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Digital corporate-startup collaboration: Understanding critical success factors of platform-based co-creation

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Abstract: In today's transformative business environment, open innovation (OI) has become a prominent strategy to achieve long-term growth and competitive advantage. Considerable research has investigated the various OI models, yet collaboration models for corporate-startup co-creation are still not very well understood and are weakly managed, leading to frequent failures. This study addresses this innovation management problem by identifying the critical success factors of corporate-startup collaboration with a focus on platform-based co-creation. It centers around digital platforms provided by three major technology corporations: Google, Amazon, and Microsoft. Based on data collected from interviews with 10 start-up founders and co-founders in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, four key themes were identified: learning curves and due diligence, industry standards and regulatory compliance, timely projects and precise utility, and advanced planning and goal orientation. These findings highlight the importance of proactive knowledge development, regulatory alignment, efficient project execution, and strategic foresight in co-creation processes.

Keywords: Co-creation; corporate-startup collaboration; platform-based co-creation; digital platforms; open innovation; business-to-business collaboration; Saudi Arabia; Bahrain; Kuwait.

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1 Introduction

In today's rapidly changing business world, innovation has become a necessity for competitiveness, growth, and long-term success. To keep pace with the rapid transformations, firms have shifted from the traditional closed innovation models to embracing more open ones. Many organizations now recognize that the knowledge necessary to remain innovative mostly exists externally (Chesbrough, 2003a). This realization resulted in the rise of the concept of open innovation (OI) which has received growing interest in research and practice since it was introduced by Chesbrough in 2003 (Avnimelech and Amit, 2024).

In research, over 6.5 million articles can be found on OI in Google Scholar (Google Scholar, 2026). Moreover, Chesbrough's (2003a) book has received over 33,025 citations to date (Google Scholar, 2026). In practice, OI paved the way for new engagement models such as corporate-startup co-creation. This approach was first visible in the pharmaceutical industry (Schuhmacher et al., 2016) and today has become more prominent in other sectors (Mazzucato et al., 2020) and among global corporations including Google, Santander, IBM, Microsoft, BMW, Volvo, Enel, and Orange (Banka et al, 2024a).

Within the arena of OI, the collaboration between startups and corporates has been receiving growing interest in literature. It is worth noting that for the purpose of this paper, startups are defined as "an independent organization operating in the market for a period shorter than 5 years with aims to create, improve, and develop a scaled, innovative, technology-based product with high potential for rapid growth" (Bormas et al., 2019). The counterpart to startups in this paper are corporates, understood here as well-established organizations with formalized structures, accumulated resources, and existing market positions (Banka, 2024).

In the past, established corporates were the main focus of the market. However, now, interest is rapidly growing towards fast-growing, risk-taking startups (Imaginaik & Masschallenge, 2016), many of which are replacing incumbent technologies (Kohler, 2016). Thus, corporates realized the need to leverage their entrepreneurial capabilities (Alänge et al., 2022). By co-creating with startups, corporates gain several benefits including launching new products, revitalizing operations and core capabilities (Urbaniec and ˙Zur, 2021), facilitating market development, acquiring insights into emerging technologies (Kohler, 2016), cultivating innovation, and fostering an entrepreneurial culture internally (Shankar and Shepherd, 2019).

Startups, on the other hand, lack the resources, brand credibility and market access of well-established companies (Grando, 2016). Hence, by co-creating with them they obtain financial resources, mentorship, networking opportunities, infrastructure, partners network, and market validation which can accelerate their growth and scalability (Borges and Silva, 2022).

Despite the mutual benefits for corporates and startups, co-creation is inherently difficult (Banka, 2024a). The complexity is amplified in the context of corporate-startup engagement due to their asymmetry with opposite characteristics in terms of strategy, culture, structure, processes, and decision (Rigtering and Behrens, 2021). While the differences could be complimentary (Mastrostefano et al., 2020), they bring challenges

which can hinder effective co-creation. For instance, corporations could struggle to identify suitable startups, assess risks, and gain leadership support. Startups, on the other hand, often find it difficult to navigate corporate bureaucracy and align with slow decision-making processes (Banka et al., 2024; Rigtering & Behrens, 2021).

As a result, collaboration models for corporate-startup co-creation are usually not understood and weakly managed, leading to frequent failures. This study addresses this innovation management problem by positing on and identifying the critical success factors of platform-based co-creation for corporate-startup collaboration, explicitly from the startup perspective. The research question is "how do platform-based corporate-startup co-creation relationships influence startup innovation outcomes, and what critical success factors shape effective co-creation from utilizing digital platforms provided by three major technology companies: Google, Amazon, and Microsoft?"

The study contributes to the literature by firstly, conceptualizing platform-based corporate-startup co-creation as a distinct form of OI alongside more prevailing collaboration approaches such as CVC (Steiber & Alänge, 2021) and acceleration/incubation programs (Banka, 2024; Nicol et al., 2024). Moreover, it brings the startup perspective to the focus, complementing extant literature which concentrates on the corporate viewpoint.

This study offers practical guidance for managers, startups, policy makers and other. For innovation managers and digital platform owners, the study offers guidance on how to design platforms that foster sustainable co-creation with startups. For startup founders and senior managers, the study provides insights into how to strategically engage with platforms to maximize innovation and co-creation benefits. For policymakers and ecosystem builders, the findings highlight the role of digital platforms as a critical infrastructure component for innovation, informing policies that support the innovation ecosystems.

2 Literature review

In today's open, dynamic, transformative business environment, OI has become an inevitable and prominent strategy for co-creating value (Osorno-Hinojosa et al., 2022). This is because OI enables organizations to leverage external and internal ideas, technologies, and pathways to accelerate innovation and adapt to rapidly shifting market demands. Moreover, it is recognized that such an approach is a necessity for fostering sustainable growth, enhancing competitive advantage, and enabling agile responses to industry disruptions (Serirungsun et al, 2024).

One notable OI approach is platform-based co-creation (Chandna and Salimath, 2024). To understand the term, we should first clarify its individual components "platform" and "co-creation". The term "platform" refers to the usage of "digital technologies to optimize operations through data-driven decision-making, automation technologies, and artificial intelligence integration" (Gradillas and Thomas, 2025). Co-creation, on the other hand, refers to "the joint creation and evolution of value with stake-holding individuals" (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2020). Consequently, the term "platform-based co-creation" simply means the utilization of digital technologies in the joint creation process.

Despite the growing interest in this model, the conceptual foundations and operational mechanisms of it, in the context of corporate-startup collaboration, remain underexplored in academic literature. Therefore, this paper reviews existing research to identify the key constructs that determine the success of such co-creation model in the context of digital platforms.

Unlike traditional models of corporate-startup collaboration that rely on acquisitions or equity investments, platform-based-co-creation operates through both technological mediation and social negotiation (Ninan et al., 2026). It therefore emphasizes deeper on joint value creation, shared resources, and dynamic innovation ecosystems (Murmu et al., 2025). This approach reflects a shift toward more agile and inclusive innovation paradigms, where innovation co-evolves through continuous interaction and feedback.

Initial literature analysis on innovation ecosystems, open innovation, and co-creation dynamics finds nine (9) constructs for platform-based co-creation in the context of corporate-startup collaboration. The first construct is Strategic Alignment which refers to the fitness of the platform to the startup's goals and strategies. Strategic alignment is foundational to successful co-creation (Banka et al., 2024). Startups are more likely to engage and invest in platforms that align with their objectives and strategies (Steiber & Alänge, 2020).

The second construct is Platform Governance which refers to the enablement of the platform's rules, decision rights, data/API access, and IP terms to create value. Governance structures define the terms of engagement and set the boundaries for co-creation. According to Garidis (et al., 2023), corporate-startup governance requires a balanced approach between integration and independence to ensure that both parties retain autonomy while collaborating.

Equally important is the Capability Development theme which looks into the facilitation of the platform in identifying business opportunities and solutions for the startup's challenges. Literature confirms that startup-corporate collaboration supports in firms' development of capabilities, through access to the corporation's technical expertise, customer insights, and business development resources (Steiber & Alänge, 2021; Banka et al., 2024).

Co-creation Process is another notable factor. It investigates the clarity on the collaboration process, benefits, and shared objectives. A well-structured co-creation process is essential for ensuring that collaboration is productive and efficient. This includes clearly defined stages from ideation to execution as well as communication protocols, conflict resolution mechanisms, and performance metrics (Banka et al. 2024; Kohler, 2016).

Commercialization Readiness is also a vital construct of the study. It explores the assistance provided by the platform to turn pilots into commercialization opportunities. This is an important construct since commercialization is one of the primary goals of co-creation (Banka et al., 2024; Kohler, 2016).

Another dimension of the study is Scaling Mechanisms. This dimension looks at the impact of the platform in accelerating the startup's scale-up and access to markets. Such digital platforms can play a pivotal role in addressing scaling challenges Steiber & Alänge (2021).

Legitimacy & Signaling is also identified as a key construct. It studies the influence of using the platform on the startup's image and credibility. According to Yitshaki (2026) the usage of platforms manufactured by established tech companies can enhance a startup's legitimacy and credibility by signaling quality, reliability, and market potential to investors, customers, and other stakeholders.

Another important construct of the study is the Ecosystem Leverage and the access provided to the platform owner and partners through its usage. According to Steiber & Alänge (2021), effective platforms act as innovation hubs that connect startups with a broader ecosystem of partners, including suppliers, customers, and other startups.

Lastly, the ninth construct is Barrier Mitigation, which emphasizes the need to address common organizational and cultural barriers such as corporate bureaucracy and slow decision-making processes (Rigtering & Behrens, 2021; Bertello et a al., 2022; Banka et al., 2024) to ensure that such co-creation models are successful. Figure 1 below captures a summary of the aforementioned constructs.

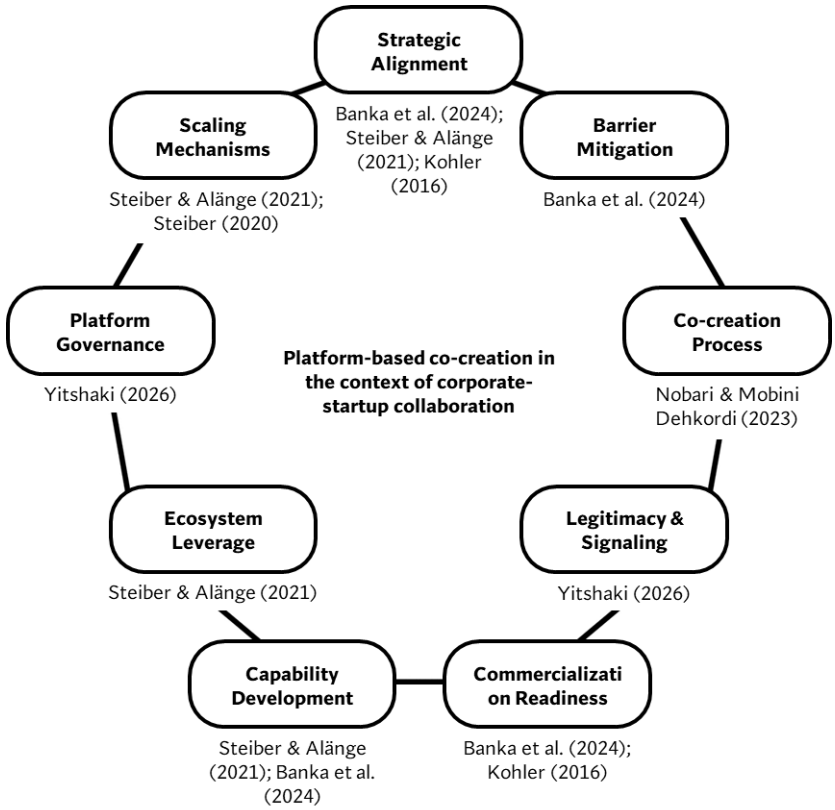

Figure 1 Concepts in literature on Platform-based co-creation in the context of corporate-startup collaboration

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3 Research methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design to investigate how startups co-create with major digital solution providers such as Google, Amazon, and Microsoft when utilizing their platforms. The qualitative approach enables an in-depth understanding of the startups' experiences, motivations, and challenges in the co-creation process. For sampling, the study employs a purposive sampling strategy, specifically maximum variation sampling, to ensure representation across various industry sectors, startup maturity levels, and types of platforms. The sample consists of seven (7) startups based in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region who actively develop products or services based on the use of digital platforms owned by the aforementioned corporates.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with startup founders or senior managers. Over a ten-week period, interviews were conducted with participants at each startup resulting in a target of ten (10) from various industries including health-tech, esports, and retail with experience ranging from one (1) to ten (10) years as shown in Table 1 below. The interviews explore the following key constructs extracted from existing literature: strategic fit, platform governance, co-creation process quality, capability development, commercialization readiness, scaling mechanics, legitimacy outcomes, ecosystem leverage, barrier mitigation, and internal diffusion. Under each construct a set of critical success factors were discussed with the interviewees. The interviews were conducted in person or via web teleconferencing such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams, based on interviewee preferences. All interviews were audio-recorded, with interviewee informed consent according to the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration, to ensure accuracy and ethical principles in capturing responses. Analysis of gathered interview data, prior to reporting, will involve thematic analysis and the ATLAS.ti software will provide support for this analysis.

Table 1 Overview of interviewees

Company code	*Sector*	*Interviewee Code*	*Gender*	*Job Role*	*Work experience (yrs)*
INT	Hospitality	INT_1	Male	Founder	10
	Hospitality	INT_2	Male	Manager	8
	Fintech	INT_3	Male	Co-founder	6
	Fintech	INT_4	Male	Co-founder	6
STR	Retail	STR_1	Male	Co-founder	4
	E-sports	STR_2	Male	Co-founder	5
	E-Sports	STR_3	Male	Co-founder	1
	Health-tech	STR_4	Male	Founder	5
RES	Hospitality	RES_1	Male	Co-founder	7
	High-tech	RES_2	Female	Founder	1

4 Findings

Interview data show four main themes on critical success factors that shape effective co creation from utilizing digital platforms. These themes are: (i) learning curves and due diligence, and (ii) industry standards and regulatory compliance, (iii) timely projects and precise utility, and (iv) advanced planning and goal orientation. Figure 2 shows the thematic network created using the ATLAS.ti software and in the next subsections, these themes are elaborated.

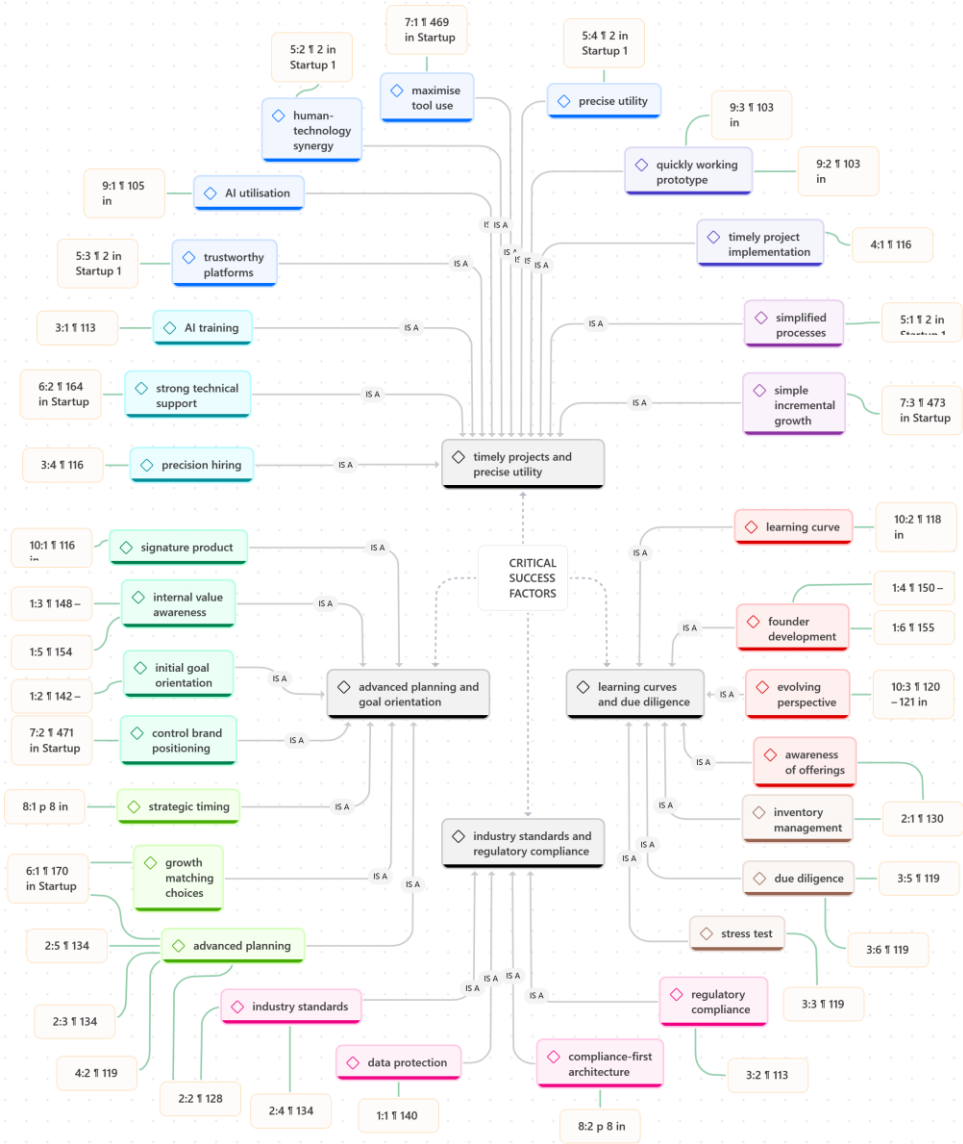

Figure 2 Network diagram from ATLAS.ti on critical success factors for corporate-start-up co-creation (grey boxes are themes, coloured boxes are subthemes, while the outer boxes represent sample quotations from which codes and subthemes are derived).

Theme 1: Learning curves and due diligence

The first theme on learning curves and due diligence is about proactively devoting time to the acquisition of knowledge and verification of facts – leading improved performance and risk mitigation for the co-creation process. The theme is derived from two sets of subthemes, as shown by Figure 2. The first set of subthemes on 'inventory management', 'due diligence' and 'stress tests' urge for start-ups to conduct business simulations and test hypothetical scenarios for platforms, ensuring that the platforms function correctly and resiliently, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

"**Read or learn about each tool** before using it; and watch videos. Use the AI itself to evaluate the tool you're considering. Try more than one tool and then assess its performance … **Test it** (the platform) **under stress**, and if you want security testing specialists, hire them" (INT_3)

The remaining subthemes on 'awareness of offerings', 'evolving perspective', 'founder development' and 'learning curve' require startups to approach co-creation with an openness to personal improvement and mindfulness on industry trends and developments. Examples of these viewpoints from the interviews include:

"I need to develop myself in my field, take courses, learn, explore new things to understand what I need and what's truly important … Ultimately, I have to educate myself completely" (INT_1)

"I would just tell them (co-creating startups) honestly that there is a bit of a **learning curve,** and I have told this to my friend because she also, is running her own business" (RES_2).

While RES_2 noted the importance of an evaluation in perspectives towards co-creation, as start-ups navigate learning curves, INT_3 focused on inventory management for accurate and up-to-date stock-taking, as part of due diligence, and argued that 'Getting that right is what holds everything else together' and that 'it sounds basic, but it is the foundation (for engaging in and using co-creation platforms)' (INT_3).

Theme 2: Industry standards and regulatory compliance

The second theme derived from the interview data is industry standards and regulatory compliance, which means adherence to sectoral guidelines and regional laws and policies. This theme has legal ramifications and penalties for non-compliance, meaning co-creation platforms must adhere to and align with legal requirements and industry guidelines. As presented by Figure 2, this theme emerges from four closely related subthemes on 'compliance-first architecture', 'data protection', 'industry standards' and 'regulatory compliance'. In terms of standards, the view is for startups to engage early on, ensuring training where necessary to create conform and ease with transition to co-creation platforms, i.e.,

"**follow the relevant industry standards** from the beginning … and make sure your team is properly trained and comfortable with the system before you switch it on" (INT_2)

Regarding compliance, the advice is to make this factor a top priority, as reflected in the following quotes:

"The best advice for founders entering the Saudi or GCC startups space is to prioritize **"compliance-first" architecture** while maintaining a multi-cloud strategy (STR_4)

"Any systems built must **comply with local regulations** and the requirements of the Central Bank and other regulatory bodies in Kuwait. (INT_3)

Theme 3: Timely projects and precise utility

The third theme concerning timely projects and precise utility is the largest one in the analysis. The theme captures the need for on-time and detailed routines for projects and use of technologies, particularly AI, for effective use of co-creation platforms. Four sets of subthemes combine to create this theme. The initial set of subthemes on 'trustworthy platforms', 'human-technology synergy', 'precise utility', 'maximise tool use' and 'AI utilisation' presents two contrasting but complementary views. On the one hand, the data support maximal use of technologies like AI due to the growing importance of data-driven innovation and related paradigms, i.e.,

"The advice will be, you know, **use all the tools the platform provides**, learn the analytics tools because data is very, very important" (STR_3)

"I think **utilizing more of AI and new technologies**, especially during development … That makes it faster for them to show an idea" (RES_1)

On the other hand, the risks of full automation unsupervised by human experts is discouraged, as presented by the following interviewee's remark:

"Do not depend 100% on one system and always **combine digital tools with human relationship**" (STR_1)

The next set of 'precision hiring', 'AI training' and 'strong technical support' subthemes reaffirms the later concern by capturing some key talent and human resource factors for co-creation via digital platforms. For this reason:

"**Strong technical support** and scalability are key" (STR_2).

"Take the right people and put them in the right place. The **right hiring for the team**. I believe that technology alone is not enough without a suitable team." (INT_3).

The next subthemes on 'simplified processes' and 'simple incremental growth', stress the need for streamlined platforms that promote effectiveness and efficiency and (STR_1) as well as a progressive approach that 'starts simple and grows step-by-step' (STR_3). The final subthemes on 'timely project implementation' and 'quickly working prototype' extend the focus of technology use and technical support to projects and prototyping processes. These time-constrained endeavours are key factors that enable startups secure investment (RES_1) and achieve long-term goals (INT_4).

Theme 4: Advanced planning and goal orientation

The fourth theme from the interviews pertains to advanced planning and goal orientation, or goal-oriented planning, which is a high-level, proactive and co-active approach to

platform use according to targets and trajectories for reaching those targets. Two clusters of subthemes provide the basis for this theme. The first cluster involves 'growth matching choices', 'strategic timing' and 'advanced planning' subthemes. This cluster relates to strategic and forward-thinking plans that focus on growth potentials from co-creation platforms. In other words,

"**Plan before you start**. That is the main thing. Before you go live with any system, make sure you have mapped out your processes how things will be entered, who is responsible for what, how the workflow runs. Do not start building in the system and figure it out as you go … The preparation is not the exciting part, but it is what makes everything run smoothly later" (INT_2)

"**Thinking ahead** and structuring your thoughts before implementation, This is the best and shortest way to achieve goals" (INT_4)

Interview data show that strategic timing in the choice of disruptive digital platforms that match growth potential is a key factor. Although this focus has an early advantage and strategic positioning, startups still require contingencies for their plans, as reflected in the following extracts:

"The most critical factor is **strategic timing**. By building on Google and AWS just as they launched local regions in the GCC, we didn't just get tools; we gained cultural and regulatory legitimacy (STR_4)

"**Choose a platform that matches your growth plan**, learn the tools deeply, avoid full dependency, and always have a backup plan" (STR_2)

The second cluster of subthemes include 'control brand positioning', 'initial goal orientation', 'internal value awareness' and 'signature product'. This cluster is about mindfulness of internal capabilities and goals, which varies according to startups' defining offerings or solutions (RES_2) and platforms and business approaches (INT_1, STR_1).

4 Conclusions

This study aimed to identify the critical success factors that shape platform-based co-creation between startups and three (3) major technology corporations Google, Amazon, and Microsoft from a startup perspective. It follows a qualitative design drawing from interviews with 12 startup founders and co-founders in the GCC region. Building on nine theoretical constructs identified in the literature including strategic alignment, platform governance, capability development, co-creation process, commercialization readiness, scaling mechanisms, legitimacy & signaling, ecosystem leverage, and barrier mitigation, the study explores how these constructs manifest in real-life platform-based collaboration experiences.

The findings revealed four critical success factors for platform-based co-creation in the context of corporate-startup collaboration. These factors are: learning curves and due diligence, industry standards and regulatory compliance, timely projects and precise utility, and advanced planning and goal orientation. These factors align closely with the

identified study constructs, especially line up with strategic alignment, capability development, and barrier mitigation.

Moreover, the study highlighted that the aforementioned platform providers were found to offer varying advantages across these constructs. For example, Google's strengths included availing developer-friendly tools in addition to its early presence and expansion in the GCC, which enhanced legitimacy and signalling. Amazon, on the other hand, was praised for its robust infrastructure and scaling mechanisms. For Microsoft, the interviews reflected its ecosystem leverage and platform governance.

In addition to the success factors, the interviews identified the challenges associated with platform governance, barrier mitigation, and commercialization readiness. This confirms the need for clearer documentation, faster support channels, and better guidance on transitioning from pilot to commercial deployment.

In conclusion, this study offers an understanding of the success factors of platform-based co-creation between startups and major technology corporations. It underscores the importance of integrating theoretical constructs with practical insights to guide startups, platform providers, and policymakers in co-creating in the GCC and beyond.

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