

BRIDGIUM

From Discovery to

Practice: How Corporate–Startup Collaboration Becomes Usable



Bridgium is a high-impact joint research initiative by Albimarketing Oy and Digitune Oy and dedicated to diving deep into the phenomenon of innovation.

© 2026 Bridgium. All Rights Reserved.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
2. INTRODUCTION	6
3. ANALYTICAL APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY	7
4. THE PROMISE AND FRICTION OF EXTERNAL INNOVATION	13
5. ENTRY / ACCESS: VISIBILITY AND MATCHING	21
6. TRANSLATION / PILOT EXPLORATION: VALIDATION PHASE	30
7. INTEGRATION / EMBEDDING PHASE	38
8. FINDINGS: HOW CORPORATE-STARTUP COLLABORATION CAN WORK BETTER	45
9. FINAL THOUGHT	49
APPENDIX 1. PRACTICE CASES: HOW COMPANIES FIND, FILTER AND ENGAGE STARTUPS	51
APPENDIX 2. CORPORATE EVALUATION LOGIC AND STARTUP FRICTION IN COLLABORATION PROCESSES	53

“

I have looked at this problem from both sides of the table: as a founder who raised money and exited a business of my own, and from inside large organisations deciding whether an outside idea is worth the risk. It is difficult work from either seat, and rarely for the reasons people expect.

The hard part is seldom the idea. It is everything around it: whether the two sides can find each other, read each other, and carry a promising pilot into the way the organisation actually runs.

This is where the report proves its worth. Rather than repeat the familiar complaint that corporates and startups do not understand each other, it names where and why collaboration loses momentum, and does not stop at the diagnosis. The expectation paradox at its centre, that corporates search for novelty but evaluate predictability, is the sharpest description of this friction I have read. Engage widely, explore jointly, filter gradually, embed selectively is a discipline any leader can apply on Monday morning.

Above all, it treats collaboration as human work, which is what it is. That is why it is worth your time.



Louis Strydom,
Director of Growth & Development (Europe & Africa),
Wärtsilä Energy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Corporate–startup collaboration

What makes corporate–startup collaboration possible and effective in practice, and why does it so often break down between first contact, pilots and real implementation?

This report addresses that question by examining collaboration as a staged Innovation Flow across organizational boundaries (How Innovation Happens (2026)).

It is based on 48 qualitative interviews with innovation leaders in large Nordic and European corporations and founders of startups and SMEs engaged in corporate collaboration.

The interviews clearly show an expectation paradox: corporates search for novelty but evaluate predictability, while startups seek fast validation but must prove reliability and operational fit.

Our analytical framework

MAKES THIS PATTERN VISIBLE BY SHOWING HOW COLLABORATION DEPENDS ON FOUR INNOVATION FLOW CONDITIONS: LEGITIMACY, PREDICTABILITY, CONNECTIVITY AND INNOVATION MEMORY, WHICH MUST WORK TOGETHER ACROSS INNOVATION FLOW STAGES.

1. Legitimacy is about whether questions and offers are seen as clearly relevant, allowed and expected from both sides;
2. Predictability is about whether actors understand next steps and evaluation logic;
3. Connectivity is about whether the right people, problems and decision-makers can find each other;
4. Innovation memory is about whether learning from prior attempts is retained and used.

¹"How Innovation Happens," Bridgium Research Team, 2026 (Illarionova N., Verlin A., Verlin K.)

The report identifies three stages where collaboration gains or loses momentum:

Entry / Access,

the key challenge is visibility: corporate needs are often unclear, and access depends heavily on networks.

Translation / Pilot Exploration,

the key challenge is interpretation: the problem, the test, and the success criteria are not always aligned.

Integration / Embedding,

the key challenge is whether the pathway from pilot to practice is clear, visible, and governed by explicit rules.

Ownership must be transferred, decision-making must be defined, funding must be secured, structural gates such as procurement, legal, IP and security must be anticipated, and responsibilities must be clear enough for the solution to move into real use.

This report provides a diagnostic lens for innovation leaders to assess collaboration readiness with external innovation providers and pinpoint where bottlenecks are likely to emerge. It also identifies the best practices observed in this research that strengthen collaboration in practice: wider engagement, structured co-exploration, gradual filtering, and selective implementation.

In this way, the original social-science-based framework helps leaders identify which structural and communication conditions must be in place for innovation to move forward, and where these conditions are currently missing.

2. INTRODUCTION

Corporate–startup collaboration promises speed, expertise, validation and access to real markets, but often stalls between first contact, pilots and implementation.

This report builds on our previous research, *How Innovation Happens* (2026), and extends the analysis of innovation as a lived organizational process into corporate–startup and corporate–SME collaboration. It asks what makes collaboration possible and effective in practice, and why it so often breaks down before external solutions become part of corporate reality.

The report takes a sociology-of-knowledge lens:

Innovation is understood as a process in which ideas become meaningful when they are clearly framed, collectively interpreted, legitimized and embedded into practice.

To examine that process, the report uses the Innovation Flow framework across three stages: **Entry / Access, Translation / Pilot Exploration, and Integration / Embedding.**

The analysis applies four Innovation Flow conditions — **legitimacy, predictability, connectivity and innovation memory.** These conditions help explain where collaboration gains momentum, where it loses clarity, and why transitions between exploration, validation and embedding are often fragile.

The report is diagnostic and practical. It helps leaders and external partners spot bottlenecks early, identify which conditions are missing, and shape collaboration more deliberately. It is most relevant in open innovation environments where part of the problem space can be discussed with selected external actors, without requiring full disclosure of confidential strategic information.

3. ANALYTICAL APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

3.1. Conceptual Foundation and Approach

This study builds on our prior research, *How Innovation Happens* (2026), extending the analysis of innovation as a lived organizational process into the context of corporate–startup and corporate–SME collaboration.

The conceptual foundation is informed by the sociology of knowledge²: we treat innovation as a socially constructed process. Ideas become meaningful when they are clearly articulated, collectively interpreted, legitimized and embedded through interaction into practice.



Building on our prior study, we identify the **structural and communication conditions** that shape collaboration, using key parameters of the Innovation Flow as analytical lenses: legitimacy, predictability, connectivity and innovation memory. These serve as constitutive conditions for how ideas move across organizational boundaries.

The analysis also makes explicit the **entry points and transition moments** where the flow passes between stages, particularly between **exploration and embedding**, where alignment is most likely to break down.

²Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. A foundational work on how shared meaning becomes institutionalized through social interaction. 7. Reprinted by Penguin Books, 1991.

3.2. Main Definitions

External innovation providers

refer to external actors that bring technologies, expertise, prototypes, PoCs, MVPs or ready-to-test solutions into corporate contexts. In this study, the term includes startups, SMEs, research-based ventures, scaleups and specialized solution providers³.

Corporate-startup / SME collaboration

refers to cooperation between established companies and external innovation providers, aimed at exploring, testing, adapting or integrating new solutions into corporate environments.

Legitimacy

refers to whether an action or proposal is perceived as relevant, appropriate, and acceptable within a given organizational context. In this study, it means that external innovation activity - for example: offering a new idea, approaching a corporate contact, or proposing a startup solution - is recognized as expected, allowed and worth attention within the corporate collaboration process.

Collaboration Stages:

Entry / Access: the stage where corporates and external actors find each other and identify potential relevance.

Translation / Pilot Exploration: the stage where corporate problems and external solutions are aligned through dialogue, PoCs, prototypes, MVPs or pilots.

Integration / Embedding: the stage where validated solutions are prepared for operational adoption, scaling, or long-term partnership.

³However, this categorization has its limits. Not all startups are purely innovation-driven, and not all small businesses or research teams are oriented toward scalable or market-ready solutions. Their goals, incentives and levels of maturity can differ significantly. Treating them as a single group risks oversimplifying these differences.

Innovation Flow

refers to the movement of ideas from articulation to shared interpretation, validation, and possible integration into organizational practice. Building on How Innovation Happens (2026), this study treats innovation as a staged process rather than a single event.

Connectivity

in this study refers to whether relevant people, problems, solutions, and decision-makers can find each other and maintain meaningful dialogue across organizational and ecosystem boundaries.

Predictability

refers to whether actors can understand what happens next: decision steps, evaluation criteria, responsibilities, timelines and possible collaboration outcomes.

Innovation memory

refers to the ability to retain and reuse learning from previous discussions, pilots, failures, feedback and implementation attempts, instead of restarting the same learning process repeatedly.

Transparency

refers to the visibility of innovation needs, collaboration stages, entry points, decision criteria, decision-maker and next steps. It does not mean full disclosure of confidential strategic information, but enough clarity for relevant actors to understand how to engage.

3.3. Research Design and Data

Methodologically, the study uses a qualitative approach based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews. We analyze interview narratives to identify recurring patterns in how collaboration is experienced in practice.

The data consists of:

28 interviews with innovation leaders and senior practitioners in large Nordic and European corporations, conducted for the previous study;

20 interviews with founders and senior representatives of startups and SMEs engaged in corporate collaboration.

Interviews were conducted between September and December 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and followed a shared interview guide to ensure comparability, while leaving space for concrete examples, reflection, and case-based narratives⁴.

The study examines collaboration as it is practiced, including informal dynamics, expectations, workarounds, communication gaps, and decision-making patterns that are often not visible in formal organizational structures.

⁴Data protection and ethics. All interviews were conducted in line with EU data protection requirements (GDPR) and standard research ethics. Participation was voluntary, and all information is treated as confidential. Interview material was coded and analyzed in anonymized form. We do not collect or use sensitive personal data. In cases where respondents provided explicit permission, their name and/or organizational affiliation is referenced. All other findings are reported in anonymized form.



Geographic Scope

The study focuses primarily on **Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands**, with selected input from Central Europe.

Roles Represented

Innovation and R&D leaders, heads of strategy and transformation, product and innovation leads, startup founders, and SME leaders.

Industries Represented

The study covers four broad industry areas: Energy & Green Transition; Industry 4.0 and Industrial Digitalization; Smart Logistics, Infrastructure & Mobility; and Digital Infrastructure, AI & Enterprise Technologies.

3.4. Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on collaboration dynamics between corporates and external innovation providers.

It does not measure financial performance, compare startup programs or rank ecosystems. The analysis is qualitative and based on interview data, so it identifies recurring patterns, tensions and practices rather than statistically representative outcomes. Its value lies in clarifying where collaboration loses visibility, meaning or momentum, and what conditions can improve the flow from discovery to pilot and integration⁵.

Sectoral differences are intentionally aggregated in this report to identify cross-industry patterns in corporate–startup collaboration. However, the meaning of “friction” differs by sector. What appears as delay in software or SaaS contexts may be a hard constraint in heavy industry. Further research could disaggregate these patterns by sector to show how collaboration conditions differ across industrial environments.

⁵We recognize that in some corporate contexts innovation questions, technology fields, or strategic priorities are strictly confidential. In such cases, full external openness is neither realistic nor desirable. However, the collaboration logic discussed in this report can still be useful: companies may not disclose sensitive details, but they can clarify the type of expertise needed, possible engagement formats, decision steps and conditions for collaboration.

“We work with external partners when we see that the capability is not available internally or when collaboration can accelerate development.”

— Innovation Leadership Perspective •
Chemicals / Materials Industry • Finland



4. THE PROMISE AND FRICTION OF EXTERNAL INNOVATION

Corporate–startup collaboration is built on a promise: corporates gain speed, external expertise, and alternative solutions, while startups and SMEs gain market access, legitimacy, funding opportunities, and real-world validation. When it works, collaboration creates a pathway from early exploration to pilots and possible scaling.

Yet this potential is not automatic. This section introduces the basic tension before the stage-based analysis. It shows why collaboration matters, where mutual value appears, and why this value is often reduced by structural and communication barriers.

4.1. Why Corporates Turn to Startups and External Innovation Actors

Corporate innovation differs across industries, but respondents in this study share a common interest: finding ways to move ideas faster, access missing capabilities, and generate stronger outcomes.

Even where internal innovation processes are well developed, corporate leaders emphasize the value of external actors in bringing perspectives and solutions from outside.

Across interviews, corporates turn to external partners when internal structures lack speed, flexibility or specific expertise.

“Co-innovation makes the process faster.”
– Innovation Leader • Energy / Industrial Sector • Finland

“Alternative solutions... you never thought about.”
– Innovation Practitioner • Technology / Corporate Environment • Finland

“We work with external partners when we see that the capability is not available internally or when collaboration can accelerate development.”

— Innovation Leadership Perspective • Chemicals / Materials Industry • Finland

“We cannot innovate everything ourselves... we need partners.”

— Group Vice President / Innovation Leader • Industrial Technology • Global

“We don’t innovate alone, we work with partners to move faster and access capabilities we don’t have internally. External partners bring perspectives we wouldn’t get from inside the organization.”

— Innovation / Digital Development • Beverage Industry • Sweden

Corporates therefore view collaboration as complementary. They can provide stability, integration capacity, real market access, while external innovation actors bring expertise, speed, experimentation, and alternative ways of solving problems.

4.2. Why Startups Turn to Corporates

In this study, we use **startups and external innovation providers**³ broadly: startups, specialized SMEs, research teams, and other actors that bring new ideas, expertise, prototypes, PoCs or ready-to-test solutions into corporate contexts.

Startups operate within a wider innovation ecosystem of investors, accelerators, universities, public institutions, and industry partners. They turn to corporates when market access, legitimacy, operational validation, and resource leverage become critical for development and scaling.

Across interviews, startups describe corporates not only as customers, but as strategic environments where solutions can be tested, refined, and made credible.

³However, this categorization has its limits. Not all startups are purely innovation-driven, and not all small businesses or research teams are oriented toward scalable or market-ready solutions. Their goals, incentives and levels of maturity can differ significantly. Treating them as a single group risks oversimplifying these differences.

4. THE PROMISE AND FRICTION OF EXTERNAL INNOVATION



“Startups view corporations as partners for piloting... and scaling their innovations.”

— Startup Founder • B2B DeepTech • Finland

“We are looking for corporate partnerships from the very start, so our solution can be landed and aligned with potential customer needs early on.”

— Startup Founder • B2B HR-Tech • Finland

Corporate collaboration gives startups access to real users, industry standards, infrastructure, expertise and reference cases. This is especially important because startups are flexible and adaptable, but often lack financial, human, and operational resources.

Pilots and PoCs⁷ with corporates allow startups to validate solutions in real environments while maintaining independence. External validation and early adoption signals also strengthen credibility for investors, customers, and future partners.

At the same time, corporate collaboration does not replace venture capital or other growth paths. Startups often combine corporate collaboration for validation with investment for scaling. As one respondent noted, stakeholders still expect “clear progress milestones... product-market fit, measurable metrics.”

“External validation and early adoption signals strongly influence credibility. That’s a crucial factor for future fundraising.”

— Startup Founder • AI & Data • Finland

“A free pilot in a corporate environment gives us the opportunity to test and pivot. Only from inside can we understand the real needs and issues.

Second, we need references and use cases to approach VCs.”

— Startup Founder • B2B HR-Tech • Finland

“Corporations provide market access and enhanced credibility/references.”

— Startup Founder • B2B DeepTech • Finland

⁷ **PoC means Proof of Concept** — a small-scale test used to check whether an idea, technology or solution can work in a real or realistic context before moving to a pilot, implementation or wider investment.

4. THE PROMISE AND FRICTION OF EXTERNAL INNOVATION

Startups therefore seek not only customers or funding, but environments where their solutions can be tested, validated and made credible before scaling. When this matches a real corporate need, collaboration becomes meaningful: corporates gain faster access to external innovation, while startups gain a pathway to validate, pivot and bring solutions into practice.

At the same time, corporate collaboration creates risks for startups. Free PoCs and long exploratory cycles can consume scarce time and resources without a clear pathway to paid continuation. Startups also need clarity on what remains protected during co-exploration, how IP is treated, and what happens if the corporate later builds internally or works with another vendor.



4.3. Two Logics of Collaboration

In exploration logic

corporates look for new perspectives, emerging technologies, and alternative ways to approach unclear problems. Startups and SMEs seek access to real problem contexts, expert feedback, and opportunities to test early concepts, prototypes or PoCs.

To understand where mutual value turns into friction, we distinguish two main collaboration logics: exploration and implementation. This helps show why corporates and startups may enter the same collaboration with shared interest, but different assumptions about what should happen next.

In implementation logic

corporates look for solutions that can be tested, integrated and used within existing operations. Startups and SMEs seek credible pilots, reference cases, paid continuation, and a pathway toward scaling.

Many collaboration problems appear when these logics are mixed. A startup may enter with an exploratory proposal while the corporate evaluates it as a ready vendor solution. Or a corporate may invite open exploration without clarifying whether a pilot, partnership or implementation pathway is possible.

This distinction matters because each logic requires different entry points, expectations, evaluation criteria, and communication practices. The following section therefore analyzes collaboration as a staged process: **Entry / Access, Translation / Pilot Exploration, and Integration / Embedding.**

How Exploration and Implementation Generate Shared Benefits.

LOGIC	MATCHING POINT	CORPORATE BENEFITS	STARTUP / SME BENEFITS
EXPLORATION	Exploration of solution space Identifying and exploring a wide range of potential solutions.	Access external expertise and niche capabilities Leverage specialized knowledge and perspectives not available internally.	Validate concepts with real customers Test ideas and gain early validation.
EXPLORATION	Speed of iteration Running and learning cycles faster than internal projects alone.	Experiment faster than internal projects alone Accelerate learning and reduce time to insight.	Iterate PoCs, prototypes, or MVPs based on feedback Improve solutions quickly through real-world input.
EXPLORATION	Joint discovery Exploring uncertain problems from new and diverse perspectives.	Explore uncertain problems from new perspectives Challenge assumptions and uncover new opportunities.	Refine problem-solution fit in real context Adjust the solution to actual constraints.
IMPLEMENTATION	Real-world testing Testing solutions in operational environments and conditions.	Validate solutions in real operations Assess performance, feasibility, and impact in practice.	Access users and operational environments Gain insight, data, and feedback in real-world settings.
IMPLEMENTATION	Path to scale Scaling proven solutions within existing systems and processes.	Scale proven solutions within existing systems Integrate and expand solutions with lower implementation risk.	Gain market access, references, and credibility Build reputation, customer traction, and proof of value.

Table 1. How Exploration and Implementation Generate Shared Benefits.

4.4. Where Collaboration Breaks: From Structural Mismatch to Stage-Based Analysis

Corporates are oriented toward execution: stability, governance, compliance, resource allocation and operational continuity. Startups and SMEs operate through exploration: speed, experimentation, adaptation and problem-solving under uncertainty.

Before turning to the analysis of communication gaps, this section shows where collaboration begins to break. The core issue is a structural mismatch between corporate and startup business logics. This creates different expectations, and when these expectations remain unclear, collaboration loses transparency, interpretation and momentum.

This difference creates a paradox of expectations. Corporates search for novelty, but often evaluate predictability. Startups seek fast validation, but must prove reliability, continuity and operational fit. Collaboration becomes difficult when these expectations remain implicit.

DIMENSION	STARTUP LOGIC	CORPORATE LOGIC	COLLABORATION RISK
INNOVATION	Exploration	Controlled implementation	Misaligned expectations
RISK	Reduce risk through experimentation	Reduce risk before action	Slow validation
DECISION-MAKING	Fast, adaptive	Layered, hierarchical	Delays and uncertainty
TIME HORIZON	Survival & rapid growth	Long-term continuity	Timing mismatch
COMMUNICATION	Iterative, evolving	Structured, formalized	Interpretation gaps
SUCCESS CRITERIA	Validation & traction	ROI & operational fit	Pilot deadlocks
RESOURCES	Limited, flexible	Structured, process-driven	Asymmetry of execution

Table 2. Structural Logic Differences & Collaboration Risks

4. THE PROMISE AND FRICTION OF EXTERNAL INNOVATION

Communication problems emerge from this gap. The problem is not only different wording, but different assumptions behind the same words. Terms such as **pilot, validation, readiness, scalability, partnership and implementation** may sound shared, while carrying different meanings for each side.

Low transparency makes this paradox harder to manage. When needs, criteria, roles, contacts and next steps are not explicit, both sides interpret the collaboration through their own logic. As a result, communication produces noise instead of alignment.	This creates a recurring breakdown pattern: structural differences produce a paradox of expectations; low transparency turns this paradox into misinterpretation; and the effects appear differently at each stage: weak access at Entry, weak exploration and translation during pilots, and weak embedding after validation.
--	--

These problems become most visible at transition points: from first contact to exploration, from exploration to pilot, and from pilot to operational embedding.

This also happens when exploration and implementation logics are mixed: one side may treat the collaboration as open learning, while the other already evaluates readiness for operational use. For this reason, the report analyzes collaboration as a staged process. Each stage has its own matching problem, communication risk and Innovation Flow conditions:

Entry / Access is the stage where corporates and external actors find each other. The key issue is transparency: whether the innovation question, the decision-making process and collaboration outcomes are visible enough to enable relevant matching.	Translation / Pilot Exploration is the stage where problems and solutions are aligned through PoCs, prototypes, MVPs or pilots. The key issue is interpretation: whether both sides share an understanding of what is being tested, how success is evaluated, and what decision comes next.	Integration / Embedding is the stage where validated solutions move toward operational use. The key issue is embedding: whether ownership, implementation pathways, feedback loops, and organizational learning are strong enough to move from pilot success to sustained practice.
---	--	--

This staged view helps shift the discussion from general claims about “corporates and startups not understanding each other” toward a more practical question: **where exactly does collaboration lose visibility and meaning, and what can leaders do to restore the flow?**

“Lack of free, accessible knowledge bases of corporate research questions impedes matching startups with corporate needs.”

— Group Vice President • Industrial Technology • Netherlands



5. ENTRY / ACCESS: VISIBILITY AND MATCHING

At the entry stage, startups and corporates try to identify possible collaboration opportunities. Alignment depends on whether corporate problems and startup capabilities are visible, understandable, and meaningful to each other.

The main breakdown occurs when corporate needs are unclear, ecosystem visibility is fragmented and both sides communicate through different logics. As a result, entry becomes less a process of direct matching and more a process of interpretation under uncertainty.

5.1. Transparency Gap (Early Stage)

Corporates do not articulate problems clearly; startups operate on signals.

A central challenge at the entry stage is the limited articulation of corporate needs. While corporates operate with defined strategies, priorities and internal problem spaces, these remain largely implicit and inaccessible to external actors.



“Corporates... don’t really tell you about their problems... only when you are already in.”

— Sales Leader • IT Services • Finland

“Lack of free, accessible knowledge bases of corporate research questions impedes matching startups with corporate needs.”

— Group Vice President • Industrial Technology • Netherlands

“Limited transparency in corporate needs... makes it hard for startups to identify relevant problems to solve.”

— Open Innovation Lead • Industrial Technology • Germany

5.2: Language Gap. Business case vs product and vision narrative

Corporates frame opportunities through business value, integration, and risk, while startups communicate through product capabilities, innovation potential, and vision. As a result, collaboration requires translation between different systems of meaning rather than straightforward information exchange.

Startups often use their own technical or ecosystem-specific language (often targeted to VC-oriented pitch decks), while corporates rely on internal business logic and terminology. As a result, communication becomes a process of translation rather than exchange, where both sides struggle to align meanings and expectations.

The gap is not only linguistic, but conceptual – each side operates within a different logic of value.

“We are exploring ways to enhance communication and collaboration... bridging gaps in language and understanding.”
– Senior Manager • Enterprise IT
• Finland

“I didn’t even understand what they were talking about... What are you looking for?”
– Open Innovation Lead •
Industrial Technology •
Germany

5.3. Ecosystem Visibility Gap: Access Through Networks Rather Than Transparent Systems

Interviews show that entry into collaboration is socially mediated rather than structurally transparent. Connections are typically formed through recurring events, informal exchanges, and introductions within existing networks.

“The ecosystem has been pretty local... you start to know the people... in your region who are dealing with it.”
– Innovation Manager • Chemicals
Industry • Finland

While ecosystems enable local interaction, they also create structural limitations. Information flow remains fragmented across small and often disconnected communities:

“...small groups and communities are competing with each other... that stops the flow of information.”

Innovation Manager • Urban Development • Finland



“Networking is often localized, limiting access to broader markets and partnerships.”

– Open Innovation Lead • Industrial Technology • Germany

“Lack of free, accessible knowledge bases of corporate research questions impedes matching startups with corporate needs.”

– Group Vice President • Industrial Technology • Netherlands

“There are so many tools... platforms... we are trying different things... but I’m not super convinced... if it’s really worth the cost.”

– Open Innovation Lead • Industrial Technology • Germany

As a result, access to corporate needs and opportunities depends heavily on proximity, networks, and visibility within established circles.

Digital matching platforms currently play only a limited role and do not resolve the underlying problem. Although they increase exposure, interviews suggest they rarely provide the trust, contextual understanding, or translation mechanisms required for meaningful alignment.

As a result, platforms support visibility but not necessarily connection. Corporates continue to rely on trusted intermediaries and known partners, while startups without network access remain difficult to discover. This creates a noise effect: corporates receive large volumes of loosely relevant proposals, while startups struggle to identify real corporate needs. Interaction increases, but alignment does not.

5.4. Results: Communication as Interpretation, Not Alignment

At the entry stage, communication issues lead to unclear or incorrect interpretations and become a barrier to dialogue, as interaction reflects structural differences between corporates and startups rather than enabling alignment. This phase is shaped by low transparency of needs and structures, network-mediated visibility instead of open access, and misaligned language frameworks for expressing value.



5.5. Analytical Synthesis: Legitimacy, Predictability, Connectivity and Innovation Memory at the Entry Stage

Our previous research on Innovation Flow identified legitimacy, predictability, and connectivity as key cross-stage conditions enabling innovation movement across organizations. In this study, we apply the same lens to corporate–startup collaboration.

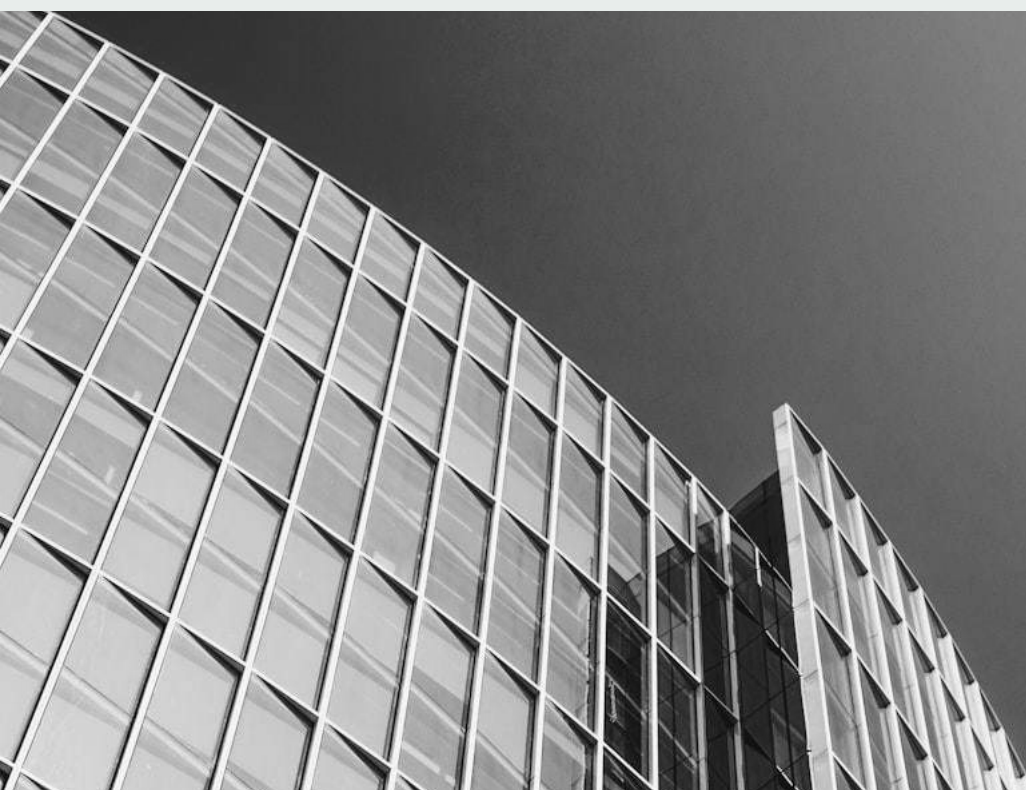
Connectivity is constrained by fragmented ecosystem structures and limited transparency of innovation needs. Access to collaboration depends heavily on personal networks, local hubs, and informal visibility mechanisms, while many SMEs, research-based ventures. **The absence of shared dialogue spaces becomes a critical barrier to early-stage alignment, leaving innovation actors structurally disconnected from one another.**

Legitimacy of external ideas remains weak when corporate innovation questions are not articulated in explicit and operational terms. A key distinction is whether the company is looking for **exploration** – joint problem framing and solution development – or for **the embedding of a ready solution** into existing operations. Without this distinction, startup approaches are often perceived as “interesting ideas” rather than legitimate solutions, because they are not clearly connected to recognized internal priorities, operational problem spaces, or the expected collaboration stage.

Innovation memory is still weak at the entry stage when previous contacts, scouting attempts, challenge definitions and ecosystem learning are not retained or made searchable. As a result, both corporates and startups repeatedly restart the matching process instead of building on what has already been learned.

Predictability is low for both corporates and startups due to the absence of transparent intake processes, evaluation criteria, and visible next steps. From the first interaction, actors have limited ability to anticipate whether engagement will progress, stall, or disappear without feedback.

Together, these conditions reduce transparency at the entry stage and make effective matching between corporate problems and startup capabilities difficult to achieve.



5.6. Requirements for Effective Entry-Stage Collaboration by Innovation Flow Conditions

The four Innovation Flow conditions create requirements for both sides. Corporates need to make collaboration visible, structured, connected and cumulative, while startups need to make their solutions understandable, assessable, relationally connected, and adaptable to corporate contexts.

Collaboration Requirements Across Innovation Flow Dimensions

DIMENSION	CORPORATE REQUIREMENTS	STARTUP / EXTERNAL PARTNER REQUIREMENTS
LEGITIMACY	Formulate clear innovation questions and problem areas that show why external collaboration matters	Explain the solution in corporate terms: the problem addressed, operational relevance, and expected value
PREDICTABILITY	Provide transparent entry pathways, contact points, evaluation criteria, decision steps, and possible outcomes	Show solution maturity, readiness, required resources, timelines, and commitment
CONNECTIVITY	Enable access through open networks, communities, events, hubs, and cross-functional interfaces	Build relationships across the ecosystem and maintain active dialogue with problem owners and sponsors
INNOVATION MEMORY	Maintain visible knowledge bases, challenge repositories, pilot records, and feedback loops	Reuse feedback, references, and pilot learning to refine the solution and improve fit

Table 3. Requirements for Effective Entry-Stage Collaboration by Innovation Flow Conditions

5.7. Improving Entry-Stage Transparency and Alignment

Filtering at the entry stage does not mean closing access too early. The stronger practice is to combine openness with structure: make the problem area visible, invite external interpretation, and then gradually filter opportunities against relevance, strategic fit and possible integration pathway.

Clearly formulated problem statements and explicit expectations about the engagement mode – co-exploration or ready-to-integrate solution – create an early alignment filter. They help startups and SMEs understand where their expertise may be relevant, while corporates reduce noise and focus on opportunities that fit real needs.

In the strongest cases, broad scouting or open challenge formats are followed by structured dialogue, expert feedback and selective movement toward pilots or implementation.

“We screened around 250 startups every year and selected roughly ten for deeper pilot and co-creation programmes.”
– Innovation Community & Startup Collaboration Lead • Engineering & Consulting • Sweden

This approach keeps the company connected to the wider ecosystem while concentrating internal resources on a smaller number of relevant opportunities.

The practical logic is:

Open broadly → clarify problem → invite interpretation → assess fit → filter gradually → move only relevant cases forward.



For leaders, this means making entry conditions explicit and operational:

- articulate innovation needs in externally understandable terms;
- define the engagement mode upfront: co-exploration or ready-to-integrate solution;
- make relevant contacts and dialogue spaces visible beyond closed networks;
- establish transparent evaluation and decision-making steps.

Together, these actions increase transparency and enable more reliable matching between corporate needs and external solutions.

5.8. Implications for Startups

For startups and SMEs, entry-stage collaboration also requires structure. Active exploration is often necessary, but it should not become endless searching inside unclear corporate systems. Startups need to understand how the corporate innovation pipeline works: who owns the problem, how decisions are made, what constraints shape adoption, and whether the case is exploratory or already expected to move toward integration.

“We spend about a year on research and exploration – not only to approve the PoC, but to build connections. It is a loss of time, but still the only working model.” – Startup Founder • B2B HR-Tech • Finland

This requires aligning the solution not only with the problem itself, but also with corporate expectations around risk, compliance, integration, scalability and continuity. Startups therefore need to demonstrate both innovation potential and operational predictability.

This makes early qualification essential. Startups need to assess not only whether the corporate is interested, but whether the opportunity has a realistic pathway beyond unpaid exploration, repeated meetings or pilot purgatory.



For startups, the practical task is to qualify the opportunity early:

- clarify who owns the problem, who decides, and what budget logic or constraints shape continuation;
- understand whether the corporate is exploring, ready to implement, and how IP is treated;
- ask what counts as success at the next stage and who funds it;
- translate the solution into business, operational and integration terms.

Together, clearer corporate entry conditions and more active startup qualification create a more transparent entry environment, supporting faster matching, stronger knowledge transfer and more reliable movement toward pilots or integration.

“Information moves quite well, but decisions are still made within units. That’s where things slow down.”

— Digital Innovation Leader •
Telecommunications • Finland



6. TRANSLATION / PILOT EXPLORATION: VALIDATION PHASE

At this stage, pilots, PoCs, prototypes, and MVPs function as exploratory validation environments where corporates and startups jointly test assumptions, refine problem–solution fit, and evaluate operational relevance before implementation decisions are made.

6.1. Structural Tension: Exploration vs Operational Logic

This stage exposes a structural mismatch between startup and corporate innovation logics. Startups typically approach pilots as iterative learning environments: spaces for rapid testing of assumptions, refinement of solutions, and demonstration of emerging value. This requires room for experimentation, fast feedback loops, and timely decisions.

Corporates, by contrast, approach pilots through governance and operational logic – expecting measurable outcomes, compliance alignment, implementation readiness, and reduced risk.

“We tend to evaluate startups as if they were already established vendors.”

– Procurement Lead • Telecommunications • Sweden

As a result, experimental solutions are often assessed through implementation-oriented expectations before the problem, the problem–solution fit, or validation logic are fully aligned.

Timing differences further intensify this tension. Startups depend on rapid iteration cycles due to financial and operational pressure, while corporates move through slower processes tied to prioritization, budgeting, compliance, and internal coordination.

At the same time:

“We did all of the work... in four weeks, but it was going to take them 18 months to get to change in production.”

– CEO / Sales & Innovation Lead • IT Services • Finland

“We need fast validation of pilots. We cannot wait long cycles.”

– Startup Founder • B2B SaaS • Finland

These structural asymmetries reduce predictability for both sides and create uncertainty around continuity, scaling, and next steps.

But, at the same time, this timing gap should not always be interpreted as organizational slowness. In regulated and asset-heavy sectors, long implementation cycles may reflect structural constraints rather than weak commitment: certification, safety cases, OT / IT security, production continuity and asset lifecycles measured in decades.

This means that startups need to distinguish between avoidable delay and sector-specific constraints that shape what can realistically be tested, changed or deployed.

6.2. Aligning Problems and Solutions

Communication mismatches emerge directly from these structural conditions. At the Pilot stage, collaboration rarely breaks because of open disagreement. More often, alignment weakens because the problem definition, pilot goals, and evaluation logic remain only partially articulated.

Interviewees repeatedly describe ambiguity around what the pilot is actually expected to demonstrate:

“We often jump too quickly from first contact to pilot, without really aligning on what problem we are solving.”

– Innovation Lead • Logistics • Netherlands • Global Operator

This reflects a broader pattern identified in *How Innovation Happens* (2026): innovation processes weaken when collective interpretation does not stabilize before implementation pressure increases.

At the same time, corporates themselves often communicate needs only partially:

“Corporates... don’t really tell you about their problems... only when you are already in.”

— Sales Leader • IT Services • Finland

As a result, startups attempt to adapt solutions to organizational contexts they only partially understand, while corporates evaluate solutions without fully exposing operational priorities, constraints, or adoption logic.

6.3. Validation Criteria and Communication Logic

A recurring mismatch at this stage concerns validation criteria. Startups often treat pilots as exploratory spaces for learning, feedback and refinement, while corporates may expect measurable impact, operational readiness or implementation potential from the start. The key issue is whether the collaboration is meant to explore and shape a solution or embed a ready one; when this distinction is unclear, both sides evaluate the same pilot by different standards.

This difference is reinforced by contrasting communication logics. Startups communicate through product capabilities, technological possibilities, and future potential, while corporates frame evaluation through business cases, integration requirements and risk reduction.

“Difficulty in translating technology into business... especially when they focus too much on technology rather than business application.”

— Innovation Leader • Industrial & Technology Systems • Finland

Under these conditions, communication becomes a process of ongoing translation rather than direct alignment.

6.4. Internal Fragmentation and Decision-Making

The lack of transparency becomes particularly visible in decision-making structures. Respondents describe fragmented ownership, multiple stakeholders, and unclear authority across innovation, procurement, and operational units.

“It’s always about who has the authority, who needs to be convinced, and what is actually your responsibility.”

— Enterprise Innovation Advisor • Enterprise Software • Finland

As a result, startups often struggle to understand how decisions are made, who owns the pilot internally, and what conditions determine continuation or scaling.



6.5. Feedback Loops Consequently Become Inconsistent:

“Information moves quite well, but decisions are still made within units. That’s where things slow down.”

— Digital Innovation Leader • Telecommunications • Finland

Under these conditions, pilots become localized experiments rather than coordinated organizational learning processes. Innovation teams, procurement, operational units, and startups interpret the same collaboration through different institutional logics, without stable mechanisms for synchronization.

As a result, collaboration slows not because of lack of interest, but because problems, solutions, validation criteria, and decision pathways are not stabilized in a mutually interpretable form.

6.6. Analytical Synthesis: Legitimacy, Predictability, Connectivity and Innovation Memory in the Translation Phase

At the Validation and Translation stage, collaboration depends on the ability of corporates and startups to jointly interpret problems, solutions, and validation criteria within a shared exploratory space. Pilots function not only as technical tests, but as processes of collective sensemaking where expectations, meanings, and operational relevance are negotiated.

Predictability becomes critical for both sides during pilot collaboration. Startups require visible timelines, feedback loops and understandable evaluation criteria in order to adapt solutions and allocate limited resources. Corporates, in parallel, seek predictability in continuity, delivery capability, integration readiness, and operational risk. When pilot goals, success criteria, ownership, or decision pathways remain unclear, collaboration becomes difficult to coordinate and sustain.

Legitimacy at this stage depends on whether experimentation itself is recognized as a valid organizational activity. Startups seek space for iteration, learning and adaptation, while corporates often evaluate pilots through implementation-oriented expectations associated with mature vendors. As a result, exploratory solutions may lose legitimacy before the problem–solution fit is fully developed.

Connectivity at this stage depends on the presence of cross-functional dialogue and coordinated interpretation across organizational actors. Pilots rarely involve only one unit: innovation teams, procurement, operational departments, technical experts, and startups all participate through different institutional logics. Without mechanisms that connect these perspectives through shared communication and feedback processes, pilots remain fragmented local experiments rather than organizational learning processes.

Collaboration Requirements at the Innovation Flow Stage

DIMENSION	CORPORATE REQUIREMENTS	STARTUP / EXTERNAL PARTNER REQUIREMENTS
LEGITIMACY	Define clear pilot goals and operational relevance	Align solutions to real business and operational needs
PREDICTABILITY	Establish transparent validation criteria and decision pathways	Demonstrate reliability, continuity, and integration readiness
CONNECTIVITY	Enable cross-functional coordination and regular feedback loops	Maintain active communication and adapt through iterative feedback
INNOVATION MEMORY	Document learning and connect pilots to future adoption processes	Capture insights, refine solutions, and transfer learning across iterations

Table 4. Requirements for Effective Translation-Stage Collaboration by Innovation Flow Conditions

6.7. Improving Translation-Stage Transparency and Alignment

When the Translation stage functions effectively, corporates can explore uncertain problem spaces with lower risk and faster experimentation, while startups can iterate proofs of concept with real users, validate assumptions, and generate strong operational reference cases. This creates conditions for joint discovery, faster learning cycles, and more realistic evaluation of solution fit before large-scale implementation decisions are made.

6.8. Implications for Corporate Leaders



For corporates, this means creating protected spaces for experimentation before implementation logic dominates the process.

Clear pilot ownership, transparent validation criteria, visible decision-making pathways, and regular cross-functional feedback loops help startups navigate internal structures and adapt solutions more effectively. Early alignment between innovation, operational, procurement, and business units also reduces fragmentation and improves continuity between exploration and future adoption decisions.

For startups, successful pilot collaboration requires moving from pitching to active qualification. The key task is to understand how the corporate defines the problem, evaluates progress, coordinates decisions and moves from validation toward possible implementation.

6.9. Implications for Startups

At this stage, startups need to clarify:

- what the pilot is expected to prove: problem relevance, technical fit, user value, business case or integration readiness;
- whether the engagement is a free PoC, a paid pilot or a pathway toward funded implementation;
- who owns the problem, who decides, who gives feedback and who funds the next step;
- what remains protected during co-exploration, how IP is treated, and what happens if the corporate later builds internally or works with another vendor;
- what counts as success at the next stage and what conditions shape continuation.

This report does not examine legal mechanisms in detail, but IP clarity is an important condition for fair collaboration. Early corporate dialogue often requires sharing ideas, assumptions and technical logic, so startups need to protect the boundary between useful co-exploration and overexposure.

At the same time, corporates look not only for innovation potential, but for reliability and integration readiness. Startups therefore benefit from translating the solution into operational and business terms, demonstrating continuity, adaptability, compliance awareness and the ability to work within existing corporate systems.

**“What works in a pilot does not always fit
into existing processes.”**
Operations Director • Logistics • Sweden



7. INTEGRATION / EMBEDDING PHASE

At the Integration stage, collaboration moves beyond exploration and validation toward operational embedding. Solutions that proved relevant during pilots, PoCs, prototypes, or MVP testing must now function within existing corporate systems, routines, governance structures, and business priorities.

7.1. Structural Tension: Innovation Flow vs Operational Stability

This stage exposes a structural mismatch between exploratory innovation logic and operational execution logic. Startups and innovation teams often approach successful pilots as evidence for scaling and continuation. Operational units, however, evaluate solutions through the logic of continuity, process fit, resource allocation and long-term maintainability.

As a result, solutions that succeed during pilots may still fail to move into practice.

“Even successful pilots don’t automatically have a place in the organization.”
— Strategy Director • Telecommunications • Denmark

A major structural issue at this stage concerns ownership assignment and integration pathways. Pilots are frequently initiated by innovation or transformation teams, while operational implementation depends on business units responsible for infrastructure, execution, budgets, and long-term support.

“Projects lose momentum when they move from innovation teams to business units.”
— Head of R&D • Energy • Norway



The previous study *How Innovation Happens* (2026) identified this transition as one of the most fragile moments in the Innovation Flow. Innovation slows not because ideas fail technically, but because organizations lack stable ownership transfer, integration routines, and coordinated movement between innovation and operational structures.

At the same time, operational environments introduce constraints that are often not fully visible during earlier experimentation stages.

“What works in a pilot does not always fit into existing processes.”

— Operations Director • Logistics • Sweden

At this stage, organizations prioritize operational stability. Procurement, legal, IP, cyber and data-security vetting often become structural gates between pilot validation and operational adoption. Startups therefore face a transition from proving relevance to proving reliability.

7.2. Internal Fragmentation and Operational Alignment

Communication challenges at the Integration stage emerge primarily through internal fragmentation. Embedding a solution requires coordination across innovation teams, operational units, procurement, legal, compliance and management structures.

“Different teams evaluate the same startup differently, and there is no shared view.”

— Innovation Program Manager • Automotive • Germany

Without coordinated alignment, pilots remain isolated local successes rather than scalable organizational practices.

This fragmentation weakens continuity between stages and creates uncertainty around prioritization and implementation decisions. Startups often struggle to understand who owns the transition process, what criteria determine continuation and how priorities shift across organizational units.

7.3. Ownership, Decision-Making and Prioritization

A recurring issue at this stage is the absence of clear embedding mechanisms. Even successful pilots often lack explicit ownership, operational resources, and structured pathways toward implementation.



“Information moves quite well, but decisions are still made within units. That’s where things slow down.” – Digital Innovation Leader • Telecommunications • Finland

“Do you understand how this future could look? And are you willing to commit to it?” Without this step, initiatives may receive encouragement – “this is nice, please carry on” – while no one has a real intention of putting resources behind them. – Director of Growth & Development • Energy Technology • Netherlands

A further risk concerns budget ownership. A pilot may be technically validated and still fail to move forward if no business unit, P&L owner or operational sponsor is prepared to fund scaling, allocate people or absorb implementation risk.

Decision-making is frequently distributed across multiple units with different priorities, slowing continuation and weakening accountability.

As described in **How Innovation Happens (2026)**, successful integration depends on orchestration across functions: clear ownership transfer, predictable decision pathways, and continuity between experimentation and execution. Without these conditions, solutions lose momentum between validation and operational adoption.

7.4. Feedback Loops and Integration Learning

At the Integration stage, learning becomes distributed across teams, countries, operational contexts and user groups. Some units adapt quickly, while others face resistance, different priorities or operational constraints.

For this reason, integration depends not only on technical implementation, but on repeatable feedback and learning mechanisms. Upgrades, failures and successful practices need to be shared, retained and translated across the organization, so that implementation learning does not remain local or disappear between units.

7.5. Analytical Synthesis: Legitimacy, Predictability, Connectivity and Innovation Memory in the Integration / Embedding Phase

At the Integration stage, collaboration weakens when validated solutions fail to become operationally legitimate for both sides. Corporates may still perceive external solutions as experimental initiatives rather than scalable operational practices, while startups face pressure to prove not only innovation value, but long-term reliability, continuity, and organizational maturity as implementation partners.

Connectivity problems emerge through fragmented coordination across innovation teams, operational units, procurement, IT, compliance, management, and end users. Different teams and countries may interpret the same solution differently, while implementation feedback often remains localized instead of becoming shared organizational learning.

Predictability becomes a major risk area when implementation pathways, ownership, budget responsibility, resource allocation and decision-making processes remain unclear. Corporates struggle to coordinate embedding across multiple units, while startups operate under long timelines and limited visibility into continuation decisions, making planning and adaptation difficult.

Innovation memory becomes critical when implementation learning, failures, adaptations and successful practices need to travel across units and projects rather than remain local.

Without stable communication, cross-functional feedback loops, and mechanisms for building innovation memory, organizations repeatedly restart integration learning rather than accumulating scalable capability for embedding innovation.

Collaboration Requirements at the Integration Stage

DIMENSION	CORPORATE REQUIREMENTS	STARTUP / EXTERNAL PARTNER REQUIREMENTS
LEGITIMACY	Define operational ownership and connect solutions to business priorities	Demonstrate operational relevance beyond the pilot stage
PREDICTABILITY	Establish clear implementation pathways, decision rules, and resource allocation	Ensure reliability, continuity, compliance awareness, and long-term support capability
CONNECTIVITY	Coordinate across operational, IT, procurement, compliance, and business units	Engage multiple stakeholders and adapt solutions to existing systems and workflows
INNOVATION MEMORY	Maintain feedback loops, document implementation learning, and share knowledge across teams	Capture operational feedback, iterate based on adoption realities, and support knowledge transfer

Table 5. Requirements for Effective Integration-Stage Collaboration by Innovation Flow Conditions

7.6. Improving Integration-Stage Transparency and Alignment

Successful integration occurs when validated solutions move beyond isolated pilots into coordinated operational use. Clear ownership assignment, transparent implementation criteria, and visible decision-making pathways help align innovation teams, operational units, and external partners around shared execution goals.

This allows corporates to reduce implementation uncertainty, coordinate adoption across functions and regions, and retain organizational learning, while startups and SMEs can adapt solutions to real operational environments, strengthen reliability, and build scalable reference cases.

7.7. Implications for Corporate Leaders

For corporates, effective integration depends on making implementation pathways explicit and coordinated across the organization.

Clear ownership transfer, stable prioritization processes and cross-functional alignment teams help reduce fragmentation during scaling. Regular feedback loops and mechanisms for capturing implementation learning allow organizations to build innovation memory instead of repeatedly restarting adoption processes.



7.8. Implications for Startups

For startups and SMEs, successful integration requires moving beyond demonstration of innovation potential toward operational reliability and continuity.

Understanding internal corporate structures, decision-making logic, implementation constraints, and stakeholder priorities becomes critical for long-term adoption. Startups benefit from adapting solutions to existing workflows and compliance requirements, maintaining active communication across teams, and supporting ongoing refinement during implementation and scaling.

“A true transition happens when strategy is paired with openness – when new ideas and fresh perspectives are actively brought to the table.”

— Director, Innovation Lab • Energy Technology • Finland



8. FINDINGS:

HOW CORPORATE-STARTUP COLLABORATION CAN WORK BETTER

This study asked what makes corporate-startup collaboration effective in practice, and why it so often breaks down between first contact, pilots and real implementation. The value of the analysis is diagnostic: it shows where collaboration loses visibility, meaning, ownership and learning — and what conditions help the flow move forward.

“A true transition happens when strategy is paired with openness — when new ideas and fresh perspectives are actively brought to the table.”

— Director, Innovation Lab • Energy Technology • Finland

Across the interviews, collaboration is shaped by a recurring expectation paradox:

corporates search for novelty but evaluate predictability, while startups seek fast validation but must prove reliability and operational fit.

This tension is structural, but it becomes harder to manage when needs, criteria, roles and next steps remain unclear. In those cases, collaboration produces noise at Entry, weak interpretation during Translation / Pilot Exploration, and fragile ownership after validation.



The staged approach makes this pattern visible.

Entry / Access,

the key challenge is visibility and matching. Corporate needs are often too implicit for external actors to interpret, and access depends heavily on networks. Stronger cases make the problem field visible, specify the type of collaboration sought, and provide enough openness for relevant actors to connect without exposing confidential strategy.

Translation / Pilot Exploration,

the main challenge is interpretation and validation. Stronger cases do not treat pilots as generic testing exercises. They clarify what the pilot is meant to prove, what success looks like, who gives feedback, what risks need to be managed, and what decision follows. This helps startups move from generic pitching to informed co-exploration.

Integration / Embedding,

the central issue becomes ownership and transfer. The key question is not only whether the pilot worked, but whether the solution has a clear pathway into practice. This requires explicit ownership, funding, decision rights, implementation responsibility, IP and risk clarity, and a way to retain learning from implementation. Without these conditions, even successful pilots remain isolated experiments.

The practice cases show that stronger collaboration does not come from more random startup exposure. It comes from **structured openness and clear rules**. Corporates define a problem field, invite external interpretation, filter gradually, and move only relevant cases toward pilots or implementation. Challenge-based models, strategic domain ecosystems, broad scouting funnels and knowledge-sharing formats all followed this logic: open the space wide enough to bring in new perspectives, but structure it clearly enough to avoid noise.

For startups and SMEs, this creates better conditions for relevant experimentation. It gives them more than access to a potential customer: it helps them understand the real problem, test assumptions, adapt the solution and assess whether the opportunity is worth pursuing. At the same time, co-exploration is valuable only when expectations, IP boundaries, feedback, funding logic and continuation decisions are visible enough from the start. Otherwise, access can turn into pilot purgatory, overexposure or wasted resources.

In practical terms, the strongest cases created four outcomes:

Legitimacy

Corporates make their problem fields and collaboration needs understandable. Startups make their expertise, maturity and relevance understandable in corporate terms.

Predictability

Stages, evaluation criteria, next steps, ownership and funding logic become visible enough for both sides to reduce uncertainty and plan realistically.

Connectivity

Ecosystems, dialogue spaces and internal stakeholders are connected before formal decisions are made. This helps startups move beyond a single contact and helps corporates connect external knowledge to real internal needs.

Innovation memory

Learning from exploration, pilots, failures and implementation attempts is captured and reused. For corporates, this prevents repeated loss of learning between projects. For startups, it supports adaptation, customer understanding and stronger problem-solution fit.

Effective collaboration is therefore not created by access alone. It requires a repeatable capability on both sides:

Corporates need to make external engagement visible, structured and connected.

Startups need to interpret the context, qualify the opportunity and translate their solutions into operational value.

Across the cases, one pattern appears consistently: **engage widely, explore jointly, filter gradually and embed selectively.**

8. FINDINGS: HOW CORPORATE–STARTUP COLLABORATION CAN WORK BETTER

The table below translates the report’s findings into practical actions for both sides. It shows how corporates and startups / SMEs can reduce uncertainty, improve alignment and create better conditions for moving from first contact to pilots and implementation.

ACTION AREA	WHAT CORPORATES CAN DO	WHAT STARTUPS / SMEs CAN DO
1. MAKE THE INNOVATION QUESTION VISIBLE	Formulate clear problem areas or innovation questions that can be shared beyond closed networks. Even when details are confidential, the direction, context, and type of expertise needed can be communicated.	Track corporate problem areas, not only open calls. Position the solution around the problem it solves, not only around product features.
2. USE SHARED COLLABORATION LANGUAGE	Clarify whether the company is inviting exploration, co-creation, PoC, pilot, prototype, MVP, or ready implementation. Use clear problem-solving wording instead of vague “partnership” language.	Ask early what kind of collaboration is expected: exploration, validation, pilot, or implementation. Avoid assuming that “pilot” means paid scaling or immediate adoption.
3. CREATE SHARED EXPLORATION SPACES	Organize regular dialogue formats with startups, SMEs, researchers, customers, and internal teams: ecosystem meetings, challenge sessions, co-creation workshops, hackathons, or thematic calls.	Enter these spaces with openness to adapt. Use them to ask questions, understand constraints, and refine problem-solution fit before pushing a fixed offer.
4. BUILD A CLEAR PILOT PIPELINE	For ready solutions, show the pathway: who evaluates, who decides, what criteria matter, what budget or financing logic applies, and what happens after validation.	Map the decision process at the start: who owns the problem, who controls budget, who signs off, and what evidence is needed to move forward.
5. COORDINATE IMPLEMENTATION EARLY	Bring business owners, IT, procurement, compliance, users, and finance into the process before the pilot becomes isolated.	Demonstrate integration readiness: reliability, continuity, support capacity, compliance awareness, and ability to work with multiple stakeholders.
6. CAPTURE LEARNING AND FEEDBACK	Treat pilots as learning processes. Document feedback, mistakes, adaptations, and user responses so learning can travel across teams and regions.	Ask for regular feedback points and document what changes were made. Show how learning improves the solution and reduces implementation risk.

Table 6. Practical Actions for Usable Corporate–Startup Collaboration

9. FINAL THOUGHT

In this report, we divide collaboration into stages for analytical clarity.

In practice, however, these stages form a pipeline. What happens at Entry shapes the quality of exploration; what happens during exploration shapes whether a pilot can be evaluated; and what happens after validation determines whether a solution can become embedded practice.

Across the interviews, the strongest cases suggest that startup engagement works best not as one-off scouting or “innovation talent acquisition,” but as collaborative sensemaking.

Regular exploration with startups, SMEs, researchers and ecosystem actors helps corporates clarify problems and understand what kind of external knowledge is actually relevant. Even where confidentiality is critical, structured exploration can create value without exposing sensitive strategy. It can also work as an early filter: only the most relevant cases move toward pilots or implementation.

This matters because discoveries do not appear from exposure alone. They require repeatable formats where external knowledge can be found, interpreted, filtered and gradually connected to real business needs. This is what turns startup engagement from occasional networking into a usable collaboration capability: not a larger pipeline of contacts, but a better system for recognizing relevance, testing assumptions and carrying learning forward.

At the same time, integration remains the hardest point. Even when exploration and pilots work, embedding still meets internal corporate barriers: fragmented ownership, siloed decision-making, unclear pathways and weak transfer of learning. These issues connect directly to the findings of our previous report, *How Innovation Happens* (2026), where internal disconnection was identified as one of the main reasons why validated ideas fail to become everyday practice.

This opens a question for further research: **how can organizations build repeatable exploration formats that not only discover relevant external solutions, but also carry learning across units, projects and industries into real implementation?**

Across the interviews, the strongest cases suggest that startup engagement works best not as one-off scouting or “innovation talent acquisition,” but as collaborative sensemaking.



APPENDIX 1.

PRACTICE CASES: HOW COMPANIES FIND, FILTER AND ENGAGE STARTUPS

“A true transition happens when strategy is paired with openness — when new ideas and fresh perspectives are actively brought to the table.” - Director, Innovation Lab • Energy Technology • Finland

STRATEGIC OPENNESS AS AN ENTRY POINT

The strongest examples in the study show that effective corporate–startup collaboration starts when strategic priorities are visible enough for external actors to respond. Companies do not need to disclose sensitive details. They can still define the problem area, expected expertise, collaboration stage and possible next step. This creates a shared exploration space where corporates, startups, SMEs, researchers and ecosystem actors can interpret a challenge before moving into formal selection, pilots or implementation.

ECOSYSTEM CHALLENGE MODEL

In energy technology, collaboration was organized around sustainability and energy-transition challenges. A continuous challenge-based programme engaged external actors around defined business and technology questions, with access to mentors and corporate experts.

The process starts from a business need and then moves into scouting and structured challenge settings: *“...we start from a need from the business units,” then “scout” for partners, while in more open formats the team can “set the scene,” “open up our challenge” and define “some criteria.”* – Director, Innovation Lab • Energy Technology • Finland

“Ideas are then collected through pipelines from “platforms,” “meetings,” “events” and “people,” matured, and assessed against different criteria.” – Director • Innovation Lab • Energy Technology • Finland The same respondent notes that the lab also helps bridge communication gaps and manage expectations between the corporation and smaller external players.

Startups, students, researchers, mentors and corporate experts worked on real problems through ideation, co-design and expert feedback. This model shows how a company can turn openness into a structured process: external actors engage with a concrete challenge, while the lab acts as a filter for identifying relevant partners and developing pilots.

SELECTIVE FUNNEL FROM SCOUTING TO CO-CREATION

A particularly clear example came from the engineering and consulting sector. The company maintained a broad international scouting funnel supported by external partners, but concentrated its resources on a small number of strategically relevant opportunities. The process kept the company connected to the wider ecosystem while concentrating internal resources on a small number of relevant opportunities.

“We screened around 250 startups every year and selected roughly ten for deeper pilot and co-creation programmes.” – Innovation Community & Startup Collaboration Lead • Engineering & Consulting • Sweden

STRATEGIC DOMAIN ECOSYSTEM

In chemicals and materials, collaboration was organized around a defined strategic field such as circularity and material innovation. The problem area was clear, while the solution space remained open. This allowed SMEs to contribute specialized expertise, test assumptions and adapt technologies to industrial requirements.

"This model allows corporations to articulate "...a shared industrial challenge while keeping potential solutions open to a broad range of contributors."

– Circular Plastics Lead • Chemicals and Materials • Finland

In this model, the corporation does not search only for ready-made products. It creates a focused exploration space around a shared industrial challenge. The problem area is clearly defined, while possible solutions remain open. This approach attracts a broad range of specialized actors while maintaining strong strategic direction and an explicit pathway from exploration to implementation.

KNOWLEDGE-SHARING BEFORE PILOT

In retail and consumer goods, startup engagement began as knowledge exchange rather than immediate pilot selection. The company invited startups to share what they were developing and bring "new perspectives, new ideas, new energy" into the organization.

"Around ten startups were invited for knowledge sharing, and only a smaller group later moved into internal projects where their expertise fitted existing work."

– Director • Innovation & Product Development • Retail / Consumer Goods • Nordic Region

The search was guided by concrete opportunity areas: packaging development, digital interaction and event-based "third space" consumption. The company did not fully specify the expected solution in the first round. Instead, it explored what startups were already working on and gradually assessed how this could fit internal project needs. This created a practical step between first contact and formal pilot selection.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATION

Effective startup engagement follows a staged logic: make priorities visible, invite external interpretation, filter gradually and move only relevant cases toward pilots or implementation. The strongest practices are repeatable interaction environments, not isolated events or platform searches. They help both sides test relevance, trust and operational fit before formal decisions are made.

Taken together, these cases suggest that effective corporate–startup collaboration is built through several recurring practices:

1. Active participation in ecosystems and partnership networks.
2. Recurring dialogue spaces where needs and ideas can be interpreted jointly.
3. Broad scouting combined with gradual and selective filtering.
4. Pilot programs designed as learning environments rather than procurement exercises.
5. Staged experimentation before large-scale implementation.

In practical terms, organizations that collaborate successfully do not simply search for external partners. They build repeatable structures that make external knowledge easier to discover, interpret, and integrate.

APPENDIX 2.

CORPORATE EVALUATION LOGIC AND STARTUP FRICTION IN COLLABORATION PROCESSES

In practice, evaluation combines four dimensions: team credibility, operational predictability, strategic fit and integration feasibility.

The core question is therefore less:

“Is this idea innovative?”

and more:

“Can this solution survive, integrate and operate inside our organization?”

Main Evaluation Dimensions Observed in the Interviews. Table 7. Appendix 2.

WHAT CORPORATES EVALUATE MORE THAN STARTUPS EXPECT

Startups often assume that corporates mainly evaluate novelty, technological quality and pilot results. The interviews suggest a broader evaluation logic. Corporates also assess organizational reliability, implementation risk, communication behaviour, governance compatibility and founder maturity.

One respondent summarized this clearly:

“We tend to evaluate startups as if they were already established vendors.”

- Procurement Lead • Telecommunications • Sweden

Another recurring concern was continuity risk:

“Would you really like to use this technology? What happens if the startup in one year is not existing anymore?”

- Open Innovation Lead • Industrial Technology • Germany

ANALYTICAL INTERPRETATION

Across interviews, corporates evaluate startups through two logics at the same time: **innovation logic**, which values novelty, experimentation and emerging potential; and **operational logic**, which values stability, accountability, continuity and integration.

This creates a structural paradox. Startups are invited because they operate differently from corporations — faster, more experimental and more flexible — but are often evaluated against criteria associated with mature enterprise vendors.

As a result, collaboration may weaken not because the idea lacks value, but because the startup does not yet appear predictable, legible or operationally trustworthy within the corporate system.

Table 7. How Corporates Evaluate Startups: Key Dimensions, Concerns, and Points of Friction

EVALUATION DIMENSION	WHAT CORPORATES ACTUALLY LOOK AT	TYPICAL CORPORATE CONCERN	STARTUP FRICTION / INTERPRETATION
PROBLEM RELEVANCE	Does the solution fit a real operational or strategic need?	Does this solve something important for us now?	Startups often struggle because corporate needs are implicit or only partially articulated.
BUSINESS CASE & ROI	Clear value creation, efficiency gains, scalability, measurable outcomes	Can this justify investment and operational effort?	Startups often enter exploratory dialogue before measurable ROI is fully defined.
TEAM CREDIBILITY	Founders' expertise, coordination, communication maturity, understanding of enterprise reality	Can these people actually deliver in a complex environment?	Corporates often evaluate startups similarly to vendors or even hiring candidates.
STABILITY & CONTINUITY	Long-term viability of the startup, funding continuity, delivery reliability	Will this company still exist in one or two years?	Early-stage startups perceive this as excessive conservatism toward uncertainty.
OPERATIONAL FIT	Compatibility with existing systems, compliance, governance, workflows	Can this realistically work inside our structure?	What succeeds in pilots may fail in operational integration.
PREDICTABILITY	Structured communication, timelines, implementation logic, responsiveness	Can we coordinate this safely?	Startups operate iteratively and often adapt while moving.
CULTURAL / COMMUNICATION FIT	Ability to communicate in "corporate language", navigate stakeholders, avoid threatening incumbents	Can they work with the organization without creating resistance?	Strong ideas may fail because communication triggers defensive reactions.
INTEGRATION READINESS	Ability to move beyond experimentation into scalable implementation	Can this become part of operations?	Many startups expect pilot success to naturally lead to adoption, but corporates require structured embedding pathways.
INTERNAL LEGITIMACY	Whether internal sponsors can defend the startup internally	Can I justify supporting this initiative?	Innovation managers may support solutions that later fail at budget or executive approval level.

BRIDGIUM

From Discovery to

Practice: How Corporate–Startup Collaboration Becomes Usable

Bridgium is a high-impact joint research initiative by Albimarketing Oy and Digitune Oy, dedicated to exploring the phenomenon of innovation.

Connect with the Bridgium team to explore how Innovation Flows across teams and where it slows down. Working with Bridgium helps you identify bottlenecks in your innovation flow, recognize the hidden potential of your teams, and align structure and people around innovation



Artem Verlin
CEO at Digitune Oy
Communications & Partnerships

"Data tells you what is happening. Our interviews told us why it is happening."



Natalia Illarionova
Founder and CEO at Albimarketing Oy
MA, Sociology

"Our research is a map drawn by those who are actually leading the market."



Kristina Verlin
CMO at Digitune Oy , MA, Economics
Marketing & Business Development

"Our mission was to translate individual perspectives into one collective roadmap."