

Collaborate to innovate

Making partnerships work in uncertain times

2025

accenture



Preface

Germany's economy is at a crossroads. Traditional strengths are under scrutiny, key industries like automotive and manufacturing are feeling the pressure, and the country is falling behind in digital innovation – especially in fields like generative AI.

Innovation is the key engine of economic growth and development. One particularly promising area of this innovation landscape is the collaboration between startups and established companies. And especially for Germany, there is a lot to gain from developing the nexus between tradition and disruption.

Building on a comprehensive survey of 500 startups and corporates, this report outlines current developments in collaboration and highlights key opportunities to strengthen both parties. It examines expectations, challenges as well as pathways for development, alongside three overarching messages:

1. Startups and corporates bring complementary assets - but deep structural misalignments block effective collaboration.
2. Germany's innovation gap doesn't stem from a lack of startups, but from corporates struggling to navigate the startup ecosystem, and startups finding it hard to work through corporate structures.
3. The future of collaboration between startups and established businesses stronger prioritizes speed, flexibility and early value creation.



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“Innovation is not a nice-to-have, but a necessity for Germany's future. Startups contribute speed, creativity, and boldness; established companies add scale, experience, and market access. When both sides work together, we can tackle the major challenges ahead. This report shows what becomes possible when startups and corporates team up.”

Verena Pausder,
Chairwoman German Startup Association



“Cooperation between startups and established companies has never been as important as it is today. Now more than ever, we need the courage to invest in innovation – but economic bottlenecks are paralysing us. That is why we need to rethink cooperation: it must be more targeted, with clear and measurable success criteria and a focus on scaling. Vision alone is not enough. Tangible results are crucial if companies are to be willing to take risks.”

Sebastian Günther,
New Models of Growth Lead Europe



Agenda

- 01 Germany is in dire need for innovation
- 02 Aligning needs with challenges in mind
- 03 Navigating complexity is key
- 04 Adapting to new realities
- 05 Key takeaways moving forward
- 06 Research design and project team

In the current economic climate, collaboration between startups and corporates is more important than ever

01

Germany and Europe are falling behind

Germany and Europe are facing a massive innovation gap — especially in terms of digitalization. While Germany's GDP has increased by just 4% over the past decade, the U.S. has seen growth of 17%. This trend is likely to accelerate, as the U.S. is now investing ten times as much in AI – the key future technology – as Europe.

02

Corporates and startups need each other

Collaboration between startups and established companies has the potential to become a powerful lever to drive the German economy forward. Both sides see great opportunities here: For corporates, the focus is on innovation potential (90%), while startups primarily use collaboration to boost sales and growth (72%).

03

Economic uncertainty holds back collaboration

28% of established businesses say that working with startups has generated a strong return on investment. Combined with the economic pressures, this modest success rate creates tension and currently only 11% of startups perceive a high willingness from corporates to collaborate.

At the same time, the way partnerships between startups and established companies work is changing at its core

04

The focus shifts to short-term and core business

57% of startups and even 73% of scaleups observe a clear shift towards short-term ROI on the corporate side. In addition, corporates strongly prioritize their core business (57%) in collaboration projects, while more general aspects, like new work (14%) or access to the ecosystem (23%), are seen as less important.

05

Both sides rely on intermediaries to move ahead on collaboration

The startup ecosystem is extremely dynamic and 59% of established companies report difficulties finding suitable candidates to work with. Thus, 76% rely on third parties — such as investors — to find the right match. Also, events and conferences are a relevant starting point for cooperation (80%).

06

One must adapt structures to collaborate efficiently

Startups criticize the complex decision-making processes (59%) and risk aversion of corporates (49%), while established companies point to a lack of experience (41%) on the startup side. Bridging the gap calls for top-level support on the corporate side and for agents of translation that understand both worlds.



01

Germany is in dire
need for innovation

Digital innovation keeps accelerating – Europe must catch up or be left behind

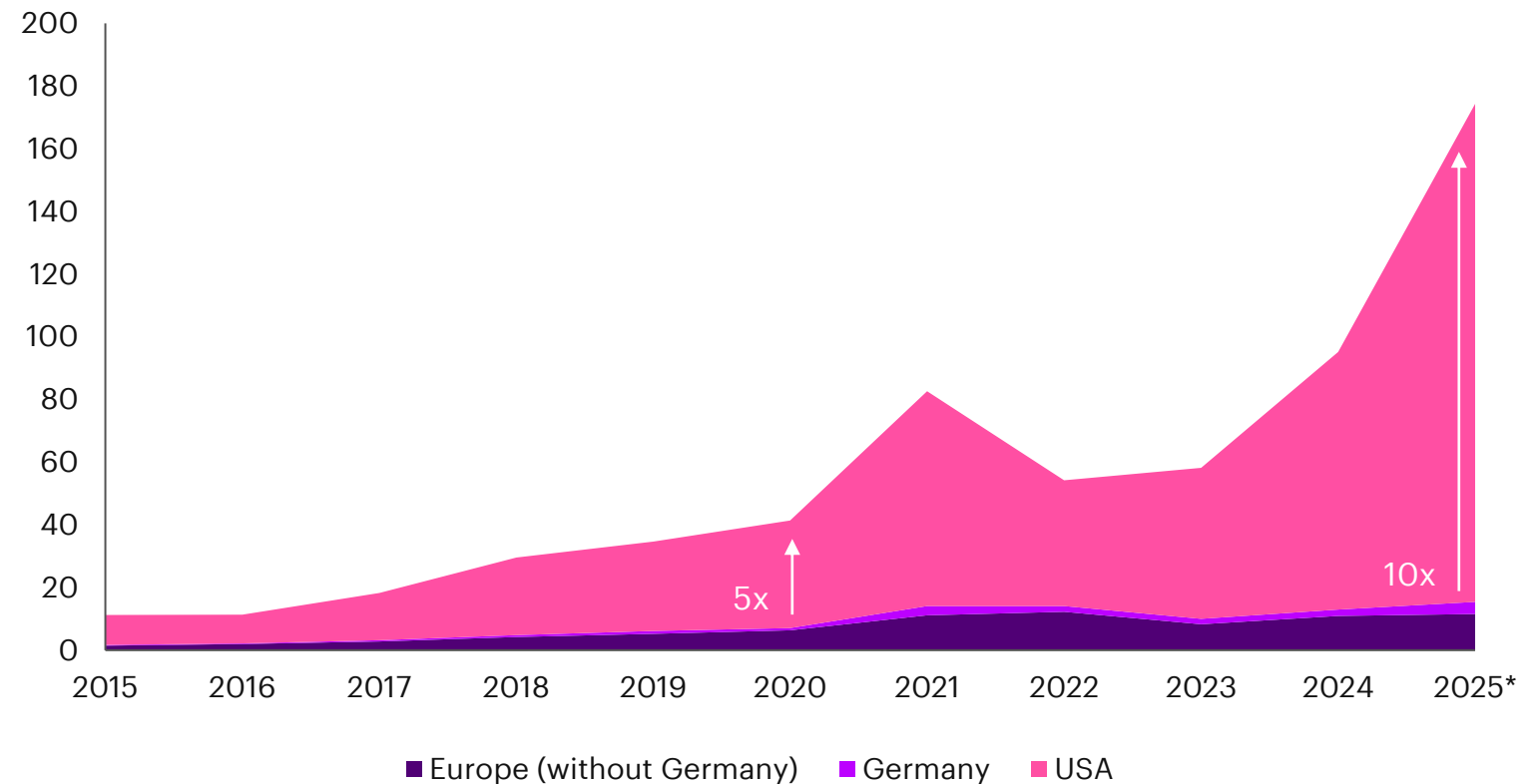
Digital technologies have become the key driver of productivity gains in the global economy – they are changing value creation in virtually all industries.

Long established as the epicenter of the digital age, the U.S. continues to lead these developments. The rapid rise in generative AI showcases this strong position, not only in terms of new software applications, but also along the entire AI tech stack: from infrastructure and hardware to platforms and models.

While Europe and Germany were already behind in 2020, the gap has substantially widened since Generative and Agentic AI reached the market, cementing US-leadership in a core segment of current innovation.

Venture capital investment in AI

(in Bn. US-Dollars, yearly)¹



¹) [Dealroom Global Data Platform](#), own analysis, accessed June 2025 | 2025 extrapolated

The German economy has long relied on past strengths – and is now facing stagnation

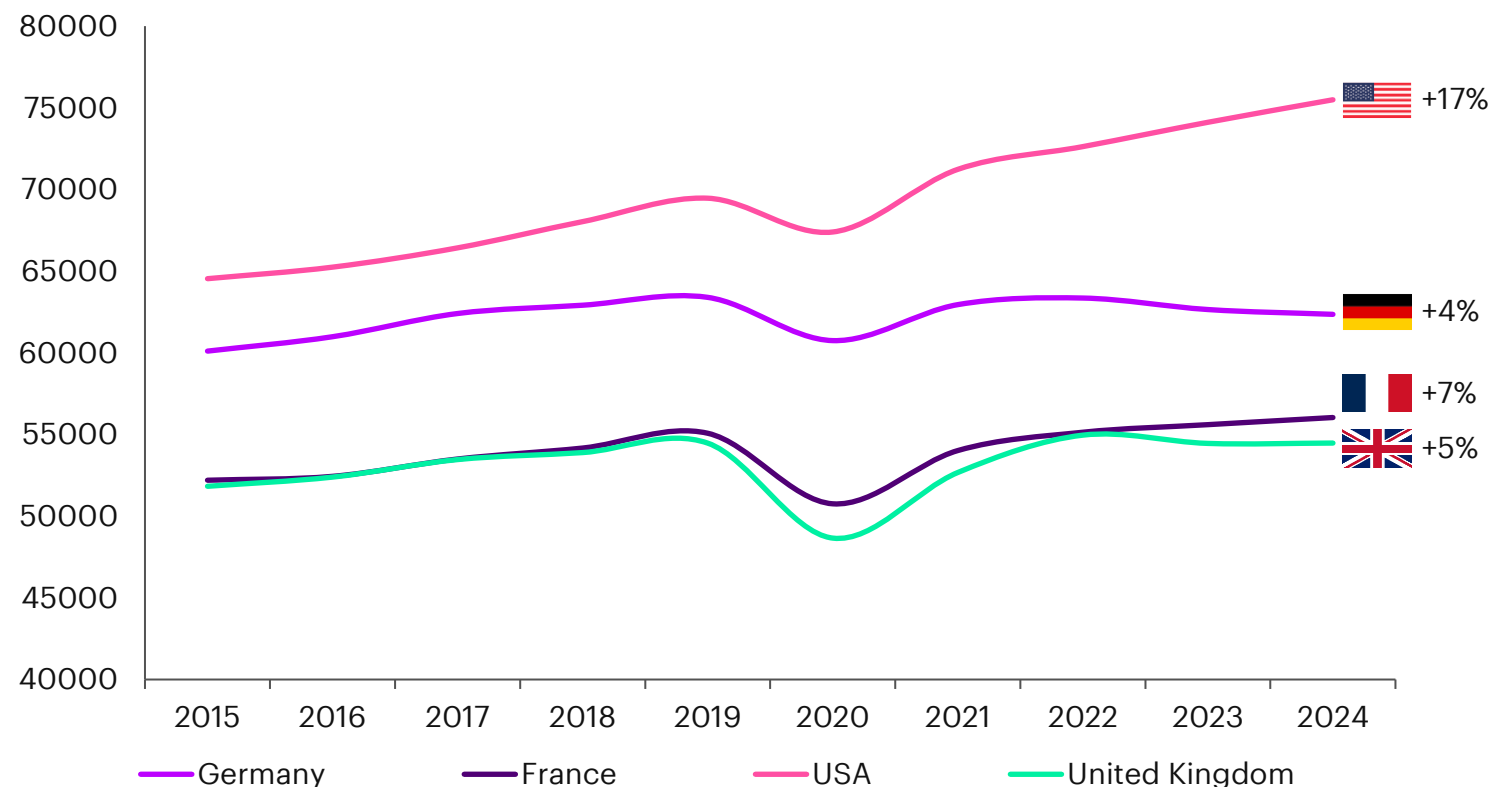
Currently, five of the top ten most valuable companies in the U.S. were founded after 1990 – and are all based on digital technologies – while the youngest top ten company in Germany is SAP, which was started in 1972. This doesn't mean that century-old companies can't explore future growth opportunities that align with our strength to catch up in digital markets.

While the digital sectors are driving growth in the U.S.², Europe and especially Germany continue to struggle to make a significant economic recovery. While current crises play a role, it is to a large part structural factors that contribute to these developments.

The German economy still holds its traditional strength in engineering and manufacturing, but key industries are under pressure from global competitors catching up in terms of technology. That is why it is crucial for the German economy to find new ways of leveraging research and the startup ecosystem to create innovative momentum – especially when it comes to digitization and AI.

Growth comparison by real GDP per capita

(PPP int. Dollar, constant prices, ICP 2021)¹



1) IMF Data 2025.2 | BEA 2023

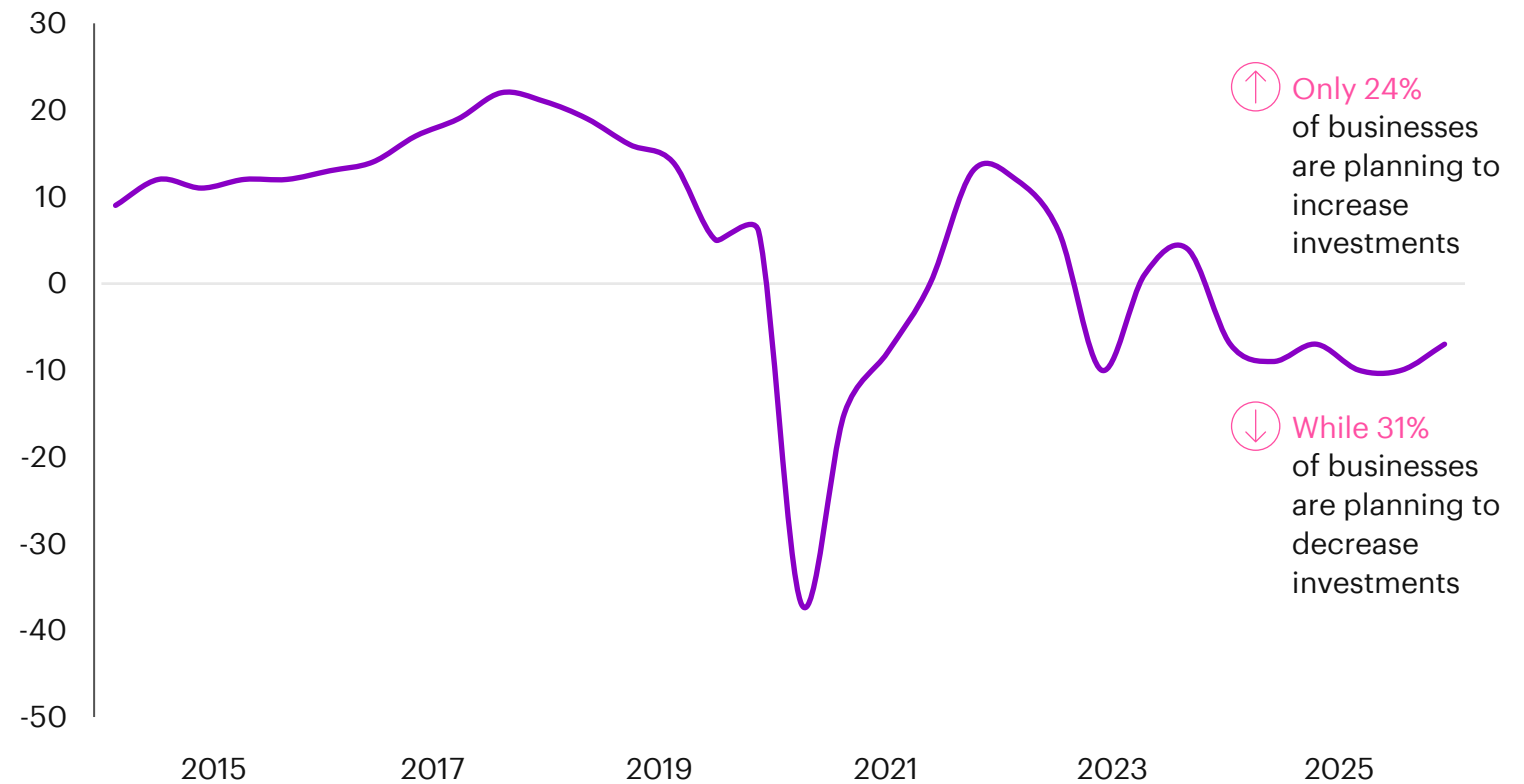
Action is needed but crises and economic uncertainties paralyze the German economy

While innovation is needed to move the German economy ahead, the current business climate is characterized by uncertainty. Almost a third of companies are looking to cut back on investments, while only about a quarter are currently aiming to increase spending.

German industry is facing multiple burning platforms – from digital transformation to decarbonization and global competition. Especially the latest pressures from increased energy prices and US tariffs are strongly affecting Germany, and the prevailing uncertainty is paralyzing many companies, making them hesitant and often incapable of taking decisive action.

A path that is still underrepresented in Germany is collaboration with startups. It can boost the innovation capacity of established companies and even replace their own R&D. At the same time, startups can scale their business and even expand internationally. However, there are relatively few startups that are sold to corporates in Germany – which indicates that their connection is to be strengthened.²

Investment intentions of private businesses in Germany¹



1) DIHK 2025, displayed is the calculated balance of the share of businesses planning to increase vs. decrease investments.

2) Laguna de la Vera, R; Honold, D.; Ramge, T. (2025) Goliath braucht David. Die deutsche Industrie „kauft“ zu wenig Innovation

Collaboration and CVC play distinct but complementary roles in driving innovation

From Corporate Perspective

87%



Startups as partners

“Startups have developed into key innovation partners for established companies over the past ten years.”

From Startups Perspective

71%



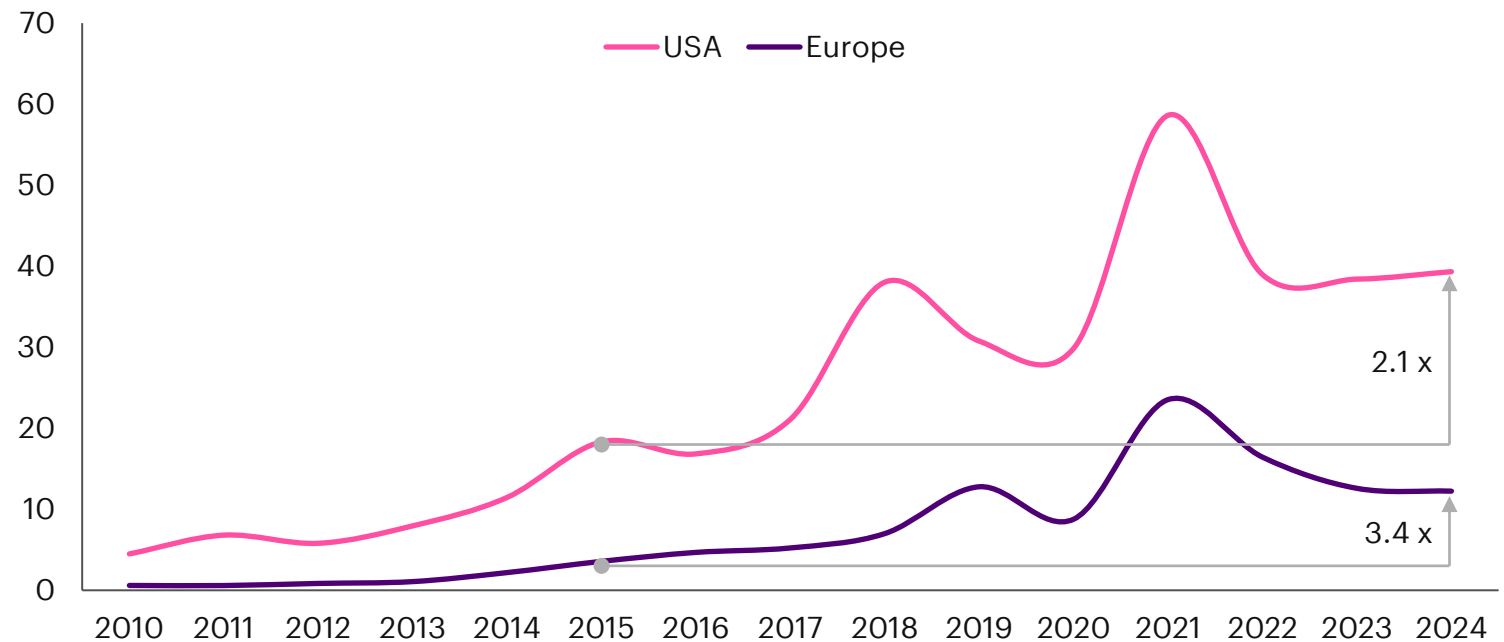
More experience

“Established companies have a much better understanding of what startups can offer to them, compared to ten years ago.”

Corporate venture capital investments

(Bn. US-Dollars, yearly)¹

While CVC funds in the U.S. have invested more than two times as much capital in 2024 compared to 2015, Europe has started to catch up and increased funding more than threefold.



¹) [Dealroom Global Data Platform](#), own analysis, accessed June 2025

Despite clear benefits, economic pressures creates discontent and demand for clear results

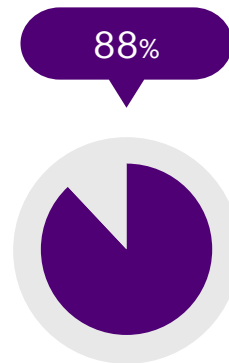
While collaboration and investments have grown in recent years, startups also express a gap between intent and implementation: While innovation is a frequent topic in corporate discourse, many startups experience the actual level of engagement as limited or inconsistent. This disconnect contributes to skepticism on the startup side regarding the seriousness of corporate collaboration efforts.

At the same time, expectations have shifted on the corporate side as well. The enthusiasm around startup partnerships is being replaced by increased pressure to deliver returns. Collaboration is no longer pursued for symbolic value or image – there is a stronger focus on measurable outcomes and alignment with strategic goals.

These findings indicate that we are entering a new phase, shaped by economic pressures and the need to achieve more with fewer resources. In this context, collaboration formats of the past are reaching their limits. It is therefore worth exploring new models that offer a better fit for both sides.

Assessments of the current state of collaboration

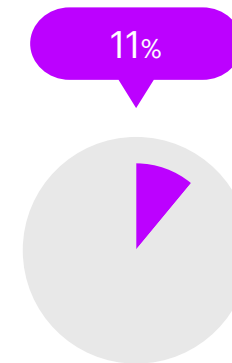
From Startup Perspective



Too little action

There is a lot of talk about innovation and startups among established businesses, but too little action.

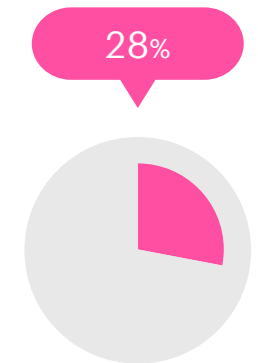
From Startups Perspective



Is the buzz over?

Only one in ten startups rate the current willingness of established companies to collaborate as "high".

From Corporate Perspective



Time to deliver

Projects need to focus on ROI – currently only 28 % rate returns of collaboration as "high".

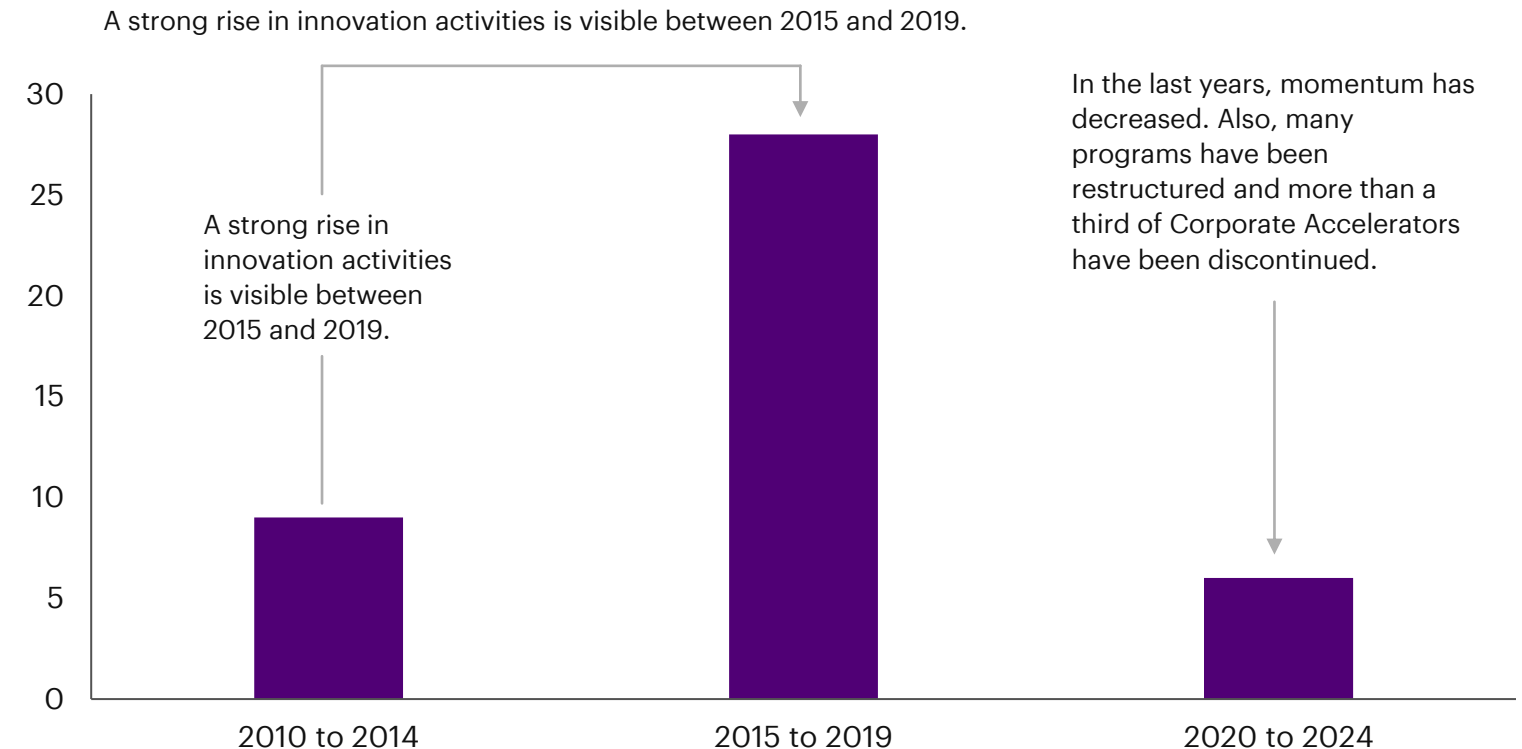
The innovation landscape is shifting and traditional collaboration models are no longer working effectively

The decline in newly launched corporate accelerators and the fact that many existing ones closed down, further demonstrates a shift in how corporates approach startup collaboration. While the 2015–2019 period was marked by an expansion of innovation units, momentum has slowed down since, and efforts have been scaled back or discontinued.

This development contributes to a broader change in the corporate-startup collaboration landscape. Companies are reassessing effectiveness, moving away from experimentation and are consolidating their engagement.

It is now essential to understand the nature and drivers of this shift. Which collaboration models are gaining relevance, what internal or external factors are prompting this transition, and how can partnerships be structured to generate long-term value?

New corporate accelerators in Germany by launch year¹



1) [Dealroom Global Data Platform](#), own analysis, accessed June 2025

Connecting startups with established companies to scale solutions and shape the future economy



Launched in 2020, **better ventures** is Europe's leading alliance of entrepreneurs building scalable solutions for the future economy. The curated network of 250+ founders, entrepreneurial angels and family business leaders has already co-invested in more than 50 startups – combining capital, know-how and strong networks to accelerate companies tackling some of the world's most pressing challenges, from climate neutrality to the circular economy. Members of the alliance contribute not just funding, but also expertise and connections that enable founders to grow faster and create lasting value.



“Founders are the driving force to build a better world and traditional industries can benefit enormously from their speed and innovative mindset. At better ventures, we actively connect startups and established companies, and we invest in teams whose solutions combine economic success with long-term value. This is how we bring innovation into real-world applications and make established companies more future-ready.”

Tina Dreimann, Founder & Managing Director

Based on our survey of startups and corporates, we see three core themes emerging

A nighttime photograph of the Hong Kong skyline, featuring numerous illuminated skyscrapers and the Victoria Harbour. Overlaid on the image are three large white numbers: 01, 02, and 03, each marking a key theme from a survey. The numbers are positioned above their respective text descriptions, which are separated by decorative white brackets.

01

Startups and corporates bring complementary assets - but deep structural misalignments block effective collaboration.

02

Germany's innovation gap doesn't stem from a lack of startups, but from corporates struggling to navigate the startup ecosystem, and startups finding it hard to work through corporate structures.

03

The future of collaboration between startups and established businesses stronger prioritizes speed, flexibility and early value creation.

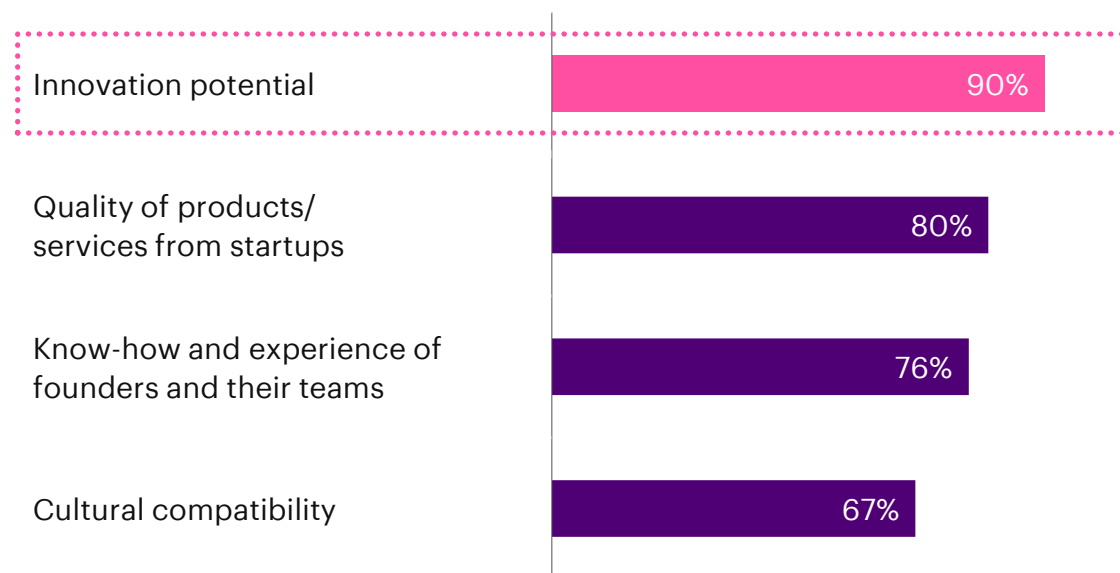


02

Aligning needs with
challenges in mind

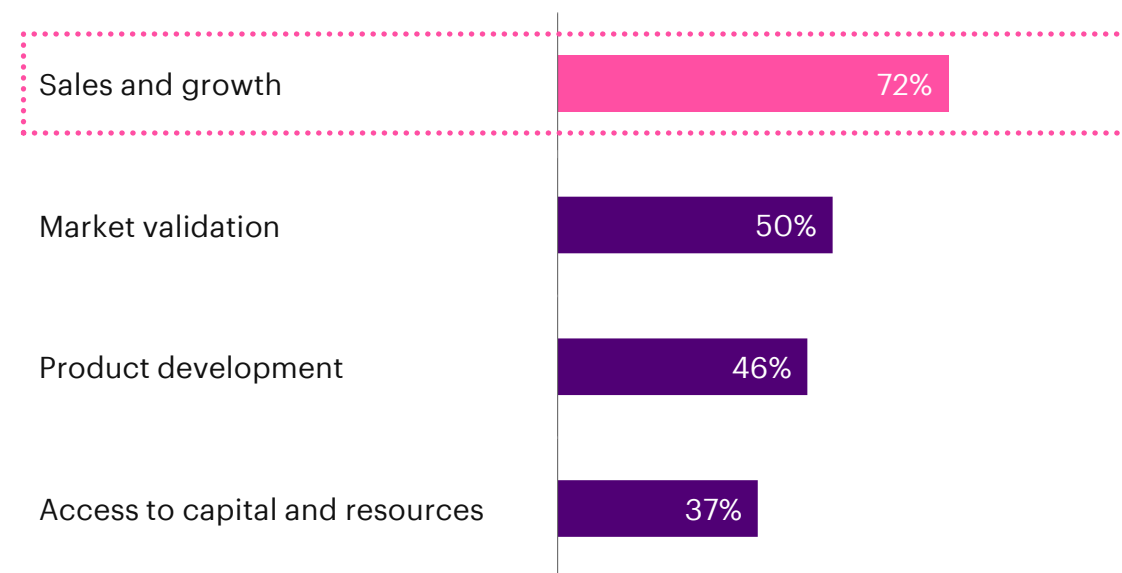
While corporates seek innovation, startups look for partners to scale

Positive rating of collaboration by established companies



Most established businesses report positive experiences concerning past collaboration projects with startups (86%). The most important factor is the innovation potential of startups, securing the corporate's market position.

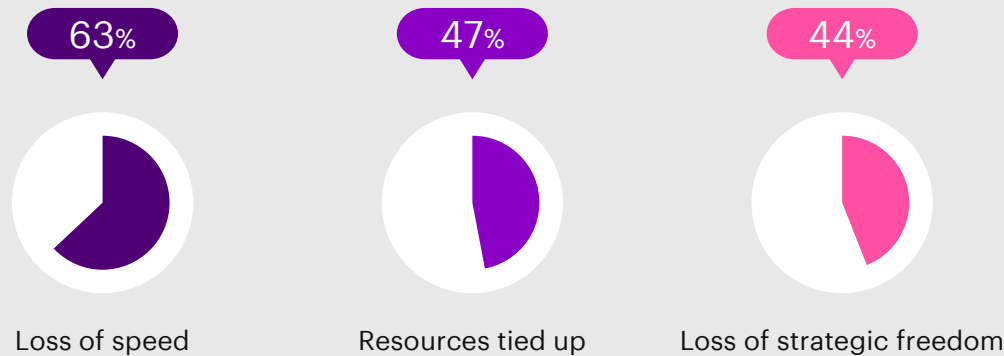
Startup perspective on the importance of collaboration



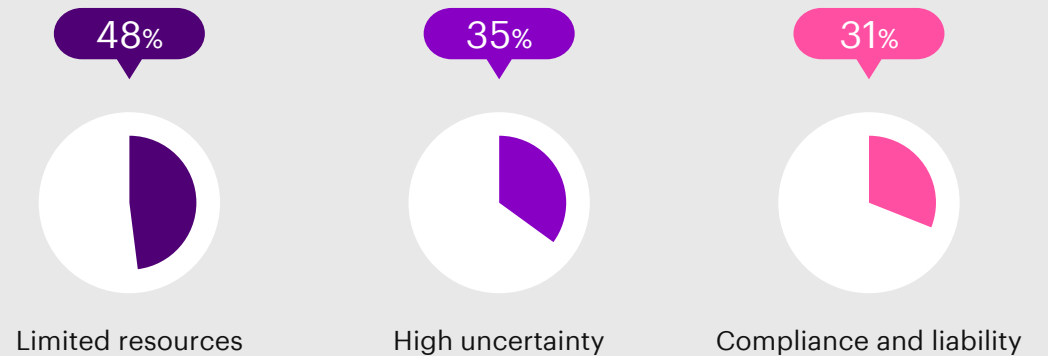
The top priorities in collaboration for almost all startups are sales and company growth. Market validation as well as product development also score high which highlight that working with corporates is mainly about getting traction and scaling.

Startups move fast, with higher risk tolerance – corporates must manage speed and compliance

Top 3 concerns of **startups** in collaboration with established companies



Top 3 concerns of **established companies** in collaboration with startups



Startups and corporates bring complementary strengths to the table – but they operate differently. Thus, the challenge is to find the right interface to make collaboration work.

Startups are used to taking bold risks – they move fast and need to make things happen with limited resources. Partnering with a corporate often means

betting on a single opportunity, which can come at the cost of flexibility. Corporates, on the other hand, must integrate startup collaboration into existing structures and priorities. For them it is more about aligning such efforts with the rest of their business.

As a result, even well-intentioned collaboration can falter if expectations aren't clearly managed. Startups want to stay flexible, while corporates need security and control. Successful partnerships strike a balance — offering enough structure to create trust, without stifling speed.

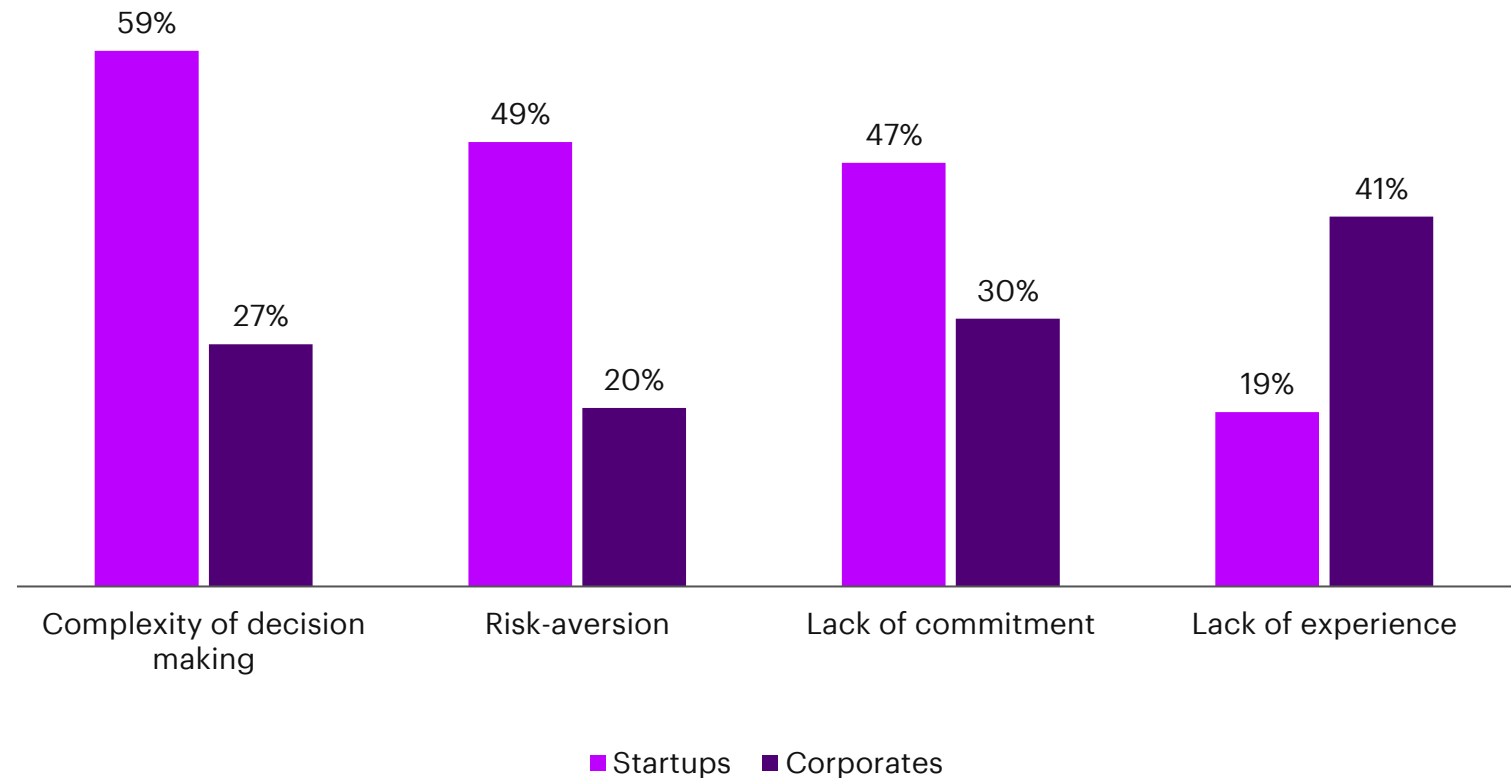
Structural differences and lack of trust are major obstacles in collaboration projects

Startups most often struggle with the complexity of corporate decision-making. They also feel slowed down by corporate risk-aversion and cite a lack of commitment — implying that they are not taken seriously.

Corporates, meanwhile, rarely see these topics as major issues and are more concerned with the lack of experience on the startup side. The gap shows how differently both sides view collaboration: while startups face structural friction, corporates are more concerned with reliability.

These mismatches reflect not only organizational but also cultural differences. What startups view as hesitation, corporates may see as process discipline — leading to frustration unless expectations are clear.

Key challenges in collaboration that both sides perceive differently



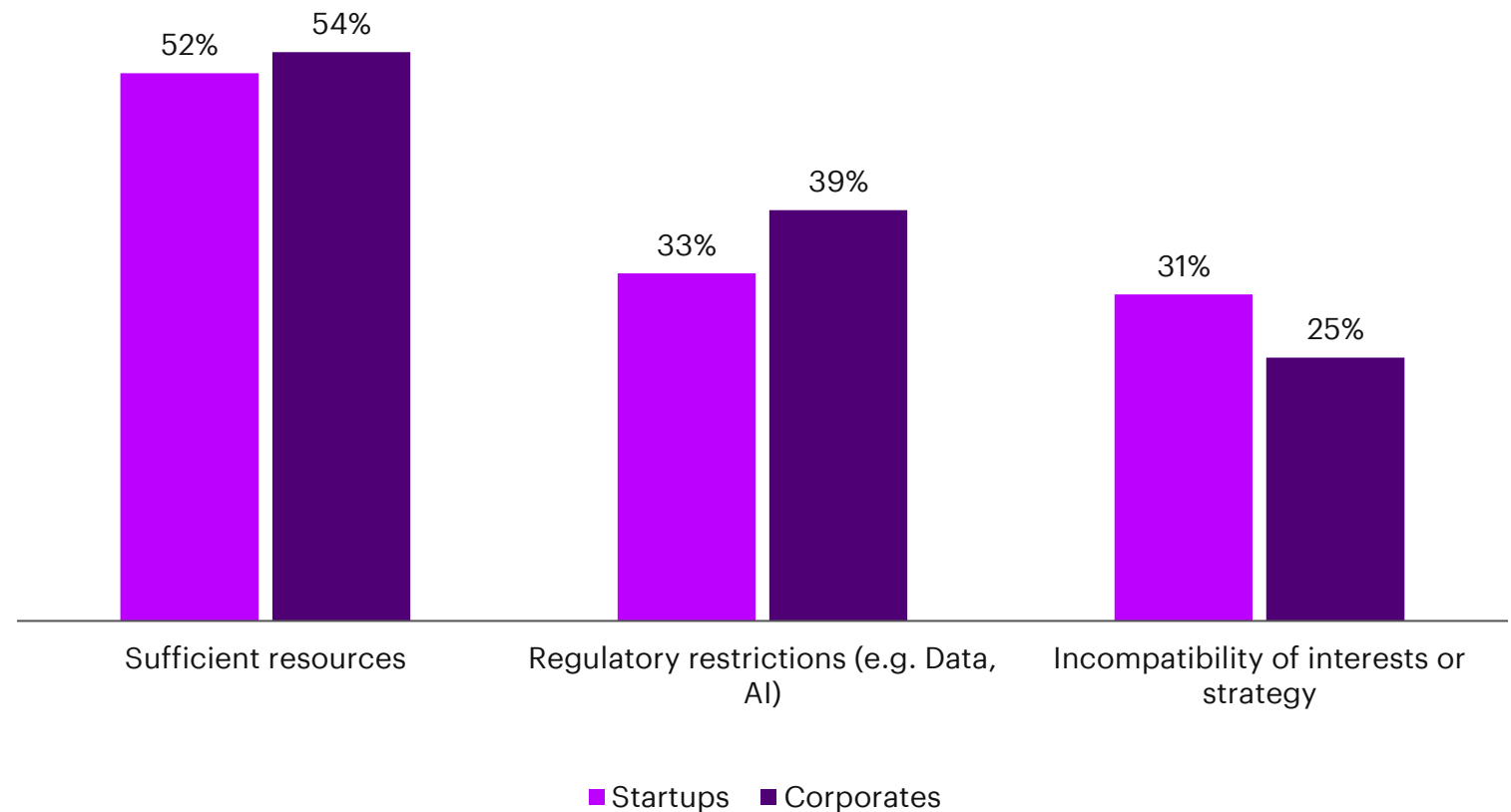
Resources, regulation and relevance – core challenges that are cited by both sides

When startups and corporates collaborate, one common challenge is securing the resources needed to carry a project from idea to implementation. This becomes even more difficult in times of tight budgets and economic uncertainty.

Regulation poses another major hurdle. In fields like AI, where sensitive data is at stake, compliance uncertainty can significantly slow things down. Without clear legal frameworks and aligned approaches to risk, innovation efforts often get stuck in lengthy review and approval cycles.

That is why clarity on objectives and strategy is so important. Without a shared direction, even the most promising initiatives can stall. Strong collaboration begins where common goals meet operational decisiveness.

Key challenges in collaboration that both sides perceive differently



Reducing cost and boosting security in employee training – with perfect oversight



doinstruct is a digital platform for employee training that enables mobile, multilingual sessions, without the need for an additional app. Especially in industries with a high number of operational workers, such as manufacturing, logistics, or construction, training requires significant effort. Founded in 2021, the startup helps established companies cut administrative costs, boost participation rates, and ensure compliance by providing HR with easy-to-use tools for roll-out and administration. Following a recent Series A round of over €16 million, the company is now scaling and tapping into a large market potential.



"Employee trainings, especially when it comes to large operational and frontline workforces, are a key challenge for many companies – even more so with new regulations, international teams, and limited HR capacity. That's where we come in: reducing the workload for HR while increasing employee understanding. The efficiency gains for companies are evident – that's our core USP."

Charlotte Rothert, Co-Founder & CEO

Key takeaways

Startups and corporates bring complementary assets – but deep structural misalignments block effective collaboration.

Startups and corporates are fundamentally different – beyond cultural contrasts, it is divergent structures, processes, and operating models that often create opposing dynamics.

One explores, the other optimizes: The key is to find collaboration formats and processes that respect this difference and focus on shared goals rather than uniform processes.

By working together, both sides benefit tremendously: startups learn to adopt scalable processes, while corporates discover strategies to stay lean and leverage innovation.



03

Navigating
complexity is key

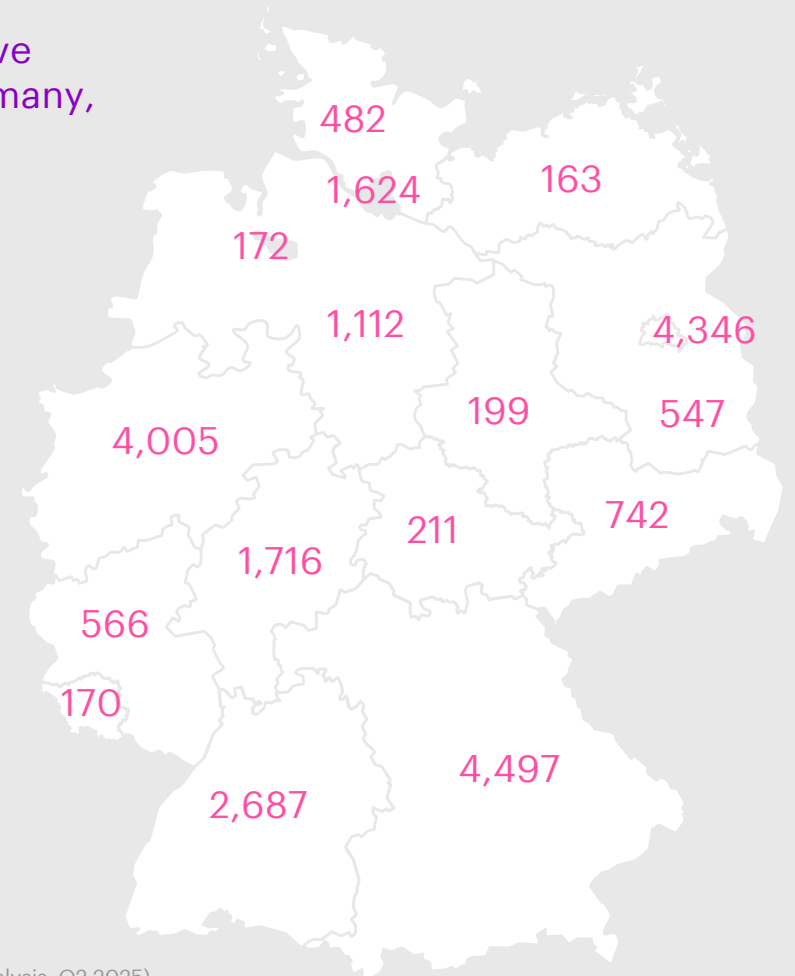
Germany's startup ecosystem is geographically diverse and difficult to fully capture

Germany's startup ecosystem has seen substantial development in recent years, marked by a rise in both quantity and quality of ventures and consists of approximately 23,000 startups. Increased availability of capital and a stronger base of experienced founders have contributed to a more professional and sustainable innovation environment.

A defining feature of the German ecosystem is its regional structure. In part, startup activity mirrors Germany's distributed demographic and economic centers, although particularly strong startup ecosystems such as Berlin and Munich have emerged in recent years. In addition to that, universities and research institutions across the country are crucial in driving entrepreneurial activity.

While this layout allows for innovation to tap into sectoral strengths and local networks, it also introduces complexity in fostering cross-regional collaboration. Differences in culture, pace, and access to networks can hinder broader knowledge diffusion and the scaling of successful models.

Number of active startups in Germany, by state¹



1) [startupdetector](#) (Own analysis, Q2 2025)

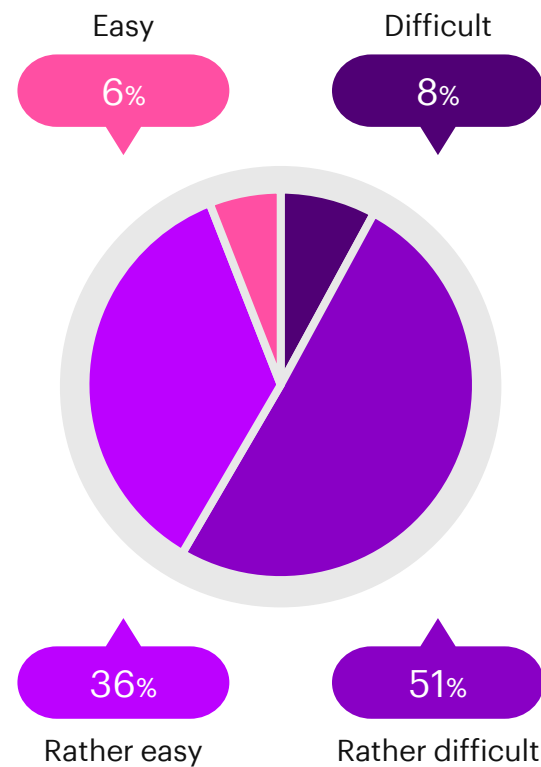
Finding a suitable partner is tough – especially for established companies

Given the size and complexity of the German startup ecosystem, finding the right partner is not trivial. Most corporates say it is (rather) difficult to identify startups that match their innovation goals.

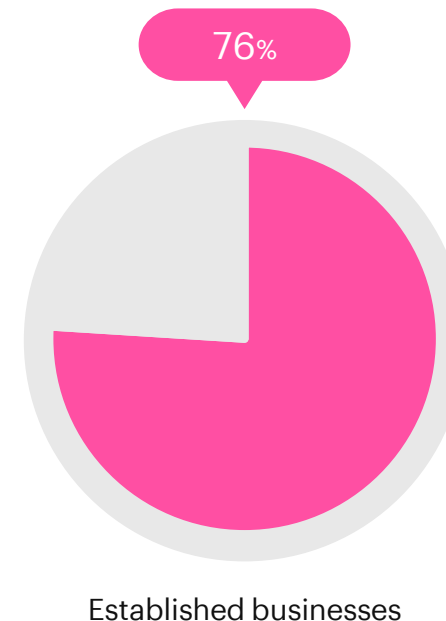
Without a clear overview of the ecosystem, companies have two options: build internal capabilities — like a dedicated innovation team and a strong corporate brand that attracts startups — or rely on intermediaries.

With limited resources, most established companies work with third parties that know the ecosystem, like universities, consultancies or VCs to bridge the gap and initiate collaborations.

How difficult is it to identify startups aligned with your innovation goals?

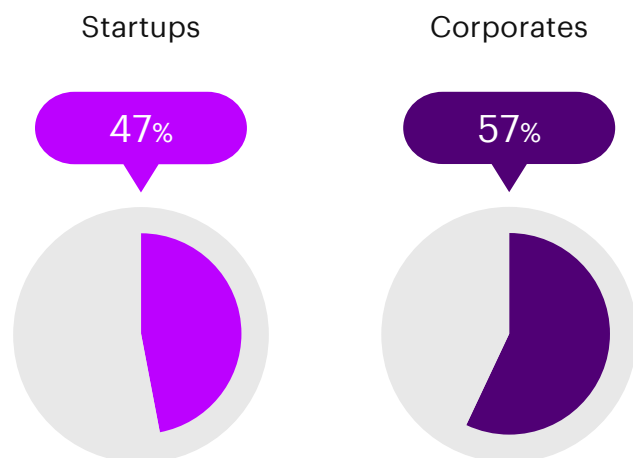


Reliance on third-party innovators to initiate collaboration:



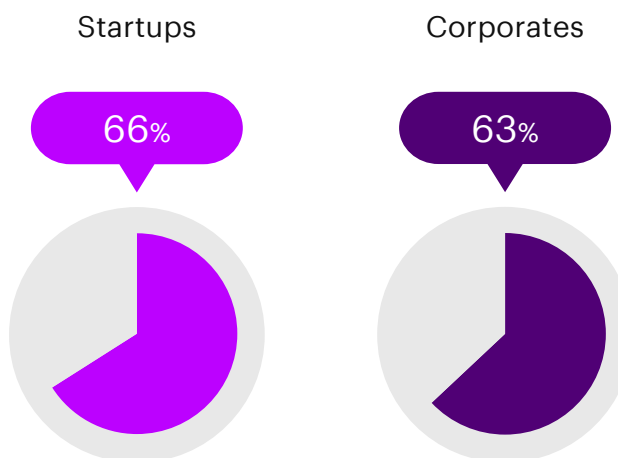
In-person events are the most important starting point for collaboration

Online platforms



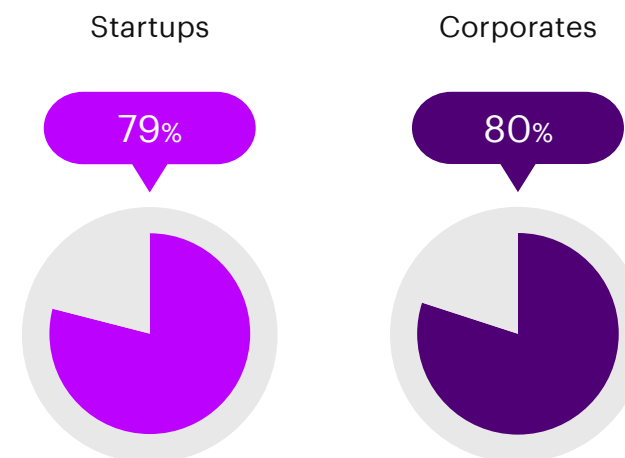
Online platforms create visibility to founders and startups, regardless of geography or marketing budget, making it easier to identify partners in specific areas.

Networks & associations



Reducing the search and validation effort for both sides, curated networks and associations are another important gateway to collaboration.

Events & conferences

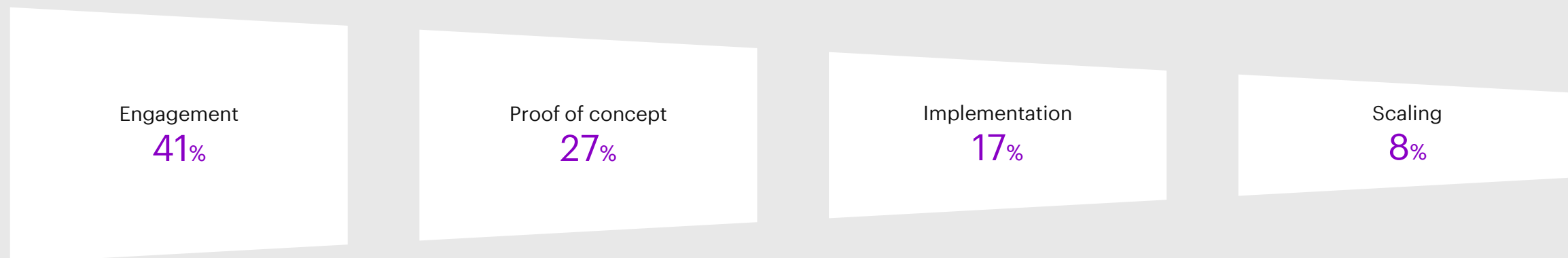


Personal encounters help build trust and spark ideas more effectively than anything else. Both parties know why they are attending — collaboration starts right there.

Navigation challenges go beyond matching and effective collaboration demands commitment

Only a small share of collaboration projects make it past the finish line and scaling successfully remains the biggest challenge. While many partnerships start off strong and almost a third reach the piloting phase, a lot of momentum gets lost before projects have real impact. One major factor hindering scaling is internal resistance within the corporate. When buy-in from key stakeholders is missing, even well-designed pilots struggle to survive.

Share of collaboration projects of established companies by phase rated as successful:



Corporates and startups alike see overcoming internal resistance and securing stakeholder buy-in as the primary barrier to scaling cooperation projects.

49%
Corporates

47%
Startups

Bringing executive leaders and business students together to foster entrepreneurial innovation



ESMT Berlin is a leading international business school at the intersection of entrepreneurship and innovation. Through its entrepreneurship hub Vali and across all programs, students and founders collaborate with established companies, gaining early access to data and real-world challenges to co-develop pilots and scalable solutions.



“We turn ideas into action at ESMT by building vibrant innovation ecosystems such as VALI. We connect students, founders, and corporates to explore and develop innovative projects – building on academic excellence, global partnerships, and entrepreneurial drive. This collaborative approach empowers founders and executives to accelerate their initiatives and create a meaningful impact.”

Prof. Jörg Rocholl, President ESMT

Key takeaways

Germany's innovation gap doesn't stem from a lack of startups, but from corporates struggling to navigate the startup ecosystem, and startups finding it hard to work through corporate structures.

Identifying suitable partners in the growing startup-ecosystem requires effective matchmaking. To bridge the gap and build trust, events and networks play a critical role.

In addition, many corporates turn to specialized intermediaries to navigate the ecosystem. These actors provide not only access to relevant startups but also strategic guidance on structuring collaboration.

Success also depends on experience and ownership within the corporate – individuals or teams who understand the startup dynamic and can align internal stakeholders.



04

Designing collaboration that delivers

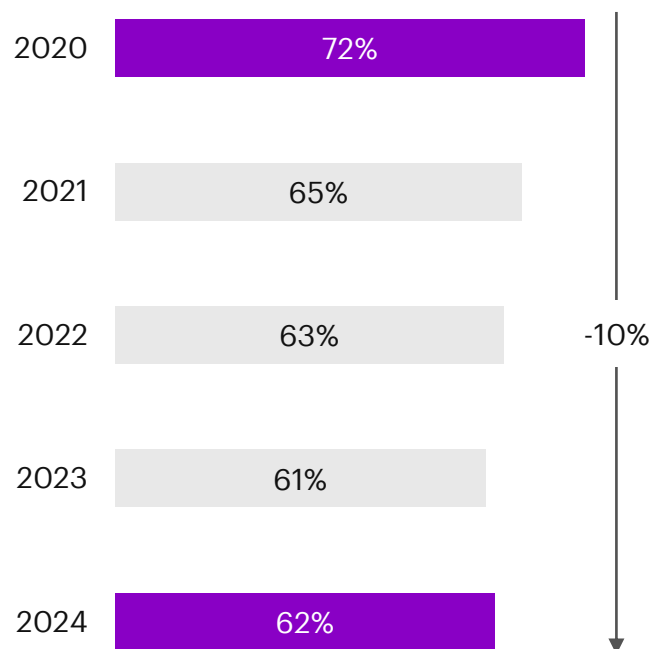
With economic pressure rising, speed and execution are taking center stage

Despite the benefits, corporate-startup collaboration has strongly declined since 2020. Corporates are increasingly prioritizing short-term outcomes in partnerships, a shift driven by tighter budgets and a focus on faster, measurable returns on investment.

Startups are experiencing these pressures as well, with larger scaleups recognizing that rapid deliverables are becoming standard in partnerships (73%). Meeting corporate expectations requires an adaptation to shorter project cycles and clearly defined KPIs.

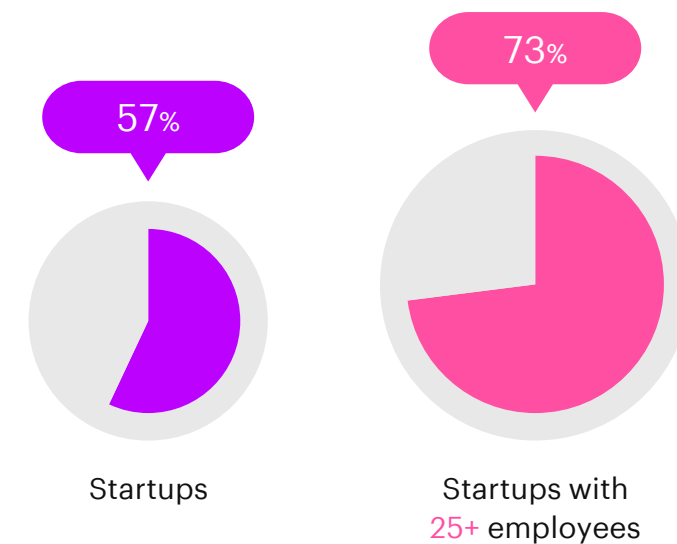
These developments have implications for the formats of collaboration: sales-oriented partnerships and other more flexible forms of engagement are likely to be preferred over more ambitious co-innovation or R&D initiatives. As a result, managing expectations becomes more critical, and corporates must ensure that the full potential of collaborating with startups can be realized.

Share of startups cooperating with established companies¹



1) German Startup Monitor 2024

“Priorities in collaboration have shifted towards short-term payout”



Startup-driven innovation needs to build on and leverage the corporates' business model

As the decline of corporate accelerators in Germany suggests, the collaboration ecosystem has changed in recent years. Different approaches were tested, and we are entering a new phase where projects are more targeted.

The objectives of established companies demonstrate a priority to strengthen the core business, focusing on product development, technology access, and business model innovation. For larger corporates, especially access to technology is key (73%).

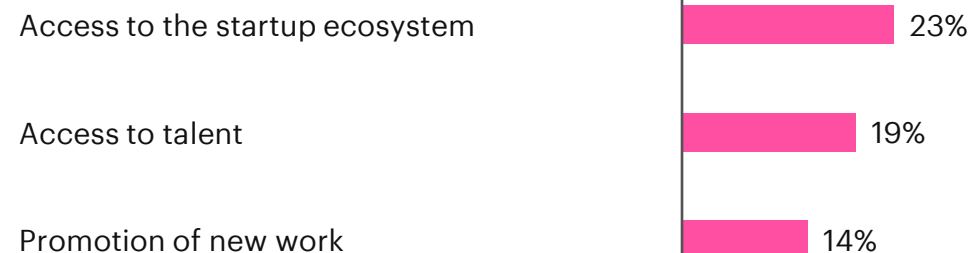
Other motives, like talent acquisition and promotion of new work, are less relevant. So more general activities in the ecosystem tend to be sidelined despite their long-term potential.

Objectives of established companies in collaboration

Core business



General interest



Flexible partnerships become more important in the current phase of economic uncertainty

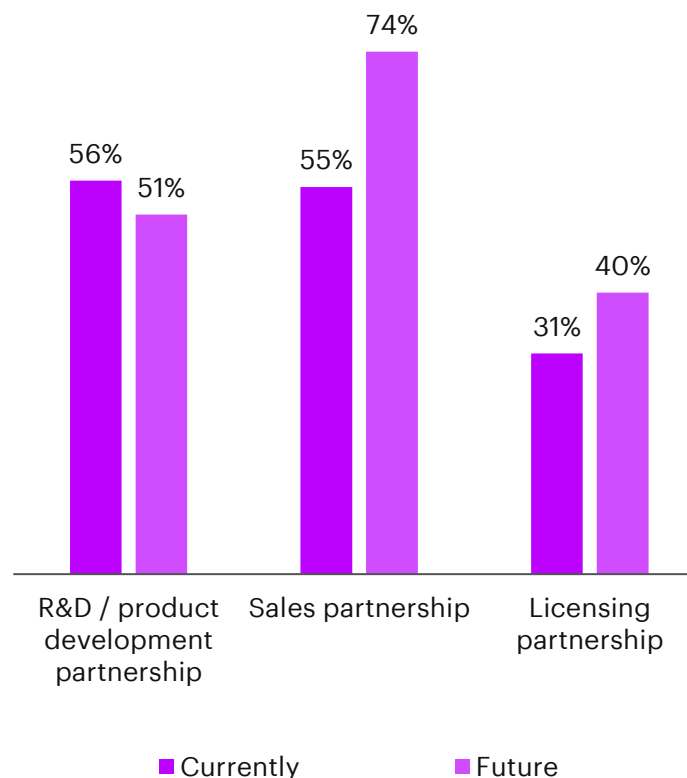
R&D and product development remain at the heart of joint innovation. However, they also come with higher risks, as outcomes are uncertain and timelines are longer.

In contrast, sales partnerships are increasingly seen as pragmatic and valuable – especially by startups, but to some extent by corporates as well. For startups, these partnerships improve cash flow, while corporates benefit from mature, scalable solutions that integrate well with existing structures.

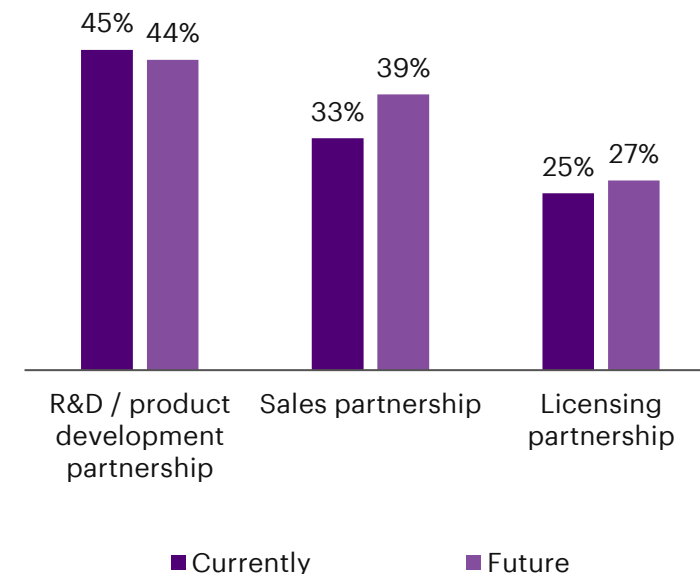
This reflects a broader shift towards more flexible forms of collaboration. While R&D remains important, it is losing some momentum in the face of economic uncertainty.

Current models of collaboration and valuable models going forward (Top 3)

Startups



Corporates



Both sides are also exploring the path towards more integrated forms of collaboration

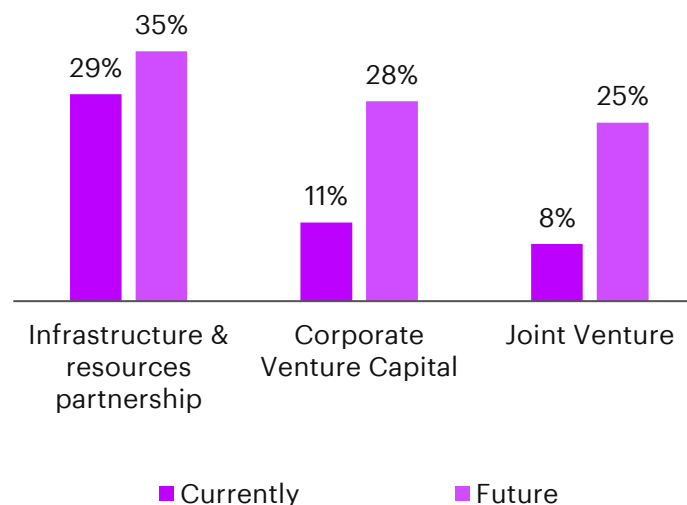
Among the types of partnerships perceived to significantly gain importance are infrastructure and resources partnerships – which could prove particularly important in the context of AI.

Interestingly, while overall we see a trend toward more flexible types of collaboration, joint ventures are cited by both sides as becoming more relevant in the future.

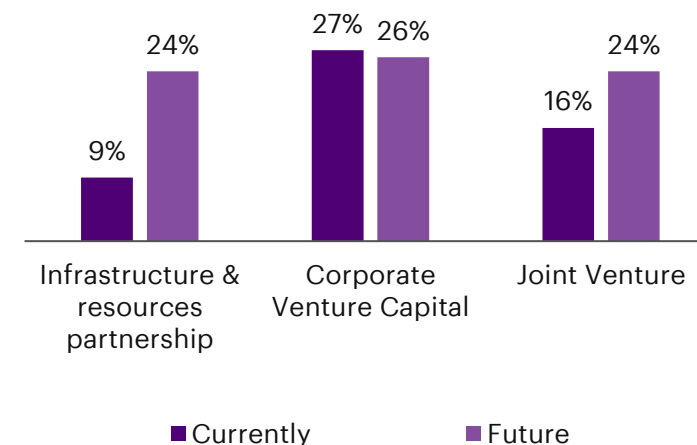
When it comes to corporate VC, the picture is diverging. While startups are looking forward to working with corporate venture capital funds, established companies do not anticipate positive momentum here.

Current models of collaboration and valuable models going forward (Top 4-6)

Startups



Corporates



Optimizing production in existing systems: Predictive maintenance as a value add-on

aiomatic

ai-omatic, founded in Hamburg in 2020, develops AI-powered software for predictive maintenance. The solution analyzes machine data in real time, detects anomalies at an early stage, and helps prevent unplanned downtime. For established companies, this means higher equipment availability, lower maintenance costs, and more efficient use of resources. The integration is vendor-independent and compatible with existing production systems. Most recently, the startup closed a €2 million seed round to further drive digitalization in the German SME sector.



“When it comes to winning over demanding enterprise clients, you need to have your KPIs ready and clearly demonstrate the value you deliver. If you can show how your solution works, what impact it creates, and how it can scale, collaboration with established companies gets off to the right start – and it becomes a real win for both sides.”

Lena Weirauch, Co-Founder & CEO

Key takeaways

The future of collaboration between startups and established businesses stronger prioritizes speed, flexibility and early value creation.

Collaboration models are becoming more focused and agile. Corporates now prioritize fast, targeted solutions over broad innovation programs with high coordination costs.

That means startups need to have direct answers to real business problems. The goals are to move to validation fast, deliver measurable value and keep complexity low.

However, these shifts also come with costs and more ambitious innovation projects risk being deprioritized. Alternative models such as joint ventures appear to be attractive going forward.



05

Key takeaways moving forward

The course is set – it is time for both sides to step up and deliver on innovation

The pressure is on: Corporates face burning platforms requiring immediate action, while startups need resources and market access to really get things going. In a time of uncertainty and transformation, both sides have much to gain – and much to lose.

In this context, partnerships are increasingly short-term and tied to the core business, reflecting the need for measurable outcomes and reduced risk. This pragmatic mindset can build momentum – if expectations are clear from the start.

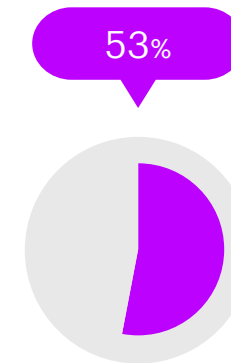
At the same time, there's a chance to also elevate collaboration. An integrated strategy could open doors across sectors and supply chains. But it requires applying key lessons from recent crises: clarity and trust must be built into every stage of the partnership.

German companies and digitalization



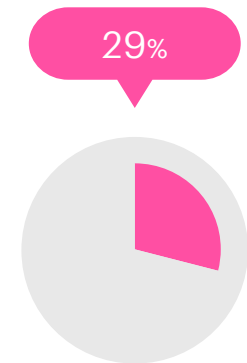
Innovation crisis

The current crisis of the German economy is also a crisis of hesitant digitalization.



Daily challenge

A majority now say they are facing difficulties in managing and implementing digitalization.



Lack of investment

Despite the urgency, only a small share plan to increase their investment in digital transformation.

1) Bitkom 2025: Corporate Survey

Better together – turning collaboration into competitive advantage

Collaboration between startups and corporates is rarely simple – but when done right, it drives innovation. Despite the complexity and cost, successful partnerships lead to the development of new products and processes, helping corporates stay competitive.

61%

of corporates report that they have launched market novelties among the products developed in collaboration with startups.

1

Focus on solving business value

Startups must deliver on innovation and technology and focus on pilots that demonstrate ROI while corporates need to exactly know what they are looking for.

2

Build trust before structure

Rigid formats often fail due to mismatched expectations. Start with lean, low-friction collaboration and assign internal translators who can navigate complexity and push things forward.

3

Make navigation a core capability

Finding the right partner is a strategic challenge. Corporates should leverage intermediaries and curated platforms, while startups must actively position themselves and make their solution visible.

4

Secure top-level support

Corporates must ensure mandate, budget, and influence to align internal stakeholders and startups should actively seek executive buy-in to accelerate decisions.

5

Showcasing best-practices

Successful projects and models of collaboration should be shared, to inspire both startups and corporates to recognize what's possible when they work together.

From insights to action – it is all about asking the right questions

Three questions for...

...both sides:

...startups:

...established companies:

1

Are we ready to work with companies fundamentally different from us — and willing to adapt?

Can we deliver value for our partners without sacrificing too much of our own identity, agility and autonomy?

Are we willing to allocate sufficient resources and attention to ensure that promising pilots can scale beyond the initial phase?

2

How can we ensure that both sides benefit equally and that the partnership creates long-term value beyond short-term goals?

Does our product directly address a cost, friction, or growth bottleneck relevant to the corporate?

Are we prepared to act decisively, even when collaboration doesn't fit into standard metrics or established processes?

3

Who are the “right” intermediaries to translate between both worlds and help us navigate collaboration successfully?

Are we prepared to navigate organizational complexity and decision-making processes within the corporate to keep momentum and alignment?

Do we have people who understand startup dynamics and are empowered to move projects forward within our company?



06

Research design and project team



The report combines data from a startup survey and a comparable one among established firms

Where does the data come from?

The data presented in this report was collected by the German Startup Association and Accenture through two online-surveys conducted between February and April 2025.

Thanks to a wide range of established communication channels, we were able to reach relevant target groups across Germany — resulting in a diverse group of respondents among startups as well as established businesses.

The final dataset used for the results presented consists of survey feedback from 135 established businesses and 368 startups.

What's a startup?

Startups are young, innovation-driven companies typically less than ten years old. They are characterized by a strong growth orientation and a lean, agile approach, often enabling them to bring new technologies to market rapidly. Collaborating with established companies allows startups to scale their solutions more effectively, while corporates benefit from fresh ideas, speed, and entrepreneurial drive.

Academic Partner

The ESMT Berlin served as a research partner for this project, contributing valuable expertise to the report's design. In addition, ESMT helped to disseminate the survey, ensuring broad participation from the established economy.



Startups are:



Ten years or younger



Growth oriented in revenue and / or employees



Innovative in products, services or business models

Project team



Sebastian Guenther

New Models of Growth Lead Europe
Accenture



Xuanzi Zhang

Innovation Consultant
Accenture



Björn Hofmann

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