



Trend Topic: Innovation Gap

By



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The new AI partnership playbook

Technology partnerships have, for decades, thrived on clarity. Teams followed a quasi ‘partnership playbook’: a vendor developed a product, a systems integrator implemented it and a customer consumed it.

AI is rewriting this playbook.

Let me be clear: no single organization owns all the ingredients needed to build and scale AI systems. Data may live in one place, industry expertise in another. Infrastructure might span multiple hyperscalers, while models themselves may come from entirely different providers. How they all connect is critical: get it right and you have a successful ecosystem for AI-driven innovation. Teams that, conversely, continue to rely on the traditional linear partnership model risk slowing their own progress, and remaining stuck in pilot purgatory.

Nearly two-thirds of global business leaders report they are satisfied with the return on their AI investments. But only 9 percent say they are investing in AI with a truly strategic, enterprise-wide approach. Most initiatives remain fragmented: small pilots, isolated proofs of concept and experiments that never scale.¹

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There are, of course, myriad reasons behind this pattern. But from my vantage point, I've seen that, more often than not, the real barrier to scaling AI is not actually technological. It's organizational — and in many cases, comes down to how the partnerships that power these initiatives are structured and managed.

We need a new partnership playbook for the AI era, even as the game itself is well underway. That can feel daunting, especially with so much investment at stake. But uncertainty also creates opportunity: to rethink how innovation happens and who contributes.

Moving toward an ecosystem model of innovation

Deploying and scaling AI at an enterprise level is complex: it requires continuous data access, shared governance and rapid experimentation. As a result, we are seeing the rise of new collaboration models.

One of these is multi-party innovation environments: vendors, integrators and customers jointly sharing backlogs, reviewing telemetry and co-prioritizing improvements. Another is outcome-based commercialization, where partners align their incentives around measurable AI performance indicators rather than traditional milestone payments.

As these models evolve, roles and responsibilities across the partner ecosystem are shifting.

- System integrators have become long-term stewards (responsible for monitoring drift, bias and operational health) beyond just delivering a project.
- Technology vendors are increasingly stepping into co-development roles, embedding teams directly with customers and fellow partners.
- And customers themselves are assuming the role of data product owners, defining the semantic standards, risk thresholds, and governance rules that the entire ecosystem must follow.

Partnerships today are defined less by handoffs and more by shared vision, shared outcomes and shared responsibility. And when these ecosystems work well, the collective capability can far exceed what any single organization could achieve on its own.

Getting there, however, is far from simple — especially when partners around the globe are entering this collaboration at very different stages of AI maturity and with very different risk profiles.

Borrowing from the cloud migration playbook

While the AI partnership playbook may still be emerging, it's worth remembering we've navigated a similar shift before: during the move to cloud.

During cloud modernization, partners often had to meet customers at vastly different stages of their journey, from cloud readiness to regulatory constraints. Some of the most important plays that emerged as a result were geared toward de-risking modernization, particularly for organizations operating in highly regulated industries.

In practice, this meant enabling modernization without disrupting core operations. I've seen this play out in many forms — for example, when a partner helped reduce the cost and complexity of data migration by keeping compliance-heavy data on-premise, while making it securely accessible from cloud applications.

These kinds of solutions rarely made headlines, but they enabled real-world transformation. The ability to run and modernize at once lets organizations innovate without sacrificing stability. The same principle applies to AI and without an evolved partnership playbook, many AI initiatives could remain stuck in pilot mode: promising, but falling short of delivering on the promise of sustained enterprise value.

The conversation shifts from internal governance to ecosystem governance. Which means that a central part of the new partnership playbook is about learning how to orchestrate trust across the entire partnership ecosystem.

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AI playbook 101: start with data

If the new playbook has a foundation, it is in data.

In the *Value of AI Report*, roughly three-quarters of organizations reported struggling with incomplete or inconsistent data, while more than two-thirds cited poor data quality or siloed systems as major barriers to progress.²

Most enterprise data environments were never designed for ecosystem innovation. They were built to support internal processes, often shaped by decades of customization and incremental change. When multiple partners, platforms and AI models begin interacting across those environments, the governance challenge changes in a fundamental way.

The question is no longer simply: Is my data secure? Is my data high quality? Instead, it becomes: Can I trust the entire ecosystem that touches this data?



This represents an interesting shift in how organizations currently operate. Many organizations today work with fragmented systems, disconnected data sources and limited visibility across their environments. These silos slow progress and without shared governance and a common operating model, innovation becomes difficult to scale.

Successful ecosystems therefore focus on clarity around a few critical questions:

- Who owns which responsibilities?
- How is shared data controlled, monitored, and tracked?
- How do we enforce consistent standards for responsible AI across every layer?

I think about this as the adaptive partnership loop: a model in which partners continuously co-govern, co-operate, and co-innovate.

Within the SAP ecosystem, for example, this means aligning around shared governance models: common guardrails, shared data standards, and joint accountability structures that allow

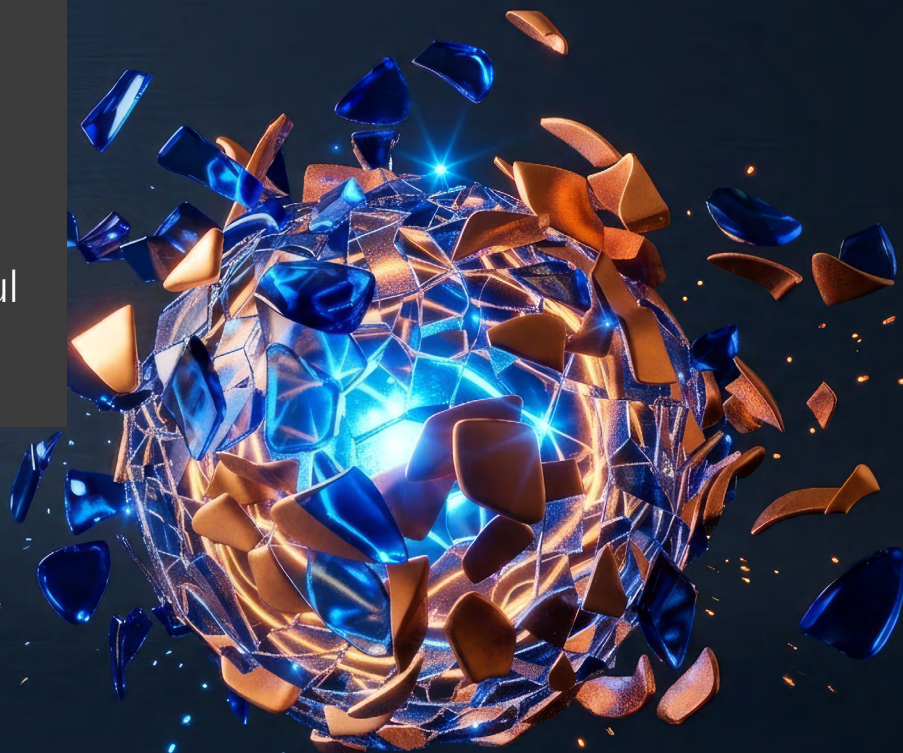
partners to innovate safely and effectively. When a partner asks, “How do we integrate into your architecture?”, the answer needs to be grounded in a consistent framework: a governed data layer, clear interoperability standards and a unified data foundation that allows systems and partners to operate together seamlessly.

Adaptability as the new partnership advantage

AI ecosystems evolve continuously – and partners must evolve with them. As a result, curiosity and flexibility are fast emerging as some of the most important characteristics of successful ecosystem partnerships.

That shift has changed the way I work with my own team. Partners need to bring real innovation, integrate their capabilities deeply and move quickly. For us to deliver real value to customers, we need partners who push the boundaries of what’s possible and help redefine the customer experience. Partners who challenge assumptions, experiment with new capabilities and help shape best practices.

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The partners who thrive in this environment tend to share a few common traits. They remain adaptable, they move quickly and they bring something genuinely differentiated to the table.

Strategic partnerships remain essential, and going forward, they will be complemented by experimental collaborations and early-stage engagements that allow ecosystems to discover, support, and scale the next generation of innovators.

Human creativity matters more than ever

As machines increasingly take over predictable tasks, the value humans bring lies in our ability to be creative: imagine new possibilities, connect ideas across disciplines and collaborate in ways that create something none of us could build alone.

I like to think that, in this way, AI is pushing us to level up as a human species.

The irony is striking. A technology often framed as replacing human work may actually require us to work with each other more closely than ever before.

The ecosystems forming around AI innovation depend on it. Shared governance depends on it. And the breakthroughs that will define the next decade of enterprise technology will almost certainly come from human teams that combine diverse perspectives across organizations and industries, allowing them to fully harness the power of AI.

Which brings us back to the playbook.

The plays we develop today won't remain static. They will continue to evolve as technologies mature, as data environments improve and as ecosystems learn how to work together more effectively.

References

1 [SAP research reveals AI to drive 31% return on investment](#). SAP. October 2025.

2 Ibid

This evolution raises a strategic question for leaders: How should your partnerships evolve to reflect the realities of the AI era? Some partnerships may need to deepen; others may require clearer governance. And in some cases, entirely new collaborators may be the key to reach the next level of growth.

Organizations willing to ask these questions — and redesign their partnerships accordingly — won't just adapt to the next playbook, they'll help write it. And in doing so, leaders will create teams that are in the best position to translate AI's potential into enterprise-wide impact. —

