ORTENT WHITEPAPER

Four Partner Programmes, One Slide

A Diagnostic for Boards and CROs

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Four named partners on the slide. One is actually delivering revenue. This paper is designed to tell you which two archetypes to build and which two to cut.

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Run the two-column audit in Section 3 before reading Section 4. The framework explains what the audit is scoring. The score tells you where you are.

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Executive summary

Most partner programmes plateau because they are four programmes pretending to be one.

The CRO tells the board there is a partner strategy. Twelve named partners. Two announced press releases. A signed MOU with a global systems integrator. The board nods. Six quarters later, partner-sourced ARR is under ten percent of the number and nobody at the executive table can say why.

The cause was structural, not tactical. Not rev share. Not deal registration. Not marketing development funds. The structural cause is the conflation. The reseller, the systems integrator, the ISV, and the instrument or platform vendor are four different businesses. They have different economics, different enablement, different deal cycles, different reporting lines, and different KPIs. Running them inside one pattern fits none of them properly.

This paper names the four archetypes. It gives you a two-column audit to test which archetypes you actually run against which you think you run. It explains the “pick two” discipline that scale-up businesses usually learn the hard way. And it gives you the language to reset the board conversation from “we have a partner programme” to “we are running these two, and here is how each is reporting.”

Ninety minutes to read. Thirty to run the audit. The rest of the work is what changes in your business afterwards.

Written from an operating perspective. Four exits over three decades (Lotus to IBM $3.5B, Paragon to Phone.com $500M, Apertio to Nokia $240M, Clearswift to Lyceum £50M) plus COO and CGO seats across enterprise software and life sciences. Every observation is drawn from operating rooms, not consultant decks.

Read the two-column audit. Score your programme honestly. If the right column has more markers than the left, the fix is not more programme. The fix is fewer programmes, run distinctly, until the operating model can hold a third.

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Why most partner programmes plateau

A CRO of a growth-stage SaaS business is walking the board through next year's number. On slide fourteen, he covers the partner programme. Twelve named partners. Two press releases from the last quarter. A freshly signed MOU with a global systems integrator. Partner-sourced ARR is 9% of the total and forecast to hit 18% next year.

The board nods. The chair asks one supplementary question about the systems integrator MOU. The CRO answers. Next slide.

What the CRO does not tell the board, because he does not yet see it himself, is that he has four different businesses sitting inside one slide.

The reseller is moving the product through their own buying-centre relationships, billing on commission, owned by channel sales, reporting partner-sourced ARR. The systems integrator is owning the implementation layer, billing services alongside the product, owned by partner success, reporting time-to-value and attach rate. The ISV is layering adjacent capability (increasingly AI-enabled now), splitting joint revenue, owned by product and alliances, reporting joint-customer ARR. The instrument or platform vendor is bundling the SaaS into hardware deals, attaching to the vendor's own quote, owned by strategic alliances, reporting bundled-deal ACV.

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> *Different economics. Different enablement. Different deal cycles. Different reporting lines. Different KPIs. Different problem when something breaks.*

The slide makes them look the same. The comp plan often treats them the same. The enablement deck definitely treats them the same. And the programme reports up to the board as one number.

That is the conflation.

The conflation is what kills partner revenue in growth-stage SaaS. It is not the rev share. It is not the deal-registration workflow. It is not the lack of MDF budget. Those are real problems but they are downstream. The structural cause of why most partner programmes plateau is that the four archetypes are operated inside one pattern that fits exactly none of them properly.

When a reseller is enabled like a systems integrator, you get demo certifications they will never use and methodology training they do not need. The reseller wants to know how to shorten their sales cycle by two weeks. You give them a five-day certification programme on your implementation methodology. They never book a deal.

When an ISV is enabled like a reseller, you get sales playbooks instead of joint roadmap commitments. The ISV wants to know what your product will do in eighteen months so they can build against it. You give them a competitive battlecard and a MEDDIC checklist. They stop returning your calls.

When a global instrument vendor is paid like a regional reseller, the strategic alliance withers and the vendor disengages within two quarters. The vendor wanted joint account planning at the executive level. You gave them a 15% deal commission. They do the first deal politely. There is no second.

Building four programmes is hard. Pretending you have one, and operating it badly across four shapes, is harder. It is what most companies actually do.

There is a simpler discipline. Run the four as four. Each archetype gets its own owner inside the SaaS business, its own enablement track, its own economics, and its own headline KPI that proves the motion is working or not. The reporting to the board can be aggregated. The operating model underneath must be distinct.

The second discipline is harder. Pick two, not four. In a growth-stage SaaS business the right answer is almost never all four at once. It is usually the two archetypes most likely to

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compound for the specific business, built properly, before the other two are added.

The two-column audit in the next section forces the honesty. Score it before you read the framework. The score tells you where you are.

The Two-Column Partner Programme Audit

How to run this

One page. Print it or fill it in on screen. Twelve rows. Two columns.

Left column is the marker of a healthy, un-conflated partner programme. Right column is the marker of a conflated one.

For each row, decide which column better describes your business today. Mark it. There is no “sort of.” If a marker is close but not quite met, it is on the right side.

Count the right-column marks at the end.

Do it alone first. Then run it with your CRO, your head of partnerships, and one other operator who touches the programme. Compare notes. Where you disagree is the interesting conversation.

Ownership and reporting

HEALTHY (LEFT)	CONFLATED (RIGHT)
1. Each archetype has one named owner inside the SaaS business with distinct P&L visibility.	1. All partner types report to one owner (usually the CRO or head of alliances) with no P&L separation.
2. Each archetype reports a distinct KPI that proves its motion is working.	2. One partner KPI covers all archetypes (usually "partner-sourced ARR" or "influenced ARR").
3. The forecast rolls up to the board as an aggregated line but decomposes by archetype on drill-down.	3. The forecast rolls up to the board as one number with no decomposition.
4. When something breaks in one archetype, the escalation path is that archetype's owner, not the CRO.	4. When something breaks in a partner motion, the escalation goes through the CRO who fixes it once for all archetypes.

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Enablement and compensation

HEALTHY (LEFT)	CONFLATED (RIGHT)
5. Each archetype has a distinct enablement track appropriate to its motion.	5. One enablement track covers all partner types, usually a certification-heavy programme designed for resellers.
6. Comp plans differ by archetype (commission, milestone-based, revenue-share, alliance credits).	6. Comp plans are largely uniform, usually a percentage commission structure.
7. Each archetype has its own onboarding pack, deal-support rules, and conflict resolution rules.	7. All partners get the same onboarding pack, and conflict resolution is ad hoc.
8. Partner marketing spend allocates by archetype based on programme-specific ROI.	8. Partner marketing spend allocates by partner size, tier, or executive sponsor.

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Board-facing signals

HEALTHY (LEFT)	CONFLATED (RIGHT)
9. The board sees which two archetypes drive the majority of partner-sourced revenue and which two are supporting.	9. The board sees "our partner programme" as one thing, one number, one narrative.
10. The board sees a gating-risk narrative: which growth constraint each archetype is relieving.	10. Nobody at the executive table can name which archetype is relieving which growth constraint.
11. The board sees kill criteria: the signal that would cause the business to stop investing in a given archetype.	11. Kill criteria do not exist because the programme is treated as strategic and permanent.
12. The board can name the two archetypes the business is currently building, and can name the two it is deliberately not.	12. The board is told "we are building partners" without being told which two.

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Scoring

Count the right-column marks.

0-3 RIGHT-COLUMN MARKS

Your partner programme is not conflated. The archetypes are separated cleanly and the operating model is doing its job. If partner revenue is still under-performing your ambition, the constraints are tactical (rev share, deal registration, MDF, quality of partner recruitment) and this paper is not the right lens.

4-6 RIGHT-COLUMN MARKS

Conflation is a contributing factor but not the primary constraint. There are one or two archetypes where the operating model has slipped into shared patterns. Targeted rebuild. Fix those first, revisit the audit in ninety days.

7-9 RIGHT-COLUMN MARKS

The conflation is the primary structural constraint on partner revenue. Any tactical fix will be undone by the shared operating pattern. The rebuild is architectural, not tactical. Read Section 4 for what the four archetypes look like when they are separated. Then decide which two are your leverage.

10-12 RIGHT-COLUMN MARKS

You do not yet have a partner programme. You have four announcements and a slide. This is common at Series C when a partner strategy has been assembled from previous CRO experiences without an underlying operating model. The rebuild starts by choosing two archetypes based on gating risk and cutting the other two entirely.

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If your team scored differently

Very common. The CRO usually scores closer to the board's view (which is optimistic). The operators running the programmes score closer to reality (which is not).

The gap between the two scores is itself the diagnosis. If the CRO scored 4 right and the head of partnerships scored 9 right, the CRO is describing what the board hears and the operator is describing what the business is doing. Both are true. The gap has to close before the rebuild can start.

Bring both scores to the next executive meeting. Reconcile them line by line. Where the CRO said left and the operator said right, ask the operator to describe what they see. That is the conversation the audit exists to force.

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The four archetypes

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The archetypes are named the same everywhere in this paper. Reseller. Systems Integrator. ISV. Instrument or Platform Vendor. Each has a distinct job, distinct economics, a distinct enablement pattern, a distinct deal cycle, and a distinct KPI that proves the motion is working.

Read this section after you have your audit score. What follows is what the diagnostic scores are built against.

Reseller

What it is. A partner with buying-centre relationships you do not have. Traditionally a channel motion. Increasingly, in modern B2B SaaS, a hybrid of channel and referral where the reseller opens the door and the SaaS business closes the deal.

What it does. Unlocks buyers you cannot reach directly. In a specific geography, a specific vertical, a specific customer tier. The reseller's value is access, not depth.

Economics. Transactional commission on the deal, usually 15-25% depending on the SaaS gross margin and the reseller's contribution. Deal-by-deal. Predictable per unit, unpredictable per quarter.

Enablement. Demo certification. Deal-registration workflow that protects the reseller's opportunities. Competitive playbooks against the two or three alternatives the reseller most often encounters. Fast response to registered opportunities. Anything more than that is enablement they will not use.

Deal cycle. Measured in weeks. Driven by the reseller's own pipeline discipline. The SaaS business supports; the reseller drives.

KPI. Partner-sourced ARR. Not influenced. Not touched. Sourced. The reseller opened the opportunity and the deal closed.

Failure signal. Certified resellers who never book a deal. Usually because the SaaS business gave them a five-day certification designed for a systems integrator instead of a two-day sales-motion enablement. Fix the enablement or lose the reseller.

Systems Integrator

What it is. A partner whose primary business is implementation and change management for enterprise customers. Global names, regional and vertical specialists too. Their value is depth, not access.

What it does. Unlocks enterprise deployment where the customer wants a single throat

to choke on delivery. Also unlocks larger deal sizes because the SI has trust the SaaS business does not yet.

Economics. Two-sided. The SI bills services directly to the customer. The SaaS business bills the software licence. Joint pipeline reviews are the operating cadence. Occasionally a joint proposal to the customer.

Enablement. Methodology training. Deployment playbook that maps the SaaS product's implementation into the SI's delivery framework. Escalation runbook. Joint account planning at director level for the top ten target accounts. Nothing less will land.

Deal cycle. Measured in quarters. Driven by customer procurement cycles. Six months to signature is normal. Twelve months is not unusual.

KPI. Attach rate and time-to-value. Both must be reported and both must trend the right way.

Failure signal. SIs "certified" who never lead a deal because the SaaS business insists on owning implementation. The SI's economic model does not work if they cannot bill implementation. If you keep the implementation revenue, you have a delivery partner, not a systems integrator.

ISV

What it is. An independent software vendor building on your platform or building alongside your platform in an adjacent capability. In modern SaaS, ISVs are increasingly AI-native businesses adding intelligence layers to underlying data platforms.

What it does. Extends your platform's addressable use cases without you building the extension. Also brings customers into your platform who came for the ISV's product first.

Economics. Revenue share on joint customers. Sometimes joint pricing. Sometimes marketplace-fee style economics with a defined percentage flowing to whichever party owned the customer relationship first.

Enablement. Joint roadmap commitments. Integration governance (SLA on APIs, notice period on breaking changes, joint testing in advance of major releases). Joint customer references. Executive sponsorship at both companies. Reseller enablement is the wrong pack.

Deal cycle. Measured in months for individual pipeline. Measured in years for the partnership itself. An ISV partnership that is six months old is barely a partnership. Two years in it starts to compound.

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KPI. Joint-customer ARR. Number of customers using both products. Trajectory of joint pipeline. A single number does not tell the story.

Failure signal. ISVs given the reseller enablement pack, then wondering why they never see the roadmap. Or ISVs given the SI enablement pack and expected to implement the platform, which is the wrong economic model. If the ISV cannot articulate what your platform will do in eighteen months, you are not enabling them properly.

Instrument or Platform Vendor

What it is. A hardware or foundational platform business that bundles your SaaS into their own quote. In enterprise software these are hyperscalers. In life sciences these are instrument manufacturers. In industrial software these are equipment OEMs. The specific vendor depends on the workflow adjacency.

What it does. Unlocks workflow-adjacent motion where the customer is already buying the vendor's kit. The vendor's own commercial cadence pulls the SaaS through as an attach.

Economics. Bundled ACV where the SaaS is a line item on the vendor's own quote. Strategic alliance credits where non-linear payouts (co-marketing budget, joint funding, alliance office headcount) matter as much as the deal commission. Multi-year strategic engagement rather than deal-by-deal.

Enablement. Alliance operating cadence at the executive level. Joint account planning for the top twenty target enterprises. Executive sponsorship on both sides with named individuals and quarterly reviews. Anything less than this reads as tactical and the alliance decays.

Deal cycle. Multi-year strategic engagements with individual deals landing on the vendor's normal cadence. The alliance itself is the asset; the deals are the outputs.

KPI. Bundled-deal ACV plus alliance health (executive engagement, joint accounts covered, joint marketing activity). Neither is enough on its own.

Failure signal. Instrument or platform vendor treated as a regional reseller. Alliance withers within two quarters because the vendor's alliance team cannot justify continued executive investment against transactional treatment. Once an alliance decays, it is very hard to restart.

The four together

Different archetypes relieve different gating risks.

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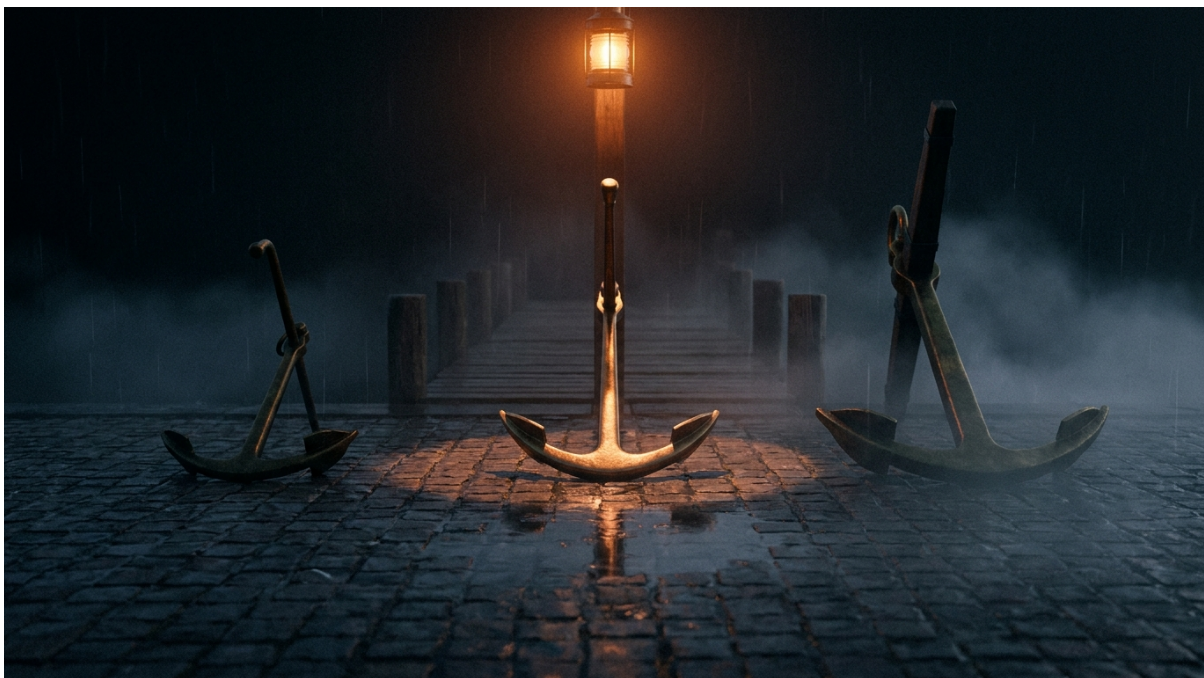
The reseller relieves reach. If you cannot get to buyers, the reseller opens the door. The systems integrator relieves deployment. If implementation is the bottleneck to scale, the SI absorbs the delivery weight. The ISV relieves platform depth. If your platform's value compounds with adjacent capability, the ISV adds the adjacency you would otherwise build. The instrument or platform vendor relieves workflow adjacency. If the workflow your product sits inside is already buying hardware or infrastructure, the vendor pulls you through.

The right answer for a growth-stage SaaS business is almost never all four at once. It is usually the two archetypes most likely to compound for the specific gating risk in front of you.

Pick two. Build them properly. Add the other two when the first two are operating.

Applied cross-industry examples



Three anonymised examples. Sector labels only. Financials rounded. Drawn from thirty-five years of operating experience across growth-stage SaaS in enterprise software, life sciences, digital health, and AI-adjacent platforms. No client names.

Example 1: PE-backed vertical SaaS, Series C, £30M ARR

The business had all four archetypes running in parallel. Twelve resellers. Six ISVs. Two systems integrators. One strategic alliance with a global instrument vendor. Partner-sourced ARR was 8% of the total and had been 8% for six quarters.

The audit was run by the CRO and independently by the head of partnerships. The CRO scored 7 right-column marks. The head of partnerships scored 10. The gap was the diagnosis.

Where they disagreed: the CRO believed each archetype had its own enablement track. The head of partnerships showed that all four archetypes had been given the same certification-heavy programme designed originally for the reseller motion. The CRO also believed the strategic alliance was in good shape. The head of partnerships showed that no executive-level operating cadence had taken place in two quarters.

The rebuild took ninety days.

Cut the systems integrator programme entirely. Implementations were small enough for

the customer success team to run in-house, and the SIs had not been carrying material pipeline. Cut the ISV programme in the same period. Six ISVs was too many for a Series C business to enable properly; the two most active were spun into pipeline partners with light enablement and no revenue commitment.

Kept the reseller motion, invested properly. Twelve resellers reduced to five. Enablement rebuilt around a two-day sales motion. Deal registration workflow tightened.

Kept the instrument vendor alliance, invested properly. Executive sponsorship reinstated. Quarterly reviews scheduled. Joint account planning for the top twenty enterprises the alliance covered.

Twelve months later, partner-sourced ARR was 28%. The five reseller partners were driving £4.5M annualised. The instrument vendor alliance was driving £3.9M annualised through bundled deals.

The lesson. Focus produced more revenue than breadth. The two archetypes that survived the cut each grew because the operating model was finally shaped around them. The four that pretended to run had been eating focus and budget.

Example 2: Life Sciences platform

The business was a clinical pathway platform serving hospital systems and specialist provider groups across the US and UK. One archetype only: a strategic alliance with a global systems integrator that had healthcare vertical depth. Partner-sourced ARR was 12% and slowly growing.

The question the board asked was whether to add more archetypes. Add a reseller motion for the mid-market? Add ISVs for the AI-enabled clinical decision support space that was emerging? Add hyperscaler alliances?

The audit was run against the existing SI alliance. Score was 3 right-column marks, so the alliance itself was not conflated. The single archetype was being operated properly. What the audit surfaced was that the alliance was under-invested for its potential. Joint account planning covered ten target enterprises when it could have covered thirty. Executive sponsorship was quarterly when it needed to be monthly given the six-figure ACVs at stake.

The recommendation was not to add archetypes. The recommendation was to deepen the existing one.

The rebuild doubled the joint account planning cadence, added a named alliance director

role on the SaaS side, and moved executive sponsorship to monthly. New ISV and reseller programmes were deferred.

Twenty-four months later, the SI alliance was driving 45% of new-name ARR. The partner motion the board had thought was tapped out had actually been operating at less than half its potential capacity.

The lesson. One archetype done well beats four archetypes done half. When one archetype is genuinely working, the leverage is depth, not breadth.

Example 3: AI-native platform

The business was a lab informatics platform serving genomics and pharmaceutical R&D. Two archetypes running: hyperscaler alliances at the instrument or platform vendor level, and an ISV programme with AI-native businesses building specialised analytics on top of the platform.

Growth was strong. Partner-sourced ARR was 34% and rising. But the audit surfaced a specific asymmetry.

The hyperscaler alliances were properly resourced. The ISV programme was under-resourced. Enablement was reseller-style. Joint roadmap commitments were promised but not delivered on time. The head of the ISV programme was also handling reseller enablement (which the business did not run) and marketplace listings (a fourth motion).

The audit revealed that budget had been quietly reallocated toward the (nonexistent) reseller motion over three quarters. The ISV programme was starving because someone had built enablement infrastructure for an archetype the business did not actually run.

The rebuild was budget reallocation and role clarity. The head of the ISV programme dropped the reseller enablement and marketplace responsibilities. Budget shifted from the phantom reseller infrastructure into ISV joint roadmap commitments and integration governance.

Six months later, ISV-driven revenue had doubled. No new partners were added. The existing partner base was finally getting the enablement they had been asking for.

The lesson. Growth-stage businesses often carry the shape of programmes they no longer run or never really ran. Auditing what the operating model is actually spending on is the first step. Cut the phantom archetypes. Reallocate the freed resource into the archetypes that are working.

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Before and after

The CRO of a Series C B2B SaaS business had told the board there was a partner strategy. Twelve named partners on slide fourteen. Two press releases. A signed MOU. The board nodded.

Six weeks later, at his monthly one-to-one with the chair, the CRO was asked to walk through partner-sourced ARR by archetype. He did not have the breakdown. He had the aggregate number, which was 9%.

The chair asked which archetype was driving the 9%. The CRO said it was mostly the systems integrator and one of the ISVs. The chair asked what the reseller programme was contributing. The CRO said the resellers were still ramping. The chair asked how long they had been ramping. The CRO said eighteen months. The chair asked how the CRO would know when they had ramped. The CRO did not have a clean answer.

The next morning the CRO ran the two-column audit with his commercial leadership team. He scored 8 right-column marks. His head of partnerships scored 10. The team compared notes for ninety minutes.

The rebuild took ninety days.

Governance first. Each archetype got a named owner. Reseller motion went to the head of channel sales who had been running it informally already. Systems integrator alliance went to the head of partner success. ISV programme went to a director in product management.

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Instrument vendor alliance went to the CRO directly because the executive sponsorship was needed at that level.

Reporting second. Each archetype started reporting its own KPI to the board every quarter. Partner-sourced ARR was broken into four lines. The aggregate line stayed for continuity but the decomposition was where the meaningful numbers now sat.

Cut and deepen third. The systems integrator motion was cut because the SIs were not carrying material pipeline and the business's own delivery team could handle the current customer profile. The ISV programme was cut from six ISVs to two, with the two remaining given proper joint roadmap commitments and integration governance. The reseller motion kept five of the twelve resellers, and the enablement was rebuilt around the two-day sales motion instead of the five-day certification. The instrument vendor alliance stayed and got the executive sponsorship it had been quietly missing.

> *Partner-sourced ARR grew fastest during the twelve weeks he was cutting the reseller and integrator counts, not adding to them.*

Six months in, the board meeting looked different. The CRO opened with: partner-sourced ARR is now 21%, decomposed as reseller 8%, ISV 6%, instrument vendor alliance 7%. Systems integrator programme was closed. The board asked about the ISV motion, and the director of product management answered directly. The board asked about the instrument vendor alliance, and the CRO named the specific target enterprises and their status. The chair moved to the next slide after ten minutes.

The bit that surprised the CRO. Partner-sourced ARR grew fastest during the twelve weeks he was cutting the reseller and integrator counts, not adding to them. The under-invested archetypes had been eating focus and budget without producing revenue. Removing the noise made the remaining signal audible. The reseller motion he shrunk from twelve partners to five started producing more revenue than the twelve had ever produced together.

The pattern is common. Boards ask for partner-programme scale when the actual gap is separation and depth. The audit surfaces it in an afternoon.

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Where the model breaks

The four-archetype pattern is designed for growth-stage B2B SaaS businesses with product-market fit and a functioning first-party sales motion. Outside that envelope, the pattern still applies as a lens but the "pick two" discipline does not carry the same weight.

Pre-Series-A businesses

Do not have partner programmes. Full stop. Founder-led sales into a small number of accounts is the correct motion at this stage. Anyone selling partner programmes to a Series Seed or Series A business is selling infrastructure the business cannot yet operate. The audit is useful once the business is at £5M ARR and considering partner motion for the first time.

Sub-£5M ARR businesses

Should not run more than one archetype. Pick the archetype that matches the biggest gating risk (usually reach, so usually the reseller motion) and run it as a small experiment before formalising a programme. Scoring the audit at this stage will always produce right-column marks because the operating model is not yet mature enough to sustain the distinctions.

Single-product deep-tech businesses

Do not have an ISV motion because there is nothing adjacent to build against. If the platform is not extensible in a way an ISV can invest their own engineering into, the ISV archetype does not apply. The audit collapses to a three-archetype pattern. Same discipline, three archetypes.

Highly regulated industries

Life sciences, healthcare, financial services. The Reseller archetype and the Instrument Vendor archetype often collapse into a hybrid where the reseller is also a regulated entity in the workflow. Distributor networks in medical devices are the canonical example. The archetypes still work as a lens but the enablement patterns and comp structures need to reflect the regulatory constraints.

Turnaround situations

Do not add partner programmes to a business in distress. The management attention required to build even one archetype properly is significant. In a turnaround, attention is on

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cash, customers, and cost. Come back to partner architecture when the business is out of distress.

There is one more limit worth naming. This paper assumes the first-party sales motion is working. If your direct sales team cannot close the deals they generate on their own, partner programmes will not fix that. Partner archetypes require a functioning downstream sales and delivery capability. Fix the first-party motion first. Then decide which two archetypes to build.

The audit tells you where the conflation is. Interpretation is the operator's job. Two businesses can score identically and need different rebuilds because the sector, the first-party motion, and the leadership team make different rebuilds possible or impossible. The audit is the map. The route is still your call.

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Next steps

If the audit surfaced something you want a second pair of eyes on, book a working session at ortent.co/contact. Forty-five minutes. No pitch, no deck, no slides. A conversation on the rows where you scored right-column, and what the shape of a rebuild would look like if you decided to run one.

If you would like the audit in a shareable format for your leadership team, this paper is designed to be printed. Copy the twelve-row audit onto a single sheet. Run the exercise together. The interesting conversations happen in the rows where the CRO said left and the operator running the programme said right.

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Every observation in this paper is drawn from over three decades of operating experience across four exits (Lotus to IBM, Paragon to Phone.com, Apertio to Nokia, Clearswift to Lyceum) and executive seats across enterprise software, life sciences, and digital health platforms. No client is named. No confidential detail is disclosed. Sector labels and rounded metrics only.

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