GO-TO-MARKET & PRICING

An ecosystem strategy is an alignment structure, not a partner list

An ecosystem strategy maps the actors, activities, positions, links, and dependencies required for a focal value proposition to materialize.

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MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

A long partner list can still fail to deliver one value proposition because the missing object is alignment, not another relationship. Adner defines an ecosystem-as-structure as the alignment structure of multilateral partners whose interaction is needed for a focal value proposition to materialize. His ecosystem grammar describes interdependence through activities, actors, positions, and links, while keeping ecosystem strategy distinct from competitive and corporate strategy. This article turns the construct into a synthetic alignment map that makes dependencies and failure signals visible. It does not assess a current platform, recommend a partner, or claim that ecosystems are universally better than markets or hierarchies.

Keywords: Ecosystem strategy · Ecosystem as structure · Partner alignment · Interdependence

A partner list is not an ecosystem strategy.

The short answer is that an ecosystem strategy maps the alignment required for a focal value proposition to materialize. It names the activities, actors, positions, links, and dependencies that have to work together. Counting partners does not show whether the value proposition can be delivered.

Adner defines an ecosystem-as-structure as the alignment structure of multilateral partners whose interaction is needed for a focal value proposition to materialize. His ecosystem grammar describes interdependence through activities, actors, positions, and links. He also keeps ecosystem strategy distinct from competitive and corporate strategy.

Gawer and Cusumano (2014) add a platform boundary: internal platforms organize common assets for derivative products, while external industry platforms provide foundations for complementary innovation. Tiwana et al. (2010) show that platform architecture, governance, and environmental dynamics coevolve. The partner list is therefore only one visible part of a structure that also includes technical design, rules, and changing conditions.

That gives the reader a more demanding starting point. Before asking who should join the ecosystem, ask what must happen, who must do it, what position each actor occupies, and which link can fail.

Why must an ecosystem strategy begin with the end-customer value proposition?

An ecosystem is not a mood around a company. It is a structure around a value proposition that needs more than one participant to materialize. The value proposition therefore comes before the partner list.

Table 1 Why must an ecosystem strategy begin with the end-customer value proposition?

Structure field	Question	Failure if omitted
Value proposition	What is supposed to materialize for the user or buyer?	Actors coordinate around different promises
Activity	What must happen for the promise to be delivered?	The work is assumed rather than assigned
Actor	Who performs or enables the activity?	A missing capability is hidden by a name list
Position	What role or place does each actor occupy?	Responsibilities overlap or remain empty
Link	How does one activity or actor depend on another?	A relationship is mistaken for alignment
Failure signal	What would show that materialization is blocked?	The ecosystem is judged by partner count

Table from this essay. Sources and interpretation are given in the article.

The fields are deliberately concrete. A partner can be present and still occupy the wrong position. An activity can be important and still have no owner. A link can exist contractually and still fail operationally.

Figure 1 The ecosystem alignment structure map

Value-proposition step	Synthetic actor	Position	Required link	Dependency	Failure signal
Create the core offer	Focal firm	Offer owner	Product to delivery	Capability is available	Promise cannot be delivered
Add a complementary service	Complementor A	Service provider	Offer to service	Interface and timing align	User receives an incomplete bundle
Reach the user	Channel actor	Access position	Service to access	Incentive and information align	Demand is present but unreachable
Support the experience	Support actor	Recovery position	User to support	Escalation path is clear	Failure has no accountable response

Author's synthetic strategy framework grounded in Adner (2017), Gawer and Cusumano (2014), and Tiwana et al. (2010). The actors, activities, and failure signals are illustrative and do not identify a current ecosystem.

The map is not a partner recommendation. It shows why a partner can be present without the ecosystem working. The problem may be a missing activity, a misaligned position, a weak link, or an unowned dependency.

What does ecosystem-as-structure mean for multilateral commercial governance?

Adner's construct begins with alignment. The partners are multilateral because the focal value proposition depends on interactions among several actors, not only on a bilateral relationship with one supplier or distributor.

The word structure is important. It shifts attention from the existence of relationships to the arrangement that makes the value proposition possible. An actor can be strategically important because it occupies a position in the structure, even if it has a small commercial relationship with the focal firm. An activity can become a bottleneck even if every actor is individually competent.

The grammar of activities, actors, positions, and links provides a compact way to describe that arrangement. Gawer and Cusumano (2014) show how platform design and governance connect firm-level and ecosystem-level innovation. Tiwana et al. (2010) add that architecture, governance, and the environment evolve together. The structure can therefore change when a new complement is added, an actor changes its incentives, or a link becomes unavailable.

How do platform leaders resolve multilateral incentive misalignments?

The source presents partner alignment as a distinct challenge in interdependent value creation. It complements, rather than replaces, competitive and corporate strategy. This boundary prevents an ecosystem map from answering questions it was not designed to answer.

Competitive strategy asks how a firm positions itself relative to rivals. Corporate strategy asks which businesses or activities the firm owns or coordinates. Ecosystem strategy asks how multiple actors align around a value proposition that none may be able to materialize alone. The questions interact, but one map does not contain all three answers.

That distinction is useful when a partner proposal is presented as a strategy. A partner can improve competitive position, reduce an ownership burden, or complete a value proposition. Those are different claims. The alignment map should identify which one is being made.

When is a gap in partner capability an governance defect rather than a recruitment problem?

Suppose the synthetic ecosystem in the exhibit has a core offer, a service complement, a route to the user, and a support actor. If the value proposition still fails, adding a fifth actor may not help.

The missing object could be:

Table 3 When is a gap in partner capability an governance defect rather than a recruitment problem?

Possible gap	What it looks like	Better question
Activity gap	A necessary task is absent	What work has no owner?
Position gap	Two actors perform the same role or nobody has authority	Which role is empty or duplicated?
Link gap	Activities exist but cannot exchange what the next step needs	What information, timing, or incentive is missing?
Dependency gap	One actor's failure blocks the whole promise	Which dependency has no recovery path?

Table from this essay. Sources and interpretation are given in the article.

This diagnosis does not say that more partners are never useful. It says that partner recruitment is a response to a structural gap only when the gap is identified.

Why does an ecosystem architecture require predefined partner exit criteria?

An ecosystem can become a permanent coordination project if it has no test for materialization. The focal value proposition should therefore have a declared signal that tells the participants whether the structure is working for its intended purpose.

The signal is not necessarily revenue. It could be delivery completion, user access, service recovery, interoperability, or another outcome that belongs to the value proposition. The choice must be declared. Otherwise a partner list can look successful because it has grown.

Use a structural review:

1. state the focal value proposition;

2. list the activities required to materialize it;
3. assign the actors and their positions;
4. draw the links and dependencies;
5. name the incentives, information, and timing each link requires;
6. define the failure signal and recovery owner;
7. state which part is ecosystem strategy and which part belongs to competitive or corporate strategy;
8. record what evidence would justify adding, changing, or removing an actor.

This sequence is a framework, not a tested performance model. Its purpose is to stop a relationship inventory from being mistaken for an alignment structure.

Which three popular ecosystem narratives should strategic planners resist?

First, do not say “we have an ecosystem because we have many partners.” Count does not show materialization.

Second, do not say “the missing partner is the bottleneck” before mapping the missing activity, position, link, or dependency.

Third, do not say “ecosystem strategy replaces competitive strategy.” Adner treats alignment as a distinct but complementary strategic challenge.

For adjacent decisions, compare the go-to-market resource system with the channel ownership boundary.

Boundary

Adner defines ecosystem-as-structure as the alignment structure of multilateral partners needed for a focal value proposition to materialize. Gawer and Cusumano add the platform innovation boundary, while Tiwana, Konsynski, and Bush add the coevolution of architecture, governance, and environment. The three sources do not assess a current platform or prove that ecosystems are universally superior. The alignment map is an author-owned translation that makes the missing structure visible before a partner list grows.

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END OF ESSAY

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