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COMPANIES

How 6 Wisconsin manufacturers have used a Milwaukee-based advanced AI

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Microsoft last year opened one of its most advanced artificial intelligence labs in Milwaukee.

Wisconsin manufacturers have wasted little time putting it to work.

We're not talking about an advanced version of an AI chatbot that now gets your homework right.

The tech giant's AI Co-Innovation Lab on the UW-Milwaukee campus is one of three in the world. (The others are in San Francisco and Kobe, Japan.) It's the only one focused on working with small- and medium-sized manufacturers.

"With access to cutting-edge AI technology and technical guidance to bring their ideas to life, we can't wait to see what Wisconsin companies will build," Microsoft Corporate Vice President Rima Alaily said at the lab's June 2025 opening.

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Alaily's wait is over, less than a year later.

Over 60 companies – more than a few Wisconsin-based – have gone through the lab, which is a partnership between Microsoft, TitletownTech, the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. and UWM's Connected Systems Institute.

"The hope is to ensure the competitiveness of companies in the region. The lab is one way which we can help companies," said Grace Schattner, TitletownTech's chief of staff. "It's really powerful for our state."

TitletownTech and Microsoft estimate the co-innovation lab has already built more than 40 prototypes and explored more than 200 potential use cases. In post-lab surveys, participating companies told Microsoft what took a week in the lab would have taken 22 weeks, on average, using normal internal processes.

Wisconsin manufacturers getting a better idea of what AI can do for them

Manufacturers' use of the AI lab highlights how one of the state's key industries is embracing the newest tool available to them.

Ann Franz of the Northeast Wisconsin Manufacturing Alliance said more than 1,000 employees of member companies have taken the alliance's Generative AI training module in the last three years. Increasingly, she said, companies putting artificial intelligence to work are learning it's no different than any other technological tool introduced in recent decades.

"It's like the internet: Twenty years ago, people wondered why they'd need a home computer. AI is the new internet. All of us would say we use the internet every day and in the next few years, that's going to be AI. It's a tool. ... You don't need to be afraid of it."

Packer Fastener chief technology officer Bill Feck said the company continues to look for more workers as it grows exponentially and that it's time in and use of the AI Co-Innovation Lab wasn't driven by "cutting the headcount," but making employees more efficient, giving them more time to provide services customers value most and advancing their careers with the Green Bay-based company.

"What fuels me is how I can help automate the mundane task to give people the ability to chase that opportunity in Green Bay or across the country," Feck said. He

later added that the AI Co-Innovation Lab "has been a tremendous help as a program and service to the community. ... This is really moving the business forward."

How does an AI Co-Innovation Lab work?

An advanced AI lab in reality bears little resemblance to the AI of dystopic science fiction.

It actually involves a lot of meetings, testing, refining, more testing and lab work. Companies can contact either TitletownTech or UW-Milwaukee's Connected Systems Institute to begin the intake and evaluation process. The initial meetings will cover what the lab is, how it works, and the potential use cases each business proposes.

Selected businesses then enter the AI Co-Innovation Lab. They meet with engineers and developers who will work with the company's team to build a prototype solution or tool. The meetings, discussions and testing continue to focus on refining the tool to improve its accuracy.

The entire process can take months with actual lab work lasting weeks. The work in the lab is free, but companies are expected to pay for the computing services required to power their new AI solutions during their useful lifespan. Additionally, Feck said companies should plan to invest in staff time and travel costs to get the most out of the lab experience.

What kind of Wisconsin companies are we talking about?

They include nuts and bolts specialists to companies that make precision machinery for power companies, automakers and the paper industry. Startups founded just a few years ago and companies with more than a century in Wisconsin have used the lab to produce solutions to real world challenges.

Their experiences have produced competitive advantages and a deeper understanding of other ways manufacturers can put AI to work.

Feck said the co-innovation lab experience last year "wowed" the Packer Fastener team and resulted in several positive impacts: It has saved staff time, given the company a competitive edge, given it an understanding of where else AI can be used and sparked conversations about AI with other Green Bay-area businesses.

"You go through the process and you get the light bulb moments. You understand how this is where some of these business process can be helped by AI. Now, we're coming up with ideas left and right," Feck said.

Here's how six manufacturers put the AI Co-Innovation Lab to work, according to details provided by TitletownTech and Microsoft.

BW Converting

The company: Ashwaubenon-based BW Converting designs and makes precision machinery for paper, print, packaging, textiles and other industries under six brands that include Green Bay area-based Paper Machine Converting Company and Hudson-Sharp.

The AI challenge: BW wanted to improve its anomaly detection and monitoring systems. The AI lab engineers ported its alert system over to Microsoft's cloud computing system, Azure, to offer real-time detection and an indication of the severity of the anomaly.

Time saved: Every week of work in the lab would have taken BW Converting workers four weeks to accomplish.

Impact: The real-time alert system automates alerts and insights and eliminates a need for additional vendors to monitor defects.

Husco International

The company: Waukesha-based Husco designs and manufactures hydraulic and electro-mechanical components for automotive and off-highway equipment. Its more than 1,500 employees work at 10 locations in Wisconsin, Iowa and Michigan as well as in China, Brazil and India.

The AI challenge: Staff have to manually review corrective action reports on supplier components, a time-consuming and inconsistent process. To resolve issues identified in reports much quicker, AI lab engineers created a system that evaluates supplier reports and incorporates the scores into Husco's workflow.

Time saved: Every week of work in the lab would've taken Husco workers 24 weeks to accomplish.

Impact: Husco has seen improved consistency in report evaluations and faster resolution of those corrective action reports. It also enabled suppliers to correct details ahead of submission.

Packer Fastener

The company: Ashwaubenon-based Packer Fastener began in 1998 with a focus on supplying and distributing nuts and bolts to a variety of businesses in northeastern Wisconsin that now sells fasteners, abrasives, safety PPE, fittings, welding supplies, and more to businesses across several states.

The AI challenge: Sales representatives spent a lot of time manually entering product orders and matching them with the right products in the company's inventory. Lab engineers created an order-and-quote tool that matches products from a customer order with the corresponding items in the company's internal inventory system.

Time saved: Every week of work in the lab would have taken Packer Fastener workers 55 weeks to accomplish.

Impact: The new software was being rolled out over the first quarter of 2026. The company estimates it will automate 75% of transactions, save sales reps 40 hours per month and result in improved accuracy.

Renaissant

The company: Founded in 2018, Renaissant automates and optimizes shipping and warehouse operations. Milwaukee-based

Renaissant sought the AI lab's assistance to design a driver check-in platform to reduce bottlenecks at entrance gates, docks and other areas.

The AI challenge: The lab produced an AI-assisted, multilingual voice assistant that provides drivers with instructions and support with tasks like check-in, shipment verification and directions from their truck cabs.

Time saved: Every week of work in the lab would have taken Renaissant workers four weeks to accomplish.

Impact: Reniassant on Dec. 22 launched the voice-enabled technology and noted it was already in use at several large sites in pilot programs. "Each minute a driver sits and waits, both the warehouse and driver are losing dollars as their shipments sit idly waiting on people to figure out how to handle the driver," CEO Tom Dean said in the news release. "As an industry, we owe it to them to build tools that give detailed data on every aspect at the gate, and that's what we've built with our new AI-enabled solution."

Sentry Equipment

The company: Sentry Equipment was founded in 1925 and is currently headquartered in Oconomowoc. The company manufactures sampling, clarifier and custom equipment used by the power utilities, oil, gas and wastewater treatment industries.

The AI challenge: Sentry wanted a way to reduce the hours of manual work it took to review lengthy contracts for compliance issues. The 101-year-old company asked Co-Innovation Lab engineers to create a system that converts contracts into readable data that AI can check to ensure it complies with Sentry's guidelines and regulations.

Time saved: Every week of work in the AI lab would have taken Sentry workers about 12 weeks to accomplish.

Impact: Sentry Equipment expects the tool will minimize backlogs and improve the accuracy of its compliance reviews. Additionally, they expect it could be scaled for additional uses and applications.

Wiscon Products

The company: Racine-based Wiscon Products is an 81-year-old precision machine shop that specializes in complex parts for aerospace, automotive, construction and other industries.

The AI challenge: Wiscon needed help adjusting its order prioritization and product scheduling to align with changing customer needs. The AI lab crafted a system to interpret customer designs and blueprints and recommend the right tools and parts.

Time saved: Every week of work in the AI lab would have taken Wiscon workers about 100 weeks to accomplish.

Impact: The system streamlines tool procurement, reduces errors and lays a foundation for future AI process innovations. Wiscon Products showcased its AI initiatives for none other than Microsoft President Brad Smith during his September visit. The company called AI a "transformative force that is revolutionizing how we approach our work" and cited its work with Microsoft as giving Wiscon a "significant advantage in a competitive global market."

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