and information back and forth in real time.

It creates a kind of "collaboratory" where scientists can work together at the same time despite being thousands of miles apart.

Detroit was chosen as the first American-based innovation center, in part, because of the tremendous changes that have taken place in the way the auto industry designs and innovates, Murphy said.

Right now, cars are being made using non-traditional materials to make the vehicles lighter and more fuel-efficient.

There is a tremendous demand for new lighter and stronger materials that perhaps didn't exist only a few years ago.

A company like DuPont, that has been a leader in scientific innovation, has a great opportunity to meet these new demands if it can invent and generate new materials, Murphy said.

"As Dave Cole said earlier, things have changed in the auto business greatly," Murphy said.

"He pointed out that 20 years ago about 10 percent of intellectual property (IP) connected to the auto business was not generated by the OEMs.

"That 10 percent was usually generated by the suppliers. Now it's closer to 50 percent of IP generated by OEMs."

Car manufacturers know that they can't innovate all the technology that goes into their cars anymore, Murphy said.

Just look at who some of their suppliers are - Google, Microsoft, Apple, he said, adding that these are technology companies, and a generation ago, it would have been unthinkable to consider them auto suppliers.

"The days of a manufacturer rejecting an idea because it wasn't generated by its employees are gone," Murphy said.

"Ideas are now coming from all sorts of different places and we have a way to bring everyone together."

Diane Gulyas, president of DuPont Polymers, came from Wilmington to help open the Innovation Center.

She said DuPont invited representatives from the OEMs, Tier I and II suppliers, as well as people like Neal DeKocker, president of the Original Equipment Suppliers Association (OESA), to take a tour of the facility.

"The idea is to say that we're open for business and ready to collaborate, not just with our other facilities around the world but also with other companies," Gulyas said.

"We want to show them, via a demonstration, what we can do here, and how DuPont innovates. We want the invitees to go back



Rick Bell, Renewably Resources Materials manager, in new lab.

to their companies and tell their material scientists to come back here and bring their teams so that they can engage with our people around the world. We want them to see this facility as a portal to the world at large."

David Cole, CEO emeritus of the University of Michigan's Center for Automotive Research (CAR) and current CEO of AutoHarvest.org, said he was glad to attend the opening and speak to people because the way that innovation is created has changed.

"We live in a world of vanishing boundaries," Cole said.

"I'm not just talking about nations. Look at engineering.

"In the old days, you were a mechanical engineer or an electrical engineer or a chemical engineer.

"And you worked in your department with other engineers of the same discipline. Now all disciplines work together to reach a common goal.

"We're living in a very different world now and we're doing things differently."

Having a facility that brings people together is a smart way to operate this new world of innovation, Cole said.

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