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**Highlights from Our February 2025 Members’ Meeting: Is There a Career Path for Corporate Innovators?**

**Five Key Dynamics Affecting Innovation and R&D Careers**

1. **Lack of a Clear Career Path in Innovation**
   * Unlike R&D, which often has defined career trajectories (e.g., moving up to SVP of R&D), innovation careers are more ambiguous and vary across industries. As one veteran of corporate innovation at Whirlpool and Allstate put it, "I think there's a path, but it's a difficult path... roles in different companies take very different shapes."
   * Many innovation roles are temporary, shifting every **two to four years** due to leadership changes and shifting corporate priorities.
2. **Instability and Constant Change in Innovation Roles**
   * Innovation teams are frequently reorganized or eliminated when leadership changes. A financial services innovator highlighted this, saying, "Every two to four years, there is a change... at some point, whoever you report into is going to change, and nobody ever gets a promotion or a pat on the back for just doing the same shit the last guy did."
   * A former Chief R&D and Innovation Officer for a public CPG company noted that R&D has more stability because of well-defined technical and management career paths.
3. **Industry Experience Is Valued Over Innovation Experience**
   * Companies tend to hire innovation leaders based on deep **industry knowledge** rather than their expertise in innovation itself. A financial services innovator observed, "For whatever reason, people always value industry experience over innovation experience... you’d never hire a head of HR without HR experience, but for innovation, they just pick someone who knows the industry and say, 'Go change it.'"
4. **Generalist Skills Are More Common Than Specialist Skills**
   * Many innovation professionals describe themselves as generalists who can **adapt across industries and functions**. An automotive industry R&D and open innovation executive explained, "I'm trying to describe what it is that I do, having been a researcher and now being an 'innovator'—and it's kind of the same. I just want to see things made into something real."
   * This generalist nature can make career transitions difficult because job descriptions vary widely.
5. **Innovation Careers Often Require Frequent Job Changes**
   * Many innovation professionals have moved between companies rather than climbing an internal career ladder. A financial services and government innovation leader noted, "I had different innovation roles within different innovation groups, then I moved into an innovation role within a business unit... every 18 months, something changes."

**Five Best Pieces of Advice for Managing an Innovation Career**

1. **Expect and Prepare for Career Transitions**
   * One veteran innovator explained that most innovation roles have a **four-year expiration date**, and another emphasized the importance of being ready to pivot.
   * **Advice:** **Keep your resume updated and maintain a personal portfolio** of successful projects to showcase your impact.
2. **Cultivate a Strong Personal and Professional Network**
   * An executive at a design consultancy stressed that most people have never been taught how to manage their careers, saying, "If you can take control of your process and path, and really determine where you want to go, you’ll be much more successful."
   * **Advice:** Build relationships **outside your company** and maintain connections through industry events, LinkedIn, and professional groups.
3. **Become a “Builder” Rather Than Just a Theorist**
   * An innovator at a healthcare technology firm emphasized that self-awareness is crucial, saying, "I know from experience that I'm a builder... I can walk into a situation with a small or mid-sized company and help build an innovation function."
   * **Advice:** Position yourself as a **practical problem solver** who delivers real-world results, rather than just an idea generator.
4. **Look for Companies That Align with Your Strengths**
   * An automotive and trucking industry veteran argues that **some companies are better suited to innovation than others**. "The type of person who joins a mature company has a certain profile... they may not be wired for innovation."
   * **Advice:** Research a company’s **history of supporting innovation** before taking a job, ensuring their culture and leadership align with your skill set.
5. **Take Ownership of Your Career (Because No One Else Will)**
   * An SVP in financial services made a key point: "You are the only person in charge of your career. The company will do what’s best for the organization, not for you personally."
   * **Advice:** **Proactively manage your career path**, rather than relying on employers for growth opportunities. Consider **side projects, continuous learning, and personal branding** as ways to stay ahead.

**Final Thoughts** The discussion reinforced that **innovation careers are rewarding but unpredictable**. The key to long-term success is **adapting to change, actively networking, and positioning yourself as someone who gets things done**. Unlike traditional career paths, **corporate innovators must be comfortable navigating uncertainty and reinventing themselves every few years**.