



Working together for progress: How American Family Insurance and MIT CSAIL are driving innovation for communities

Audrey Woods, MIT CSAIL Alliances | October 1, 2026

American Family Insurance, an MIT Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Lab (CSAIL) Alliances Affiliate, is a Fortune 500 company with deep roots in community engagement. For American Family Insurance, protecting customers is about more than policies and premiums. It's about inspiring, protecting, and restoring customers' dreams. One way they deliver on that promise is by leveraging innovation, cutting-edge research, and trusted collaborators to deliver meaningful solutions for the communities they serve.

"Delivering on our promise to our customers means being prepared for the unexpected and understanding the risks ahead. Relationships with institutions like MIT help us navigate the volatile nature of our business and be there for our customers when they need us most." – Brad Burke, Chief Information Officer

Rooted in Community: The American Family Insurance Story

Originally founded in 1927 in Madison, Wisconsin, American Family Insurance was created to provide insurance for farmers. Founder Herman Wittwer believed Wisconsin farmers shouldn't pay the same for automobile insurance as city drivers, especially when they drove less during winter. His model proved successful, and the company has since expanded nationwide with over 10,500 employees.

Lead Program and Portfolio Manager of External Research Melissa Godboldt says American Family Insurance remains "a small company at heart," priding itself on being committed to investing in community initiatives like Habitat for Humanity, food pantries, youth education, and other programs and local events, with high employee and agency owner engagement. Godboldt shares, "Insurance doesn't always sound exciting and interesting to people. However, it truly is a noble profession that helps customers protect the things and people that matter most in their lives and brings peace in arguably what could be one of the worst times of their lives."

Harnessing Technology for Resilience and Trust

One way American Family Insurance is helping customers is by using new technologies and tools for prediction, security, and trust, leveraging data and analytics to manage and mitigate emerging risks to keep customer and company data safe and secure. The company is committed to leading in the responsible use of data and AI and addressing climate risk, using new models to understand the impact of climate-related disasters like wildfires, hail, and convective storms.

A central part of their approach to these challenges is engaging with research institutions like MIT CSAIL.

A Dynamic Relationship: Engaging with MIT CSAIL Alliances

American Family Insurance's relationship with MIT has evolved over time. It began with a sponsored research project with MIT Professor Emeritus of Meteorology Kerry Emanuel and now, active membership with CSAIL Alliances.

"After we saw the benefits of that project, we joined MIT CSAIL Alliances," Godboldt says. Godboldt credits CSAIL Alliances Client Relations Manager Philip Arsenault for a consistently positive collaboration.

With a growing employee footprint in Boston, American Family Insurance invests in relationships with universities local to the Boston office, bringing many benefits and helping to develop deeper connections to the Boston ecosystem.

Participation in the CSAIL Alliances Program has brought tangible benefits. Faculty Lead Daniel Weitzner's keynote at American Family's Enterprise Data Conference remains a highlight. The team also appreciates discussions with MIT faculty, who offer an industry perspective, bringing forward ideas and sharing feedback.

"AI is fundamentally changing the speed, scale, and sophistication of cyber threats. Our engagement with MIT gives us early access to cutting-edge research that helps us translate that acceleration into a defensive advantage—embedding it directly into how we operate and protect the enterprise." – Jonathan Hughes, Chief Information Security Officer

Looking Ahead: Deepening Academic-Industry Collaboration

Fostering relationships between academia and industry can be challenging and costly. American Family Insurance has historically had a broad strategy of engagement with a multitude of universities. Now they're focused on fewer but deeper relationships to help research and manage business risks. This will also help American Family Insurance with talent acquisition, with sponsored research, and educational tools attracting students and postdocs.

Overall, Godboldt says the connection with MIT brings a clear return on investment. "The yearly membership fee provides conference tickets for the annual meeting and access to related literature. That alone is a great benefit, along with curated topics, discussions with faculty members, and access to the Stata Center's innovative research makes the relationship with CSAIL Alliances incredibly beneficial." For Godboldt, working in this space offers an opportunity to work with many people inside the company and across academic institutions.

"We value our collaboration with MIT and how our relationship has expanded and grown in many ways. We're excited about exploring more ways we can engage to continue to improve the customer experience." – Zak Rottier, Data Science Associate Vice President

About American Family Insurance

American Family Insurance, a mutual holding company based in Madison, Wis., has been serving customers since 1927. We inspire, protect, and restore dreams through our insurance products, exceptional service from our agency owners and employees, community investments, and creative relationships. American Family Insurance is the nation's 12th-largest property/casualty insurance company, ranking No. 226 on the Fortune 500 list. American Family has a current 'a+' credit rating through AM Best and has distinction as a "Standing the Test of Time" company, which is represented by having an AM Best financial strength rating of 'A' or better for at least 75 years. The company offers American Family-brand products through a network of exclusive agency owners as well as nationwide through key strategic engagements. American Family Insurance also includes Homesite and Main Street America Insurance. The company has approximately 10,500 employees nationwide.