STARTUP IRELAND
BY ENTERPRISE IRELAND

THE FOUNDER PLAYBOOK SERIES · 05

How to find the right partners in a new market

A practical guide to finding, choosing and managing international partners



startupireland.com

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A SIX-STEP APPROACH TO FINDING THE RIGHT PARTNERS

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03 Users are encouraged to conduct their own research, verify information relevant to their circumstances and seek appropriate independent professional advice where required, particularly before making significant financial, legal, contractual or commercial decisions.

ABOUT THIS PLAYBOOK

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A well-matched partner can help you enter a new market faster, with local knowledge, relationships and reach you may not have on your own.



This playbook shows you how to find, assess and manage partners that fit your business and your goals. A strong partnership is about more than finding someone willing to work with you. You need a clear role, complementary strengths, shared expectations and a reason for both sides to invest in making the relationship work.

The goal is to choose deliberately, set the partnership up well from the start and manage it actively as the relationship develops.

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01

Six steps to finding the right partners

From knowing what you need to managing the relationship.



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THE 6 STEPS TO FINDING THE RIGHT PARTNERS

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01

Know what you need from a partner



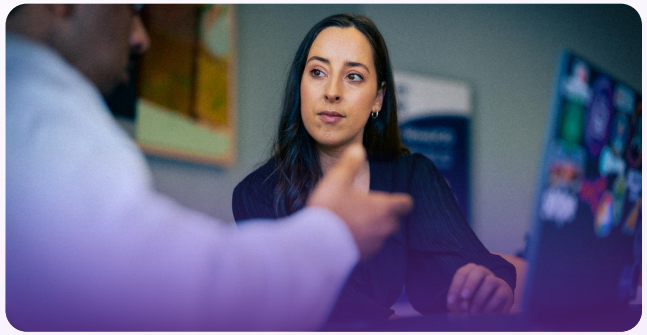
02

Map potential partners



03

Assess potential partners



04

Test alignment and commitment



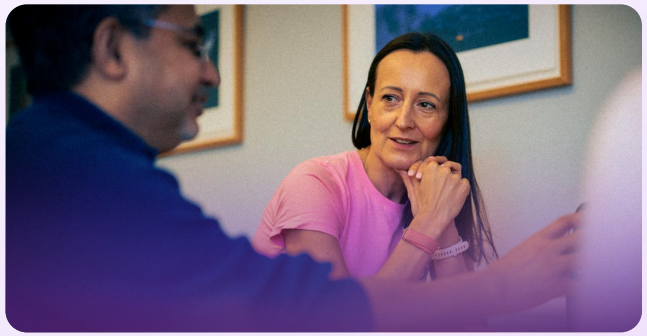
05

Structure the agreement



06

Manage the relationship



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STEP 1 OF 6
KNOW WHAT YOU NEED FROM A PARTNER



WHAT

Get clear on the role you need a partner to play before you start looking.

HOW

Define the specific gap you need help with. That might be access to customers, active selling, distribution, local market knowledge, regulatory support or after-sales service. Different needs call for different types of partner, so be clear about the outcome you need before deciding who could deliver it. Use the Partnership Types Map in the toolkit to compare distributors, resellers, agents and strategic partners and work out which model best fits your needs.

WATCH OUT FOR

Looking for one partner to do everything.

A very broad brief can make it harder to find a good fit and set clear expectations. Start with the specific capability or outcome you need most.

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STEP 2 OF 6
MAP POTENTIAL PARTNERS

WHAT

Build a shortlist of credible partners so you can compare your options rather than relying on the first available opportunity.

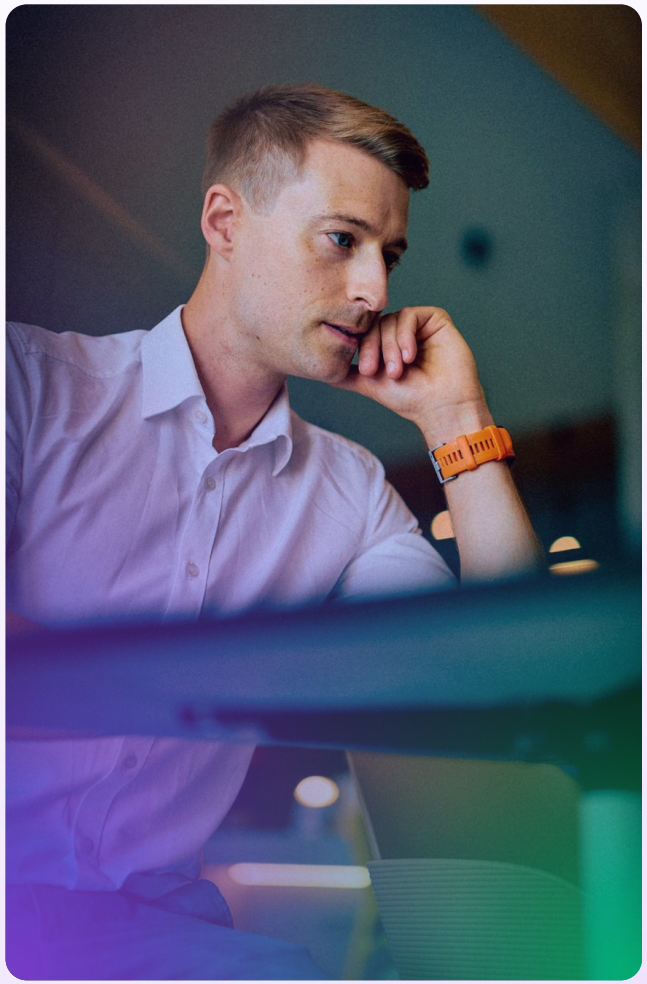
HOW

Use a mix of in-market sources to find candidates: Enterprise Ireland's overseas offices, industry associations, events, LinkedIn and introductions from people you already trust. Aim for a shortlist you can compare properly, rather than relying on one or two names. Once you have a few candidates, use the Partner Profile & Scorecard in the toolkit to compare them against the criteria that matter most to your business.

WATCH OUT FOR

Mistaking enthusiasm for fit.

A partner expressing an interest in working with you doesn't necessarily mean they have the reach, capability or motivation to deliver. Build a shortlist and compare candidates before you commit.

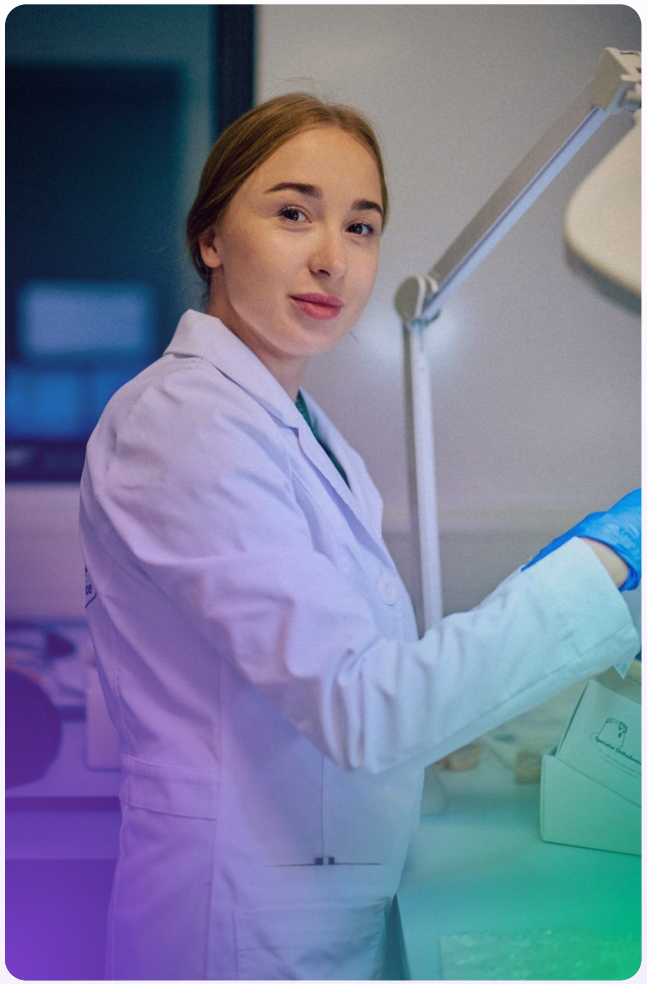


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STEP 3 OF 6
ASSESS POTENTIAL PARTNERS



WHAT

Check whether each potential partner has the reach, reputation and capability to deliver what you need.

HOW

Look at their track record, customer base, market reach, reputation and financial stability. Pay particular attention to how your product fits within their existing portfolio. A partner is more likely to prioritise you if your offer complements what they already sell rather than competing with it. Ask for references and, where possible, speak directly to companies they already work with. Then use the Partner Profile & Scorecard in the toolkit to compare candidates consistently.

WATCH OUT FOR

Assuming bigger is always better.

A large partner may have impressive reach, but you could be a very small account to them. A smaller partner that sees your product as a priority may give you more attention and commitment.

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STEP 4 OF 6
TEST ALIGNMENT AND COMMITMENT

WHAT

Look for evidence that the partner is motivated to invest in making the relationship work, not just interested in adding another product or service to their portfolio.

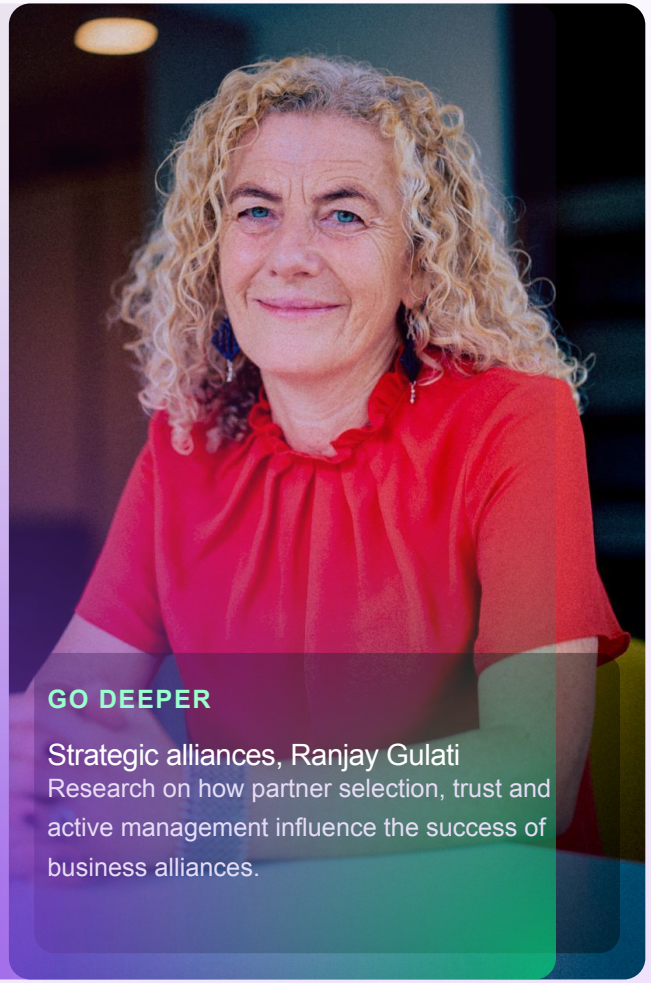
HOW

Look for clear strategic fit: a reason your offer matters to their business, shared goals and a willingness to commit time, people or budget. Talk openly about what success looks like for both sides and what each party is expected to contribute. Where possible, meet in person and use the early conversations to assess how open, responsive and reliable they are. A strong partnership needs commercial fit, but it also needs trust.

WATCH OUT FOR

Partners seeking rights without clear commitments in return.

If they are asking for exclusivity, territory or other benefits, make sure there are clear expectations and performance commitments in return.



GO DEEPER

Strategic alliances, Ranjay Gulati

Research on how partner selection, trust and active management influence the success of business alliances.

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STEP 5 OF 6
STRUCTURE THE AGREEMENT CAREFULLY



WHAT

Put a clear agreement in place that protects both sides and makes expectations easy to understand.

HOW

Agree the key terms upfront, including scope, territory, exclusivity, targets, pricing, responsibilities, intellectual property, review points and what happens if the relationship needs to end. If exclusivity is part of the deal, link it to clear performance expectations rather than granting it unconditionally. Use the Partner Agreement Checklist in the toolkit to work through the main points, and take local legal advice before signing.

WATCH OUT FOR

Vague or open-ended terms.

Unclear responsibilities, exclusivity without targets or a weak exit clause can create problems later. It's generally easier to agree these points at the start than to resolve them later if the relationship comes under pressure.

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STEP 6 OF 6
MANAGE THE RELATIONSHIP ACTIVELY

WHAT

Treat the partnership as an ongoing relationship, not something that ends once the agreement is signed.

HOW

Invest in a strong start with clear onboarding, training and regular communication. Agree how you'll share leads, support sales activity, review performance and resolve issues. Keep checking that both sides are getting value from the relationship and that the partnership is still supporting your goals. Use the Partner Agreement Checklist in the toolkit to make sure reporting, review points and responsibilities are clear from the outset.

WATCH OUT FOR

Assuming the partner will keep prioritising you without active support.

Relationships can lose momentum if communication drops off or expectations become unclear. Maintain regular contact so you can identify issues early and keep expectations aligned.



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02

Partner selection toolkit

A types map, a scorecard and an agreement checklist.



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PARTNER SELECTION TOOLKIT

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01 Partnership Types Map

Steps 1 and 2

Compare distributors, resellers, agents and strategic partners on what they do, who owns the customer, risk, control, margin and speed.

02 Partner Profile & Scorecard

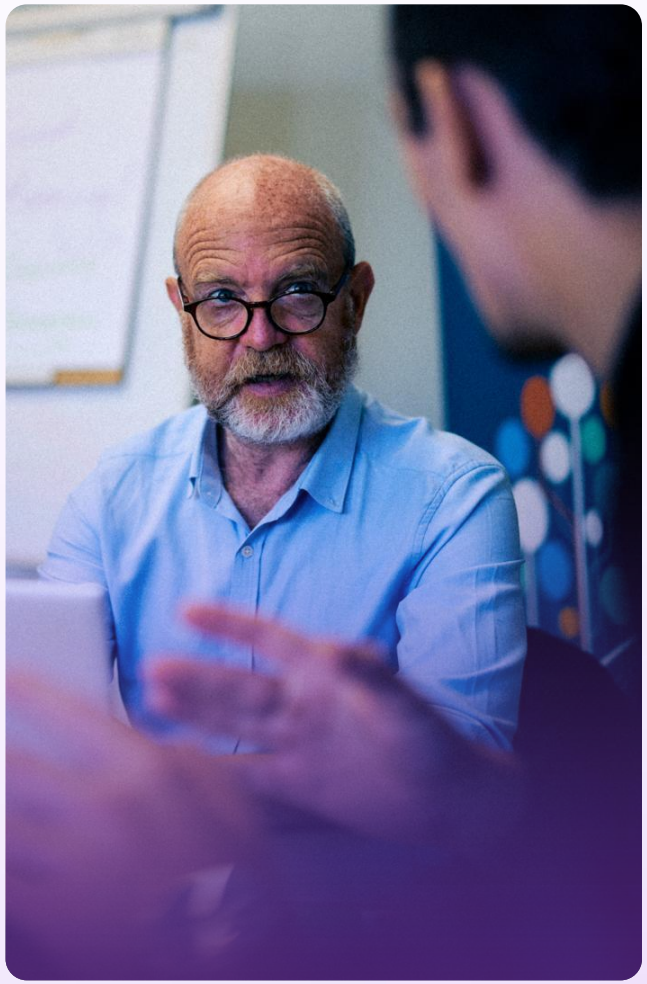
Steps 2 and 3

Define your ideal partner, then score each candidate on the same criteria so you compare consistently.

03 Partner Agreement Checklist

Steps 5 and 6

Work through scope, exclusivity, targets, commercial terms, IP, exit and relationship management before you sign.



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TOOL
PARTNERSHIP TYPES MAP · 1 OF 3

Before you start looking for potential partners, be clear on what you need them to do. Different partner types offer different levels of reach, control, commitment and margin.

	Distributor	Reseller	Agent	Strategic partner
WHAT THEY DO	Buy and resell your product, often holding stock and managing the customer relationship	Sell your product through their existing customer base	Sell on your behalf for commission, usually without taking ownership	Work with you in a deeper relationship, such as co-selling, joint development or shared investment
CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP	Usually owned by the distributor	Often shared or led by the reseller	Usually stays with you	Usually shared
STOCK / COMMERCIAL RISK	Usually held by the distributor	Varies	Usually stays with you	Usually shared
YOUR LEVEL OF CONTROL	Lower	Medium	Higher	Depends on the agreement

Tool 1

Continued on the next page: margin, speed to market, best when and watch out for.

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TOOL
PARTNERSHIP TYPES MAP · 2 OF 3

How each partner type affects your margin and speed, when it works best and what to watch for.

	Distributor	Reseller	Agent	Strategic partner
YOUR MARGIN	Lower, as the distributor takes a margin	Medium	Higher, less commission	Varies
SPEED TO MARKET	Fast	Fast	Medium	Often slower to set up
BEST WHEN...	You need local distribution, logistics and market reach quickly	You want additional sales reach with relatively low commitment	You want local sales support while keeping more control over pricing and customers	The opportunity is significant and both sides bring something important to the relationship
WATCH OUT FOR	Becoming a low-priority account	Limited commitment if they carry many competing products	Limited capacity or influence in the market	More complexity, slower decisions and shared control

Tool 1 A more focused role usually makes it easier to choose well, set expectations and measure performance.

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TOOL 1
PARTNERSHIP TYPES MAP · 3 OF 3

HOW TO USE IT

Start by writing down the specific gap you need to fill. Is it market access, active selling, physical distribution, local support or regulatory knowledge?

THEN COMPARE THE PARTNER TYPES AGAINST THREE QUESTIONS

01
Which option gives us the capability we need most?

02
How much control do we want to keep?

03
What are we willing to trade in margin or flexibility to gain local reach and speed?

Avoid expecting one partner to cover too many different needs. A more focused role usually makes it easier to choose well, set expectations and measure performance.

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TOOL 2
PARTNER PROFILE & SCORECARD · 1 OF 3

Define your ideal partner, then compare candidates consistently.

A good partner is not simply the one that looks strongest on paper. They should fit the role you defined in Tool 1 and be willing and able to make the relationship work. Use this tool to set your criteria before you start evaluating candidates, then compare your shortlist against the same measures.

PART A · ANSWER THE BELOW

The gap we need this partner to fill…

Must-have capabilities…

How their existing offer should complement ours…

The type of partner we need…

The customers or market reach they need…

Our deal-breakers…

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TOOL
PARTNER PROFILE & SCORECARD · 2 OF 3

Part B: compare your shortlist and score each candidate from 1 to 5 against the criteria.

CRITERION	WHAT TO LOOK FOR	A	B	C
Fit with your offer	Their portfolio complements rather than competes directly with yours			
Commitment and motivation	A clear reason to prioritise your product and invest time or resources			
Market reach	Access to the customers or channels you need			
Track record and reputation	Relevant experience and strong references			
Attention you'll receive	Your business is important enough to get meaningful focus			
Financial stability	A sound, reliable business with no obvious red flags			
Strategic alignment	Shared goals and a clear reason for both sides to succeed			
Trust and ways of working	Open, responsive and reliable in early conversations			
Willingness to commit to targets	Comfortable agreeing clear expectations and performance measures			
Local knowledge	Strong understanding of the market, regulation and local business environment			

Tool 2

Score several credible candidates so you compare them consistently rather than validating the first option you prefer.

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TOOL 2
PARTNER PROFILE & SCORECARD · 3 OF 3

HOW TO USE THE SCORECARD

Score several credible candidates so you can compare them consistently rather than simply validating the first option you prefer. Not every criterion will matter equally: before you score, identify the three or four factors that matter most for your business and give them greater weight in your decision.

THEN LOOK BEYOND THE TOTAL SCORE

01 Where is each candidate strongest?

02 Where are the biggest risks?

03 Are there any deal-breakers that a high overall score could hide?

04 What still needs to be verified before you decide?

Verify key information

Don’t rely only on presentations or sales conversations. Ask for references and, where possible, speak directly to companies the partner already works with.

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TOOL 3
PARTNER AGREEMENT CHECKLIST · 1 OF 3

WORK THROUGH THE KEY TERMS BEFORE YOU SIGN

A good agreement should make the relationship clear from the start: what each side is responsible for, how success will be measured, what happens if expectations are not met and how either side can exit.

Use the following checklist to prepare for discussions with your partner and legal advisor. Contract requirements vary by market, so take local legal advice before signing.

SEVEN AREAS TO COVER

01 Scope and responsibilities

02 Territory and exclusivity

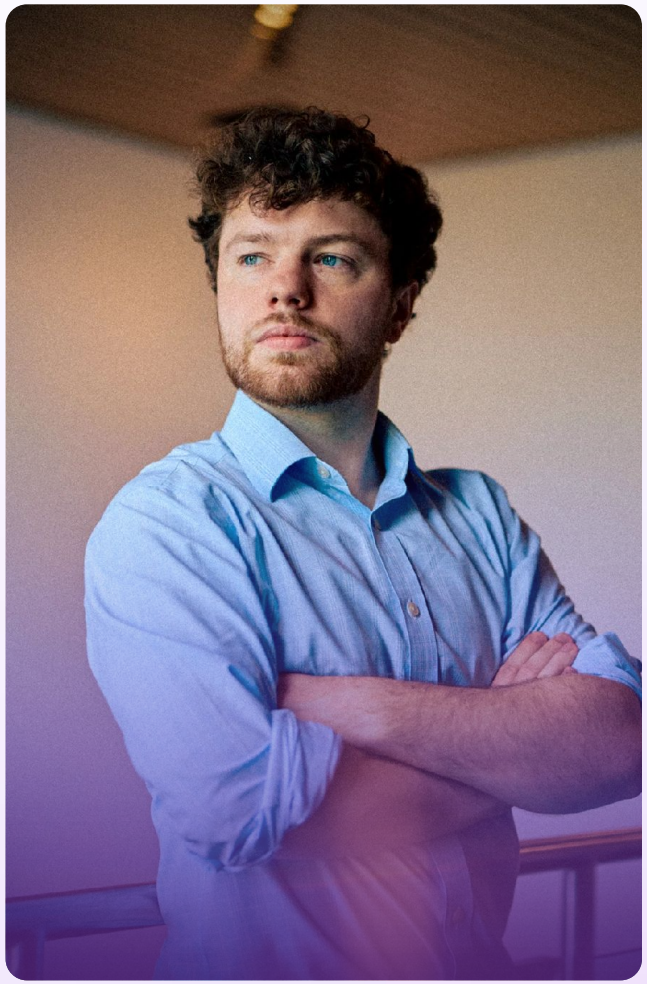
03 Performance and targets

04 Commercial terms

05 Intellectual property and brand

06 Term, renewal and exit

07 Managing the relationship



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TOOL 3
PARTNER AGREEMENT CHECKLIST · 2 OF 3

SCOPE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- [ ] Partner type and role clearly defined
- [ ] Products or services covered by the agreement
- [ ] Responsibilities of each party set out
- [ ] Costs and responsibilities for sales, marketing, training, logistics and support agreed

TERRITORY AND EXCLUSIVITY

- [ ] Territory clearly defined
- [ ] Exclusivity terms agreed
- [ ] Any exclusivity linked to clear performance expectations
- [ ] Right to review or change exclusivity if targets are not met

Key point: If you grant exclusivity, tie it to clear performance commitments and review points.

PERFORMANCE AND TARGETS

- [ ] Clear, measurable targets agreed
- [ ] Review points and reporting cadence defined
- [ ] Responsibilities for lead generation, sales and market development agreed
- [ ] Actions if performance falls below expectations set out

COMMERCIAL TERMS

- [ ] Pricing, margins or commission agreed
- [ ] Payment terms and currency agreed
- [ ] Responsibility for foreign exchange risk clarified where relevant
- [ ] Marketing, logistics, returns and other costs allocated clearly

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TOOL 3
PARTNER AGREEMENT CHECKLIST · 3 OF 3

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY AND BRAND

- [ ] Ownership of intellectual property clearly stated
- [ ] Brand and trademark usage agreed
- [ ] Confidentiality requirements included
- [ ] Any local IP risks discussed with legal advisors

TERM, RENEWAL AND EXIT

- [ ] Initial term and renewal conditions agreed
- [ ] Notice periods clearly defined
- [ ] Termination rights set out
- [ ] What happens to stock, customer data, leads and other assets on exit agreed
- [ ] Governing law and dispute resolution agreed

MANAGING THE RELATIONSHIP

- [ ] Named contacts on both sides
- [ ] Onboarding and training commitments agreed
- [ ] Reporting and review meetings scheduled
- [ ] Shared measures of success defined
- [ ] Process for resolving issues agreed

Before signing, check you can answer yes

— Does the agreement give both sides a clear reason to perform?
— Is any exclusivity matched by meaningful commitments?
— Are expectations and measures of success clear?
— Is there a workable exit route if the partnership does not succeed?

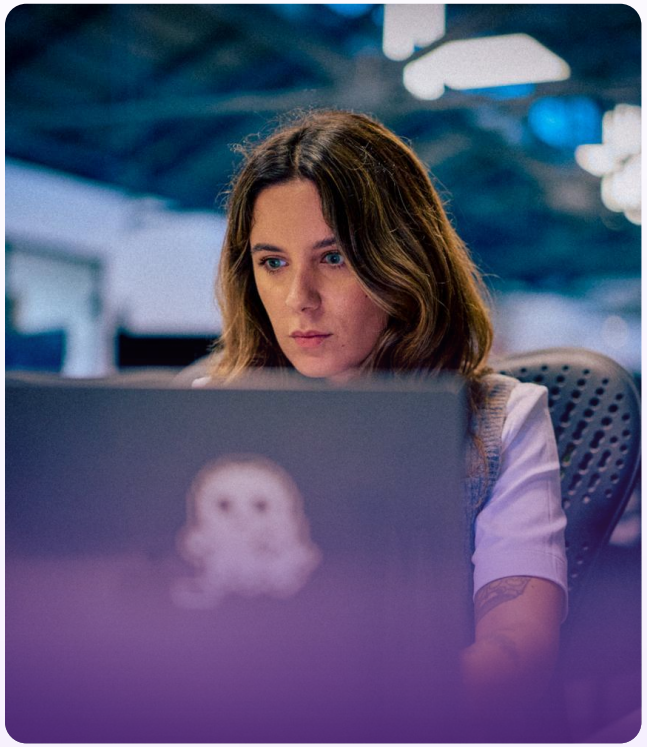
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WHAT A GOOD PARTNERSHIP LOOKS LIKE
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By the end of this playbook, you should have a clearer view of whether you can say:



- ✓ I'm clear on the role I need a partner to play.
- ✓ I've compared a credible shortlist rather than relying on the first available option.
- ✓ I've checked each candidate's reach, reputation, capability and fit with my offer.
- ✓ I have evidence that the partner is motivated to invest in making the relationship work.
- ✓ We have clear expectations, targets and responsibilities on both sides.
- ✓ Any exclusivity is linked to performance.
- ✓ I know how we'll manage the relationship and measure success.
- ✓ There is a clear exit route if the partnership does not work out.

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YOUR NEXT STEP

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Once you've identified the type of partner you need and built a shortlist, you can start testing potential matches in-market and opening conversations.



NEED SUPPORT?

Enterprise Ireland and LEO client companies can access international soft-landing supports. Talk to a Startup Ireland advisor for more information.

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