

Member Success Case Study | Written By: Audrey Woods

## DEVO Lab – SDA Bocconi School of Management

There's no denying that we live in an age of rapid technological change. The laptops, phones, and tablets of today would be unrecognizable to early computer scientists, and the degree to which digital technology has become essential to commerce would surprise even the most technophilic businesspeople from just a few decades ago. This trend of groundbreaking digital development leading to rapid global adoption and economic change—which shows no sign of slowing down—puts pressure on companies to act on whatever new invention is taking up the headlines. Topics like autonomy, generative AI, and quantum computing create media hype which can cause industry leaders to respond with haste or inefficiency. On the other hand, the sheer volume of digital change can lead others to tune out and continue with the status quo, missing the enormous potential gains digital solutions can bring.

Created to help companies walk this narrow line of strategic technological adoption, CSAIL Affiliate [DEVO Lab](#) of Italian business school SDA Bocconi applies a multidisciplinary, business-oriented approach to studying technical advancements and uses their findings to help business professionals navigate the post-digital era. A key part of their strategy for synthesizing the potential impact of emerging technologies is to engage with academic research centers like MIT CSAIL to understand the current state of research.

### DEVO LAB: TRANSLATING TECHNOLOGY FOR BUSINESS

Short for Digital Enterprise Value and Organization, DEVO Lab was first established in 2015 with the idea of supporting companies in integrating digital solutions without “throwing money at projects that don't make sense,” says DEVO Lab Director Gianluigi Castelli. In an effort to differentiate themselves from other initiatives in a similar niche, the founders decided to approach the problem from a business-oriented perspective, bringing together both their corporate and academic backgrounds. Structured to fund research based on a membership approach, DEVO Lab was centered around an ethos of “no frills, no hype,” which the founders have maintained for eight years.

Scientific Coordinator Severino Meregalli jokes that while the knowledge of engineers might be limitless, the hours in the day are not, so there's only so much business professionals can do to stay on top of the changes happening in the digital realm. To address this, one thing DEVO Lab offers its members is their High Impact Technologies Radar or HIT Radar. This annual publication puts various technologies into context and classifies them based on the speed at which they are being adopted, the potential area of impact, and the level of technological maturity, measured as the distance from the center of their visual framework. They also publish books such as *The Post-Digital Enterprise: Going Beyond the Hype*, host annual meetings to bring together members and researchers (much like the CSAIL Alliances Annual Meeting), offer bootcamps and think tank events, and generally share their research in ways that clarify technological advancement for business professionals and help them answer the simple question: are we missing an opportunity?

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## DEVO LAB: TRANSLATING TECHNOLOGY FOR BUSINESS (*cont.*)

From the very beginning, Castelli explains, it was important for DEVO Lab to associate with top technology institutions. When a family connection linked Castelli to the MIT Media Lab, they realized that MIT was a natural fit for their needs. Soon after, the founders got in touch with CSAIL and discovered the CSAIL Alliances program, which gave them access to a **“very broad set of researchers covering a large range of subjects,”** Castelli says.

They’ve been members ever since.

## ENGAGING WITH ALLIANCES: CSAIL AS A RESOURCE

Operations Coordinator Dr. Gianluca Salviotti calls DEVO Lab’s relationship with CSAIL a “super precious source of knowledge for our HIT Radar, but also for other research.” Using the articles, news stories, spotlights, and videos offered on the CSAIL Alliances website as well as engaging with CSAIL faculty at Alliances events—both virtual and in-person—the DEVO Lab team works hard to stay on top of the information coming out of CSAIL. Even though Castelli laughs that the number of CSAIL papers and publications can be daunting to keep up with as a small team, this research is critical for informing their HIT Radar and helping DEVO Lab keep their members informed of the most up-to-date developments in key technological sectors.

Another way DEVO Lab uses their connection with CSAIL to educate their members is to invite CSAIL faculty and speakers to their events. For example, Castelli explains, “last year we had Professor Fox Harrel talking about vehicle identities” at their half-day event for DEVO Lab members, a visit he says was facilitated in part thanks to their CSAIL Alliances Client Relations Coordinator Christiana Kalfas. Meregalli elaborates that DEVO Lab is currently excited to be using CSAIL to inform their research on AI, “considering that we are now at the peak of the hype in this field, so it’s very important to get something firsthand on the real issues behind it.” Not wanting to be a “one-man band” when it comes to furthering technological understanding, DEVO Lab ensures they’re utilizing the best sources as they keep their member companies informed, making CSAIL critical to their strategy.

Ultimately, DEVO Lab is grateful to CSAIL for providing, Castelli says, **“both the depth of knowledge of technologies but also the width,”** thanks to the **“spectrum of areas that CSAIL investigates.”**

## GOING FORWARD: HELPING SMALLER COMPANIES AND DEEPENING THEIR LINK TO CSAIL

As the founders look back on nearly a decade of work, Castelli explains that they’re ready to “rejuvenate or introduce something new.” In part, this means expanding their focus to help smaller companies, which make up close to 70% of Italy’s GDP. Because this audience doesn’t have the resources that larger corporations do, Meregalli says, “they don’t have the antibodies” to react appropriately, meaning they either do nothing or fall victim to the hype and make business decisions that ultimately won’t suit their long-term interests. Castelli describes how DEVO Lab wants to “set up initiatives to get them involved in a way which is really useful for them, so they don’t waste time.”

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## GOING FORWARD: HELPING SMALLER COMPANIES AND DEEPENING THEIR LINK TO CSAIL (*cont.*)

Another near-future aim for DEVO Lab is growth, specifically growing their team to synthesize more information and help more businesses. The DEVO Lab team is deceptively small for their prolific output, and Castelli believes that bringing in more researchers and staff could lead to a bigger impact, not to mention digest more of the research and innovation coming out of CSAIL.

Finally, in their relationship with CSAIL, DEVO Lab wants to be strategic and targeted as they continue engaging with MIT. Castelli describes how they're aiming to find a handful of researchers who are specifically doing work in their areas of interest and not just read the papers coming out of their respective labs but also find opportunities to spend time with them, either in Boston or in Italy. "I think if we can find three to five researchers with whom we can stay in touch in a continuous way, that would be useful for us," Castelli explains.

Castelli boils down DEVO Lab by saying, "our mission is really to help companies improve their performances," work that the founders still find exciting and fulfilling. Meregalli calls the intellectual stimulation of keeping up to date on such dynamic and rapidly changing tech subjects a "dream come true." Castelli agrees, adding that, even though he's officially retired, being a part of DEVO Lab is a "smart and interesting way to get older without getting old." And, much like the trends DEVO Lab covers, these founders have no plans of scaling back their efforts as they continue helping companies navigate the emerging digital world, educating professionals about current research topics, and leveraging resources like MIT CSAIL to do so.



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