

The Strategy and Innovation Team reached out to the 2024 Innovator of the Year Award Recipients one year after later, to get their latest take on innovation, inspiration, and what it means to be an Innovator of the Year.



Here's what [Ines Hegedus-Garcia](#), managing partner, [Avanti Way Realty](#); [Kathleen Lappe](#), founder and chief executive officer, [DirectOffer](#); and [Pritesh Damani](#), chief technology officer, [Real Broker](#), shared:

What prompted you to apply for the Innovator of the Year Award?

Ines Hegedus-Garcia

Funnily enough, I didn't actually apply myself! I later discovered that my husband secretly nominated me, having seen how passionate I am about driving innovation in real estate tech and knowing how The iOi Summit is my favorite event in real estate by far!

Kathleen Lappe

At DirectOffer, we've worked relentlessly to close a major gap in the real estate industry: the need for more accessible listings and higher-quality leads for agents.

We're one of the very few proptech companies holding multiple AI patents specific to real estate, and we've developed a hands-free solution that delivers Matterport-like conversion rates — without the complexity or high price. Our tech integrates seamlessly into any MLS, making innovation truly scalable.

But innovation isn't just about building cool tools — it's about building with purpose. We're delivering value to both consumers and the industry by creating tech that solves real problems.

Pritesh Damani

We applied for the Innovator of the Year Award because it recognizes the industry's most forward-thinking leaders, and at Real, innovation is at the core of everything we do. As we continue to push the boundaries of technology and artificial intelligence in real estate, this award was an opportunity to showcase our leadership in shaping the future of the industry while increasing awareness of Real among NAR's 1.5 million members and beyond.

Can you tell us more about the specific challenges or obstacles that led to the developments or achievements that earned this award?

Ines Hegedus-Garcia

A specific challenge was when I was chosen as Vice-Chair of NAR's Federal Technology Policy Committee. I had served on that committee for years, and while the information shared was always valuable, the general consensus was that it felt more like a presentation than a think tank—people spoke at us instead of leveraging the brainpower in the room to actually get things done.

So I poked around and asked if it would be okay to shake things up. To my surprise, I got a very positive “yes” from staff, leadership, and some of the top minds in the industry. When I stepped into the Chair role the following year, I made it a point to transform the committee into a collaborative, action-driven group. Thankfully, my Vice-Chair was fully on board, and even though we encountered some resistance from a few staff members, others really stepped up.

One of our biggest wins was getting the ball rolling on AI policy on the Hill. The fact that NAR didn’t yet have a voice in Washington when it came to artificial intelligence—especially with how fast the tech is evolving—was unheard of. That momentum has been one of the most meaningful outcomes of this journey.

Kathleen Lappe

This journey started with my autistic daughter. She couldn’t understand real estate listings the way they were presented online. That experience opened my eyes to a larger issue — millions of people with hearing, visual, neurodiverse, or language barriers are left behind in real estate.

So, I created a solution. We developed and patented DO AudioTours, which makes listings more inclusive and ADA-compliant. It also supports over 100 languages.

We built it to help people like my daughter. We patented it to protect the agents and MLSs who use it. And now it’s automating across multiple MLSs — all because of her. Here’s her blog if you’d like to hear her voice and story: [Abby’s Blog – “Hey, Do You Live Around Here?”](#)

Can you share a specific instance or project this past year where this award's focus has been most evident?

Ines Hegedus-Garcia

After receiving the award, we launched a full internal protocol at Avanti Way Realty to help our agents navigate the sweeping industry changes tied to buyer representation and compensation. We didn’t just respond—we built tools, created systems, and trained hundreds of agents to embrace the new landscape confidently.

We developed compensation agreements, buyer consultation workflows, customizable guides, and educational assets rooted in clarity and transparency for consumers. It wasn’t just about compliance—it was about using innovation to turn disruption into opportunity, and helping our agents lead with value instead of fear. That kind of meaningful, system-based innovation is exactly what fuels me—and what I think this award is truly about.

That project made it clear that with the right structure and the right people at the table, we could move from passive discussion to real impact—and that shift in mindset is exactly what this award represents to me.

Kathleen Lappe

Our decision to offer DO AudioTours directly through MLSs was a game-changer.

Agents think about two things every morning: list and sell. By embedding DO AudioTours directly into listings via a virtual tour button, we've created a tool that helps agents win listings and attract more buyers — automatically.

This solution has helped MLSs with member retention and growth, and it gives agents an edge right where they need it most — on the frontlines of client engagement.

How does an innovative lens inform decision making in your business?

Ines Hegedus-Garcia

The word “innovation” gets thrown around a lot these days—so much so that it’s almost lost meaning. Everyone thinks they’re innovating just because they’re using a new tool or jumping on the latest trend. But real innovation goes deeper—it’s not just about what’s new, it’s about what’s better.

For me, innovation means rethinking the way we operate, questioning the status quo, and asking, “Is this actually moving us forward?” I have always used that lens to guide decisions and thankfully my partners at Avanti Way have a similar thought process —from how we build systems, to how we train and support our agents, to how we create better experiences for our clients. This may sound cliché but innovation isn’t a buzzword for us—it’s a mindset. It shows up in the way we lead, the way we solve problems, and the way we constantly challenge ourselves to do better.

Kathleen Lappe

Innovation isn’t just a buzzword for us — it’s personal. I grew up watching my parents work tirelessly as real estate agents. I know how demanding this profession is.

Every decision we make is filtered through that lens: Will this save agents time? Will it make them more money? Does it deliver real value?

That’s our north star in innovation — building tools that truly serve the industry, not distract from it.

Pritesh Damani

At Real, innovation isn’t just a strategy—it’s our DNA. We were founded to make agents’ lives better, and the best way to do that is by leveraging technology to drive efficiency, reduce costs, and create seamless experiences. Every decision we make is filtered through this lens: How can we innovate to eliminate friction, enhance productivity, and empower agents to focus on what they do best—serving their clients? From AI-driven tools to automating routine tasks to streamline operations, our commitment to innovation ensures that Real agents stay ahead in an evolving industry, while improving efficiencies and keeping costs down.

Can you tell us about someone in this space who made an impact on you, inspires/inspired you, or set you on your present path?

Ines Hegedus-Garcia

One person who really inspired me to push for change is actually not in tech—it’s past NAR President Tracy Kasper. Watching her go all-in during her campaign to lead NAR with transparency, strength, and

a real commitment to change was incredibly moving. Even though her term was cut short, the courage and conviction she showed made a lasting impression on me.

On the tech side, there are people I deeply admire—Jeff Turner is one of them. His ability to connect big ideas with practical execution is unmatched. And then there’s the powerhouse team behind REACH and Second Century Ventures. Their work in fostering innovation within our industry proves that meaningful change doesn’t have to come from outside disruptors—it can be nurtured from within, if we have the right people championing it.

Kathleen Lappe

Jennifer Berman. She was my COO, my best friend, and my mentor. She knew everyone in the industry and treated the industry like family. Her drive, her heart, and her belief in doing things right continue to inspire me every single day.

What contribution have you made to the profession / the space that is most meaningful to you?

Ines Hegedus-Garcia

The most meaningful contribution for me has been creating space for practitioners to have a voice in tech and policy conversations—especially in rooms where we haven’t traditionally been invited to speak.

Helping shift the Federal Technology Policy Committee from passive to proactive, and kickstarting work on AI policy at the national level, has been incredibly fulfilling. But beyond that, showing others—especially agents and brokers—that they can influence the future of our industry if they lean in, ask questions, and challenge the norm... that’s what means the most. I want people to feel empowered to lead, even if they don’t come from a “tech background.” Because that’s exactly how I got here.

Kathleen Lappe

Our biggest contribution is helping break down barriers to homeownership — especially for underserved and underrepresented communities.

By building AI tools that support fair housing and ADA accessibility, we’re helping MLSs and brokerages serve more people more equitably. Communication is at the heart of real estate — and we’re making sure everyone can participate in that conversation.

If you could leave one mark on the profession, what would it be?

Ines Hegedus-Garcia

I’d want to leave the profession more self-aware, forward-thinking, and unafraid to evolve. Real estate has this habit of holding on to “how we’ve always done it,” even when the world is changing around us. If I can help push the industry to think more critically, embrace technology responsibly, and stop being reactive—that’s the mark I want to leave.

It’s about raising the bar, asking better questions, and making sure we don’t get left behind because we were too comfortable to adapt.

Kathleen Lappe

I want to see DO AudioTours on every listing — residential, commercial, and multi-family. Just like photos or property descriptions, AI-driven, inclusive communication should be a standard part of every listing. It's too important not to be.

Pritesh Damani

One of the most meaningful contributions we've made is building a fully integrated technology platform that truly transforms agents' businesses and lives. Because we built it from the ground up and it is used by 100% of our agents, we have unparalleled access to holistic agent data, allowing us to leverage AI in ways others simply can't. Leo, our AI-powered assistant, goes beyond basic automation—it acts as a co-pilot, anticipating agent needs, streamlining workflows, and making intelligent recommendations based on real-time behaviors.

Beyond productivity, we're also redefining financial empowerment for agents. Real Wallet, our industry-first financial platform, provides seamless commission access, revenue-sharing insights, and wealth-building tools designed specifically for real estate professionals. These innovations aren't just about efficiency—they're about giving agents more control, stability, and long-term financial success. And we're just getting started.

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