



Partnerships in Early International Expansion: A Case Study of encentive

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Dissertation written under the supervision of professor
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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the
MSc with specialization in Strategy, Entrepreneurship & Impact
at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa,
May 27th, 2026.

Abstract (English)

Why do resource-constrained B2B startups entering regulated European markets see different early traction when they pursue direct, partner-led, or hybrid entry? This dissertation addresses that question through a qualitative single-case study of encentive, a B2B energy-tech startup expanding from a domestic base. It shows that early international traction is best understood as a gated progression rather than a linear funnel: beyond initial interest, progress depends on clearing adoption gates linked to operational risk, IT/security involvement, and proof requirements, while remaining feasible under limited commercial and delivery capacity.

The study adopts a qualitative single-case design. Evidence comprises five semi-structured interviews (three internal decision roles and two customer perspectives), analysed through a theory-informed thematic approach combining deductive coding, inductive refinement, and pattern matching.

Findings suggest that partnerships shape early traction through access (qualified pathways to decision-makers), legitimacy (risk reduction via credibility signals and referenceability), and complementarity (reach and role allocation). These benefits are qualified by governance trade-offs that intensify with stronger partner ownership, including reduced control over the customer interface and dependency risks. Viewed as alternative learning architectures, partner-enabled routes can reduce the cost of reaching gated proof steps but may weaken learning when the customer interface becomes opaque. The dissertation concludes with case-specific implications and a concise playbook for partner-enabled entry under resource constraints.

Keywords: internationalisation; entry approach; partner-led entry; hybrid entry; partnerships; early international traction; governance trade-offs; qualitative case study

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Resumo (Português)

Porque é que startups B2B com recursos limitados, ao entrarem em mercados europeus regulados, obtêm níveis diferentes de tração inicial ao escolher entrada direta, entrada liderada por parceiros ou configurações híbridas? Esta dissertação responde a essa questão através de um estudo de caso qualitativo (caso único) da encentive, uma startup B2B de tecnologia energética. A contribuição central é mostrar que a tração internacional inicial segue uma progressão com “portas” (gated progression) e não um funil linear: para além do interesse inicial, o avanço depende de ultrapassar portas de adoção ligadas ao risco operacional, ao envolvimento de TI/segurança e a requisitos de prova, mantendo simultaneamente a viabilidade com capacidade comercial e de entrega limitada.

A evidência baseia-se em cinco entrevistas semiestruturadas (três funções internas de decisão e duas perspetivas de clientes), analisadas com uma abordagem temática informada pela teoria (codificação dedutiva e refinamento indutivo), complementada por pattern matching. Os resultados indicam que as parcerias influenciam a tração inicial através de acesso, legitimidade e complementaridade, mas estes benefícios são condicionados por trade-offs de governação (controlo–dependência) que se intensificam com maior propriedade do parceiro. A dissertação termina com implicações específicas do caso e um playbook conciso para entrada apoiada em parceiros sob restrições de recursos.

Palavras-chave: internacionalização; abordagem de entrada; entrada liderada por parceiros; entrada híbrida; parcerias; tração internacional inicial; trade-offs de governação; estudo de caso qualitativo

Título: Parcerias na Expansão Internacional Inicial: Um Estudo de Caso da encentive

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Acknowledgement

This thesis would not have been possible without the support and trust of several people I want to acknowledge here.

I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Professor Gonalo Salazar Leite, for his guidance throughout this project. His questions and his feedback at critical moments helped this thesis become something I am proud to submit.

I would also like to thank the team at encentive for opening the company to me. The conversations with the Founder, the CEO, and the Partnerships Manager were not only the empirical backbone of this work but a continuous source of insight that shaped my thinking far beyond the pages of this document. I am equally grateful to the two customer representatives who took the time to share their perspective on adoption, risk, and the realities of B2B decision-making; their openness gave this thesis the buyer-side depth it needed.

Finally, my deepest thanks go to my family. They have supported me throughout my academic journey - across every programme and wherever the path has led - both emotionally and materially. Without their unwavering backing, none of this would have been possible.

And last, but not least, a special thank you goes to my girlfriend, who has been pushing me to do my best since my Bachelor years and whose belief in me has been a constant source of motivation throughout my studies.

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III. List of Abbreviations

ACV	Annual Contract Value
B2B	Business-to-Business
C1-C2	Customer interviews 1-2
CapEx	Capital Expenditure
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CS	Customer Success
GTM	Go-to-Market
I1-I3	Internal interviews 1-3
IT	Information Technology
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MSc	Master of Science
NDA	Non-Disclosure Agreement
P1-P4	Propositions 1-4
PLC	Programmable Logic Controller
PoV	Proof of Value
PV	Photovoltaic
SLA	Service Level Agreement

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and managerial decision problem

International expansion is a recurring pathway for growth-oriented firms seeking opportunities beyond the limits of their domestic market. However, foreign market entry is rarely a simple scaling exercise. Firms typically must make strategic decisions under conditions of incomplete information about local demand, institutional conditions, customer expectations, competitive dynamics, and viable routes to market. This challenge has been central to internationalisation research for decades. In the original Uppsala model, internationalisation is conceptualised as a gradual learning process in which firms increase foreign market commitment as they accumulate experiential knowledge, while the revised model places greater emphasis on network position and the problem of outsidership from relevant business relationships (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977, 2009). In parallel, entry mode research has shown that foreign expansion is not only about where to enter, but also about how to enter, since alternative entry approaches involve different trade-offs between control, commitment, flexibility, and risk (E. Anderson & Gatignon, 1986).

These questions become especially consequential in B2B contexts. Compared with many consumer markets, B2B market entry is often shaped by longer sales cycles, more complex offerings, higher switching costs, and stronger information asymmetries. Under such conditions, successful entry depends not only on the intrinsic value of an offering, but also on trust, credibility, and access to relevant decision-makers. This makes relationships particularly important. As Johanson and Vahlne (2009) argue, firms entering foreign markets are constrained not only by insufficient market knowledge, but also by their lack of access to relevant networks. Similarly, Coviello and Munro (1997) show that for smaller firms, network relationships can strongly shape both the direction and form of internationalisation.

The managerial tension is particularly salient for resource-constrained startups. Unlike established incumbents, young firms often internationalize while still building legitimacy, routines, and internal capabilities. Research on international new ventures and born globals suggests that such firms may internationalize rapidly, but they do so under conditions of considerable uncertainty and resource scarcity (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004; Oviatt & McDougall, 1994). For these firms, entry decisions are especially consequential because an unsuitable entry

approach can absorb scarce resources, slow down learning, and delay the creation of proof points needed for subsequent growth.

This thesis is anchored in this managerial problem through the case of encentive, a B2B energy-tech startup exploring international expansion from a primarily domestic base. Two characteristics of the focal setting make the entry-approach decision particularly consequential. First, internal decision-makers frame a core risk of international expansion as an economics-of-entry problem: committing personnel and capacity to a new country before time-to-cash is sufficiently predictable. Second, customer-side evidence highlights that early adoption is shaped by risk and proof thresholds that go beyond generic value claims: operational risk in critical processes, explicit mitigation logic (risk registers and fallback mechanisms), and demanding IT-security approval chains can become gating factors even before a solution is considered scalable (Customer Interview C1).

Against this background, the core managerial problem addressed in this thesis is not internationalisation in general, but variation in the effectiveness of different entry approaches. Resource-constrained B2B firms may pursue direct entry, partner-led entry, or hybrid configurations that combine internal and external routes to market. Yet these approaches are unlikely to produce the same early outcomes. Direct entry may provide greater control and closer customer contact, but it also requires market access, legitimacy, and commercial capacity that startups may not have in an early stage. Partner-led entry may accelerate access and credibility by leveraging partners' networks and reputation, but it may reduce control, create dependency, and complicate governance. Hybrid approaches may mitigate some of these tensions, but they are not automatically superior and may introduce coordination challenges of their own. The central managerial issue, therefore, is to understand under what conditions certain entry approaches are preferable, through which mechanisms partnerships shape early outcomes, and what trade-offs follow from relying on partner-enabled entry.

1.2 Research aim, scope and boundaries

Against this background, the aim of this thesis is to explain why some entry approaches lead to stronger early international traction than others in the case of encentive, and to examine how partnerships shape this outcome through identifiable mechanisms and governance trade-offs. More specifically, the study seeks to (i) identify the conditions under which partner-led or hybrid entry may be preferable to direct entry, (ii) clarify the mechanisms through which partnerships influence early traction (access, legitimacy, complementarity), and (iii) derive

practical implications for designing partner-enabled entry in a way that supports credible evidence-building while managing dependency and control risks.

The thesis is deliberately bounded to ensure conceptual clarity and analytical focus:

- Research scope (single-case study): The study is framed as an in-depth case study of encentive. Findings are interpreted as case-grounded insights rather than as general conclusions about all energy-tech startups or all European markets.
- Context: The study focuses on regulated European B2B energy contexts where buyer-side risk, procurement formality, and ecosystem structures can materially shape early traction.
- Outcome focus (early international traction): Performance is not defined as long-term international success or profitability. Instead, the outcome of interest is early international traction, defined as the first credible evidence that a firm's offering is gaining commercially meaningful acceptance in a foreign market. In this thesis, early traction is reflected in signals such as (i) access to qualified opportunities and decision-makers, (ii) progression toward pilots or proofs-of-value (PoVs) and evidence-building milestones, and (iii) the emergence of referenceable proof points that increase perceived feasibility of scaling.
- Topic focus: The analysis concentrates on entry-approach choice (direct vs partner-led vs hybrid), partnership mechanisms (access, legitimacy, complementarity), and governance trade-offs (control vs dependency).
- Exclusions: The thesis does not aim to rank or select target countries as a primary output and does not attempt to explain all determinants of international performance over longer horizons.

1.3 Research question and expected contribution

Based on this problem setting, the thesis is guided by the following main research question:

Why do some entry approaches (direct, partner-led, or hybrid) lead to stronger early international traction than others in the case of incentive, and through which mechanisms do partnerships shape this outcome?

This main research question is addressed through three sub-questions:

1. Conditions: Under what market- and firm-level conditions is partner-led (or hybrid) entry preferable to direct entry?
2. Mechanisms and trade-offs: Through which partnership mechanisms (access, legitimacy, complementarity) does partner-enabled entry shape early traction, and what governance trade-offs (control vs dependency) emerge?
3. Implications: What practical implications follow for designing partner-enabled entry (e.g., role allocation, partner enablement, and evidence-building through pilots and references)?

The thesis is expected to make both an academic and a managerial contribution. From an academic perspective, it connects three streams of literature that are often discussed separately: internationalisation under uncertainty, entry-approach and governance choices, and partnership- or network-based market access in B2B contexts. Rather than treating partnerships merely as contextual background, the study examines them as mechanisms that may shape early international traction and clarifies how governance trade-offs can qualify partnership benefits. In doing so, the thesis contributes a case-grounded mechanism explanation of early entry-approach performance in a regulated B2B setting.

From a managerial perspective, the thesis addresses a practical decision problem that is highly relevant for startups seeking international growth in complex B2B markets: how to design an entry approach that creates early traction under resource constraints without creating excessive dependency or loss of control. Its value lies in clarifying when direct, partner-led, or hybrid entry appears most appropriate in the focal case, how partnerships may generate early traction, and what follows for the design of partner-enabled entry - particularly regarding role allocation, partner enablement, and the development of early proof points such as pilots and references.

1.4 Thesis structure

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 introduces the case context and problem setting. Chapter 3 develops the literature-based conceptual framework and analytic lens. Chapter 4 outlines the methodology, data sources, and analysis approach. Chapters 5 and 6 present the key findings, organized around (i) conditions shaping entry approach preference and (ii) partnership mechanisms and governance trade-offs shaping early international traction. Chapter 7 discusses the findings in relation to the literature and derives implications. Chapter 8 concludes with a concise, case-specific set of recommendations in a playbook-style format.

2 Case Context and Problem Setting

2.1 Case background and setting

This dissertation is grounded in the case of encentive, a resource-constrained B2B energy-tech startup headquartered in Germany. The firm operates in a European context in which industrial energy costs, decarbonization pressures, and the need for operational flexibility have increased managerial attention to energy optimisation solutions. In such settings, international expansion is rarely a simple replication of domestic go-to-market routines. Instead, it is shaped by institutional heterogeneity, multi-stakeholder buying processes, and ecosystem structures that can shape market access and legitimacy.

At the time of writing, encentive's customer portfolio is becoming increasingly diversified across industrial segments. This reflects the cross-sector relevance of industrial energy optimisation and flexibility, even though with varying use cases and adoption requirements.

A recurring feature across industries is the presence of operational assets or processes whose energy demand can be managed more flexibly than core production output. By way of illustration, refrigeration and cooling processes, present in parts of the food value chain, often contain identifiable flexibility potential and therefore provide a useful example of how proof-of-value can be demonstrated without compromising operational reliability. Importantly, this dissertation does not focus on a single vertical. Rather, the case is used to examine entry approaches and partnership mechanisms that are expected to be relevant across B2B industrial contexts where adoption is shaped by trust, perceived risk, and ecosystem access.

The case is particularly suitable for the research problem because encentive is at a stage where international expansion is a realistic growth pathway, while simultaneously facing constraints typical of early-stage B2B ventures. This creates an information-rich setting to investigate why different entry approaches - direct, partner-led, or hybrid - may lead to different early outcomes, and through which partnership mechanisms such differences arise in regulated European markets.

2.2 Value creation logic and adoption context in B2B energy-tech

encentive's value creation logic is anchored in enabling industrial customers to improve the economic and environmental performance of energy consumption by identifying and activating flexibility potential in operational processes. Because the firm serves multiple industries, the concrete "flexibility levers" differ across customer settings (e.g., site-level load profiles, thermal processes, energy-intensive equipment, or other controllable assets). In many cases, value is demonstrated through structured proof-of-value initiatives that translate optimisation into measurable outcomes, such as cost reductions, improved energy efficiency, and sustainability-related performance indicators.

Adoption in these contexts is rarely a single-actor decision. Instead, B2B energy-tech solutions are evaluated through multi-stakeholder processes that often involve operations and site management, energy management roles, procurement, finance (for business case validation), and, depending on integration requirements, IT/security. This has two implications for early commercial traction. First, buyers perceived risk is not purely technological; it is strongly linked to operational reliability, governance expectations, and feasibility of implementation. Second, evidence requirements tend to increase as a buyer progresses from initial interest to pilot and rollout. Consequently, early traction depends not only on product performance but also on the provider's ability to address adoption risk credibly and to coordinate organizational buy-in.

Buyer-side evidence from the focal setting suggests that adoption thresholds are shaped by two recurring gates: operational risk and IT-security governance. Customers emphasise that interventions in mission-critical processes (e.g., refrigeration or production control) trigger strong risk perceptions and create expectations for explicit mitigation measures, such as pre-commissioning quality checks and clearly defined fallback procedures. In parallel, connecting a gateway with outbound connectivity to a corporate network can be perceived as a "no-go" and may require approvals at senior IT levels before any meaningful data exchange is permitted. In encentive's context, pilots and proofs-of-value are typically designed jointly with customers, which supports alignment on success metrics and increases the credibility of observed outcomes. However, such co-design also implies non-trivial delivery and coordination effort.

Even when the technical integration of a pilot can be executed within approximately 7-8 weeks under ideal conditions, the overall B2B sales cycle is often substantially longer. This reflects procurement dynamics, stakeholder alignment, compliance requirements, and internal prioritisation within customer organizations. The resulting mismatch between integration timelines and sales-cycle timelines is a defining feature of the case setting. It reinforces the importance of understanding early traction not as an immediate revenue outcome but as a sequence of credibility-building steps (e.g., access to qualified stakeholders, willingness to pilot, and the creation of referenceable proof points).

2.3 International expansion challenge: entry approaches, partnerships, and resource constraints

Against this background, international expansion confronts encentive with a central strategic choice: how to select and govern an entry approach that can generate credible early traction under resource constraints. Resource-constrained B2B ventures may pursue direct entry, partner-led entry, or hybrid configurations. These approaches are unlikely to yield equivalent early outcomes because they differ in control, commitment, speed, and dependence on external actors.

Importantly, internal decision-makers in the focal case do not describe a strict “hard cut” between hybrid and partner-led entry. Instead, entry configurations are viewed as a continuum ranging from lead-sharing and partner-introductions to co-selling configurations with provider-owned contracting, to partner-owned contracting and ultimately partner-owned delivery. This continuum has direct governance implications, because moving further toward partner-led execution increases dependence and requires process and product adaptations that make delivery sufficiently standardisable for partners to execute reliably.

Direct entry can provide stronger control over customer relationships, delivery quality, and learning. It can also support the development of standardised implementation narratives and transferable proof points. However, direct entry is resource-intensive and may be slow in contexts where legitimacy barriers are high or where access to qualified accounts is network mediated. For an early-stage firm, this risk is amplified by limited commercial and delivery capacity.

Partner-enabled entry routes can mitigate some of these challenges by leveraging ecosystem actors such as utilities, integrators, or other intermediaries that already possess relationships,

credibility, and complementary capabilities. In encentive's case, the firm has already established a limited number of partnerships, and these relationships have contributed to at least one early project abroad, illustrating that partner-enabled routes can function as concrete channels for international access. At the same time, partnerships introduce governance tensions. Partner-led entry may reduce control over customer ownership, pricing, and execution quality; it can also create dependency risks and coordination burdens, particularly when incentives are misaligned or responsibilities for selling, delivery, and customer success are unclear. Hybrid approaches promise to combine partner-enabled access with retained control over selected critical activities, yet they also require explicit role allocation and governance to avoid ambiguity, channel conflict, and inconsistent customer experience.

Customer-side evidence suggests boundary conditions that qualify an overly simplistic "partners always reduce friction" assumption. In some contexts, involving a large incumbent partner can increase perceived bureaucracy and coordination costs (e.g., additional legal review, NDAs, and slower stakeholder alignment). In addition, customers may interpret certain partnership constellations as raising questions about vendor independence, indicating that legitimacy transfer is not universally positive and depends on the buyer context and the partner's role (door-opener vs. contract owner).

A further defining element of the case is that constraints are not abstract: they are rooted in team size and capacity limitations relative to the effort required for customer-specific pilots and implementation work. This constraint increases the managerial relevance of entry approach choice. The "best" approach is not necessarily the one that maximizes theoretical market coverage, but the one that enables credible early traction under realistic execution capacity, while building transferable proof points for future scaling.

Accordingly, the problem setting addressed in this dissertation is not internationalisation in general, but the question of why some entry approaches lead to stronger early international traction than others in regulated European B2B energy-tech contexts and through which partnership mechanisms and governance trade-offs these differences arise. The encentive case provides an setting to examine (i) the conditions under which direct, partner-led, or hybrid entry is preferable, (ii) the mechanisms through which partnerships shape early traction (access, legitimacy, complementarity), and (iii) the governance tensions that qualify partner-enabled advantages.

3 Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

This chapter develops the theoretical lens used to explain why different entry approaches (direct, partner-led, hybrid) may lead to different levels of early international traction in the case of encentive. It draws on internationalisation theory, network-based perspectives, and entry mode/governance research to derive a mechanism-oriented conceptual framework focused on conditions, partnership mechanisms (access, legitimacy, complementarity), and governance trade-offs.

3.1 Internationalisation as a staged learning process

3.1.1 Uncertainty as the starting point: why learning matters in foreign expansion

International expansion exposes firms to uncertainty about foreign market demand, institutional conditions, customer expectations, and competitive dynamics. A central reason why early internationalisation is difficult is that firms face additional frictions associated with operating outside their home environment, commonly referred to as the liability of foreignness (Zaheer, 1995). In B2B contexts, uncertainty is often amplified by multi-stakeholder buying processes, long sales cycles, and high perceived adoption risk. As a result, learning and credibility-building are critical to achieving early international traction.

3.1.2 The Uppsala mechanism: learning-commitment as a staged process

The original Uppsala model conceptualises internationalisation as an incremental process driven by experiential learning: firms build knowledge through market activities, which reduces perceived uncertainty and gradually increases foreign market commitment (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). The value of this model for the present study lies less in a deterministic “slow expansion” claim than in its underlying mechanism: when uncertainty is high, firms tend to prefer lower-commitment steps; as uncertainty becomes manageable through learning, they increase commitment. Entry approaches can therefore be interpreted as alternative ways of managing uncertainty and learning costs in the early phase of internationalisation.

3.1.3 Sequencing and boundary conditions: psychic distance and the “born-global” challenge

Psychic distance captures perceived differences - such as language, institutions, and business practices - that increase learning costs and make foreign market commitments riskier (Johanson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 1975). Subsequent research argues that psychic distance is multi-dimensional and not reducible to geography, implying that “closeness” can be domain-specific rather than purely spatial (Dow & Karunaratna, 2006). At the same time, the international new venture and born-global literature shows that some firms internationalise early when they

exploit capability advantages, niche positioning, and opportunity windows that make rapid expansion strategically necessary (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004; Oviatt & McDougall, 1994).

This stream therefore serves as a boundary condition for staged views: early internationalisation is possible, but its feasibility depends on whether the firm can manage uncertainty, complexity, and resource constraints (Sapienza et al., 2006).

3.1.4 Learning beyond experience: critique, outsidership, and the bridge to networks

A key critique of staged internationalisation models is that learning does not occur only through gradual experiential accumulation; managerial interpretations and relationship-based learning can accelerate knowledge acquisition and opportunity recognition (Forsgren, 2002). This logic is incorporated in the revised Uppsala model, which shifts the central constraint from lack of country knowledge to lack of network position, outsidership, i.e., being outside the relevant networks through which information, credibility, and opportunities flow (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). In such settings, partnerships are not only an “execution detail” but can shape early outcomes by substituting for slow experiential learning through network access and credibility while simultaneously introducing governance trade-offs that affect how much control and learning the focal firm retains.

3.2 Network-based internationalisation and partnership logic

3.2.1 Network-based internationalisation and outsidership

In many B2B markets, exchange is not purely transactional but relationship-based and embedded in networks of interdependent actors. Business relationships therefore do not operate in isolation; they are shaped by broader network structures that influence information flows, credibility, and opportunity access (J. C. Anderson et al., 1994). From this perspective, international expansion is not only a question of accumulating country knowledge but also of becoming embedded in the relevant business networks in which customers, intermediaries, and complementary actors operate.

Empirical work supports this network view of internationalisation. Coviello and Munro (1997) show that network ties can shape both the direction and the pace of internationalisation by enabling opportunity recognition and by providing entry routes that are difficult to establish through independent market activity alone. Similarly, Ellis (2000) highlights the role of social ties in triggering foreign entries through privileged information and referrals, reducing search costs and uncertainty. These insights align with the revised internationalisation process perspective, which frames a key constraint as “outsidership”, being outside the networks through which opportunities and legitimacy are mediated (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). In this

sense, entry approaches can be interpreted not only as governance choices but also as alternative ways of overcoming outsidership in the early phase of international expansion.

3.2.2 Partnership mechanisms: access, legitimacy, complementarity and trade-offs

Partnership research provides a mechanism-oriented explanation for why network relationships may matter for early market entry outcomes. Alliances are embedded in broader networks, and a firm's network position and prior relational ties can shape both partner selection and alliance performance (Gulati, 1998). The relational view further argues that inter-firm relationships can generate value through relation-specific assets, knowledge-sharing routines, and complementary capabilities that create "relational rents" beyond what firms could produce independently (Dyer & Singh, 1998). In addition, an embeddedness lens suggests that ties to established actors can affect legitimacy and trust: relationships can function as social and reputational signals that reduce perceived risk under uncertainty (Granovetter, 1985).

For the present thesis, these perspectives support a focused set of partnership mechanisms relevant to early international traction:

- **Access:** relationship-based pathways that provide reach to qualified accounts and decision-makers;
- **Legitimacy:** credibility transfer and risk reduction through association and endorsement;
- **Complementarity:** capabilities and resources that the focal firm cannot quickly build (e.g., market coverage, delivery/service capacity, local know-how).

However, the literature also emphasises that partnership benefits are qualified by trade-offs. Embedded ties can create dependence, lock-in, and reduced flexibility, particularly when the focal firm becomes reliant on a partner for customer access or delivery (Uzzi, 1997).

These hazards imply that partner-enabled entry can accelerate early traction through mechanisms such as access and legitimacy while simultaneously creating governance risks that shape how much control and learning the focal firm retains - an issue that becomes central when comparing direct, partner-led, and hybrid entry approaches.

3.3 Entry Mode and Go-to-Market Choices in B2B Contexts

3.3.1 Direct vs. partner-led entry: conceptual distinctions and a working typology

Entry mode is commonly conceptualised as a governance choice regarding how cross-border commercial activity is organized and controlled, and it is typically associated with systematic trade-offs between control, resource commitment, flexibility, and risk (E. Anderson & Gatignon, 1986; Hennart, 1988). In B2B settings, these trade-offs often manifest through channel design and interorganizational governance arrangements, because key go-to-market activities (customer access, selling, implementation, and support) can be performed either by the focal firm or by external actors such as intermediaries, integrators, or incumbent partners (Heide, 1994; Wathne & Heide, 2004). Building on this governance perspective, the present thesis applies a deliberately compact working typology, using three anchor categories for analytical clarity:

- **Direct entry:** the focal firm controls core go-to-market activities, particularly the customer interface and typically delivery/value realization.
- **Partner-led entry:** external actors perform substantial parts of go-to-market activities (selling and/or delivery), while the focal firm retains influence through contracting, enablement, and governance mechanisms.
- **Hybrid entry:** mixed configurations that combine partner-enabled access or selling with vendor-owned control over selected critical activities (e.g., key account ownership, solution design, or customer success), reflecting the broader idea that “hybrid” organizational forms can emerge between market and hierarchy when coordination and control are shared.

In practice, partner-enabled entry can take multiple forms and is better understood as a continuum rather than as mutually exclusive categories (Heide, 1994; Wathne & Heide, 2004). Examples include partner-assisted lead sharing and introductions (network-mediated access), co-selling arrangements, reseller/white-label configurations, and integrator-led delivery models. For the analysis, these variants are treated as points on a continuum anchored by the three categories above, because the key analytical question is how these governance choices shape early traction through access, legitimacy, and complementarity mechanisms, and how they introduce control-dependency trade-offs.

3.3.2 Conditions shaping entry mode choice: governance hazards, institutions, resources, and channel control

Entry mode research emphasises that foreign market entry involves systematic trade-offs between control, commitment, flexibility, and risk (E. Anderson & Gatignon, 1986).

From a governance perspective, entry configurations can be interpreted as alternative ways of organizing interdependent activities under uncertainty and safeguarding against coordination and appropriation hazards (Hennart, 1988). When coordination needs and safeguarding problems intensify, higher-control arrangements can become more attractive; when uncertainty is high and commitment costly, lower-commitment arrangements may be preferred despite reduced control.

Institutional context further shapes entry mode performance because contracting environments, enforcement, and legitimacy requirements vary across countries. Consequently, entry configurations may perform differently depending on institutional conditions such as regulatory complexity or the formality of procurement and compliance expectations (Brouthers, 2002). In B2B settings, these institutional features can increase the cost of establishing credibility and of executing pilots/PoVs, thereby affecting the feasibility of direct entry and increasing the potential role of intermediaries.

A resource/capability perspective complements governance arguments by emphasising feasibility constraints. The resource-based view suggests that advantage depends on valuable and difficult-to-imitate resources (Barney, 1991), while dynamic capabilities capture the firm's ability to build and reconfigure routines - such as enterprise sales, solution engineering, and customer success - in changing environments (Teece et al., 1997). In this sense, direct entry is not only a preference but also a capability requirement: if a firm cannot build the necessary commercial and delivery routines quickly enough, partner-enabled routes may become a practical necessity. This shifts the strategic problem from "whether to use partners" to "how to design and govern partner-enabled entry without losing critical learning and control."

Channel governance research makes this design challenge explicit. Partner-led entry is not "hands-off"; interorganizational relationships require governance mechanisms that manage coordination, incentives, and conflict (Heide, 1994). This becomes particularly salient in multi-actor ecosystems where different partners may compete for customer ownership or where misalignment can spill across relationships (Wareham et al., 2014; Wathne & Heide, 2004). Accordingly, the relevant question for partner-enabled entry is not only whether partners can accelerate access, but also how governance choices shape dependency, execution quality, and learning.

3.3.3 Evidence-building mechanisms: pilots, proof-of-value, and reference creation

In B2B markets, information asymmetry and perceived risk shape adoption decisions. Signalling theory explains how credible signals reduce information asymmetry and increase willingness to engage under uncertainty (Connelly et al., 2011). Legitimacy theory further emphasises that stakeholders evaluate whether a firm appears appropriate, trustworthy, and capable of executing reliably, and that legitimacy can be strengthened through endorsements and visible successes (Suchman, 1995). These perspectives support the view that early international traction depends not only on product claims but on evidence that makes quality and feasibility observable.

In this context, pilots and PoVs function as structured evidence-building mechanisms: they reduce uncertainty by demonstrating performance under real conditions and by clarifying implementation feasibility. References are a particularly important output of this process, as they influence how buyers interpret quality when uncertainty and risk are salient (Godes, 2012). Recent work suggests that reference design and the conditions under which references are produced can affect the strength and transferability of these signals (Boyd et al., 2023).

For the present study, this implies that entry approaches differ not only in speed or coverage, but also in their capacity to create referenceable and transferable proof points. Partner-enabled configurations may accelerate initial engagement through network access and credibility, yet they may also affect who owns proof points and how transferable they become for subsequent expansion. Evidence-building therefore provides a practical bridge between entry approach design, partnership mechanisms, and early international traction.

3.4 Synthesis: Conceptual model

3.4.1 Conceptual model: How conditions shape entry approach and early traction

Bringing these aspects together, this thesis examines early international traction through a contingency lens: market- and firm-level conditions shape the feasibility of direct, partner-led, or hybrid entry, while partnerships influence early traction through access, legitimacy, and complementarity. These mechanisms are systematically qualified by governance trade-offs, particularly control-dependency tensions that intensify as partner involvement deepens (Heide, 1994; Uzzi, 1997). Market-level conditions are understood as gatekeeping intensity, procurement formality, and compliance requirements (Brouthers, 2002); firm-level conditions as commercial capacity, delivery readiness, partner-management capability, and the ability to generate credible proof points under resource constraints (Barney, 1991; Teece et al., 1997). Evidence-building through pilots, PoVs, and references operates as the practical carrier through

which early traction becomes observable under information asymmetry (Connelly et al., 2011; Godes, 2012).

3.4.2 Propositions guiding the empirical analysis

Given the qualitative and mechanism-oriented design, the analysis is guided by four theory-driven propositions that structure coding and pattern matching:

P1 (Conditions)

Partner-led or hybrid entry is more likely to support early international traction than direct entry when gatekeeping and credibility thresholds are high and when institutional complexity increases the costs of learning through direct market activity for resource-constrained firms (Brouthers, 2002; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009).

P2 (Access and legitimacy)

Partnerships can strengthen early traction by providing relationship-based access and credibility transfer, thereby increasing the likelihood of reaching qualified stakeholders and progressing to early proof steps (Coviello & Munro, 1997; Suchman, 1995).

P3 (Complementarity)

Partnerships can strengthen early traction when partners contribute complementary capabilities the focal firm cannot rapidly build (e.g., local coverage, delivery/service capacity), increasing feasibility of pilots/PoVs and initial value realization (Dyer & Singh, 1998).

P4 (Governance trade-offs)

Partnership benefits are qualified by governance trade-offs: reduced control over the customer interface, incentive misalignment, and dependency risks can weaken learning and limit the creation of standardised, transferable proof points even when early access accelerates (Heide, 1994; Uzzi, 1997).

Together, these propositions provide the analytical backbone for Chapters 5 and 6 and support the discussion of implications in Chapter 7 and the case-specific recommendations in Chapter 8.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research design: qualitative case study rationale

This dissertation adopts a qualitative single-case study design to examine why different entry approaches (direct, partner-led, and hybrid) lead to different levels of early international traction in the case of encentive, and through which mechanisms partnerships shape this outcome. The case is information-rich because it involves a resource-constrained B2B energy-tech startup navigating partner-enabled entry under real execution constraints, making trade-offs between control, speed, and dependency both visible and consequential.

A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research question is explanatory and mechanism oriented. The aim is not to estimate average effects across firms or markets, but to reconstruct how conditions (market- and firm-level), partnership mechanisms (access, legitimacy, complementarity), and governance trade-offs (control versus dependency) jointly shape early traction. These dynamics are relational and processual in nature and are best examined through rich interpretive data rather than purely quantitative indicators.

The study further emphasises analytical generalisation: findings are linked back to established theoretical perspectives in internationalisation, networks, and channel governance to derive case-grounded insights and boundary conditions that may inform similar resource-constrained B2B ventures. At the same time, conclusions are framed explicitly as case-based and contingent, reflecting the context dependence of regulated B2B adoption processes and partnership arrangements.

4.2 Data collection: interviews

Primary evidence consists of five semi-structured interviews: three internal interviews with key decision-makers at encentive (Founder, CEO, Partnership Manager) and two customer interviews to capture the buyer-side perspective on adoption requirements and proof thresholds. Interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes, were conducted in German, and were audio-recorded and transcribed with consent. Where quotations are presented in the thesis, they are translated into English by the author.

4.3 Sampling logic and interview protocol

Sampling follows a purposive, information-rich logic suitable for a qualitative case study. Internal interviewees were selected because they occupy central roles in international expansion decision-making and partnership-related market entry activities, thereby providing

complementary perspectives on strategy, constraints, and governance. Specifically, the Founder provides strategic framing and assumptions, the CEO provides prioritization and resource-constraint perspectives, and the Partnership Manager provides operational insights into partner models, enablement, and governance design.

To complement the internal perspective and reduce the risk of purely inward-looking conclusions, two customer interviews were included. These customer interviews provide buyer-side evidence on adoption risk, proof requirements (pilots/PoVs/references), and the extent to which partner involvement affects credibility, willingness to engage, and perceived delivery feasibility.

All interviews follow a semi-structured protocol consisting of a shared core section (ensuring comparability) and role-specific modules (internal vs. customer). The operationalisation of key constructs is summarized in Table 1; detailed construct operationalisation is provided in Appendix A, and the interview mapping is included in Appendix B.

4.4 Data analysis approach (coding, pattern matching, triangulation)

Data analysis follows a theory-informed thematic approach combining deductive and inductive elements. To ensure transparency in how the theoretical constructs are identified in qualitative data, the core concepts derived from the conceptual framework were operationalised into observable interview indicators. Table 1 summarizes this operationalisation and serves as the basis for coding and cross-source comparison (the full mapping is provided in Appendices A and B). Building on this operationalisation, the analysis was conducted in four steps.

Table 1: Construct operationalisation overview

Construct	Working definition	Indicators in interviews	Primary Data Sources
Market-level conditions	External context features shaping entry approach feasibility/effectiveness	Gatekeeping intensity; procurement formality; compliance burden; trust/legitimacy thresholds; channel norms	Internal interviews (I1–I3) + Customer interviews (C1–C2)
Firm-level conditions	Internal resources/capabilities constraining feasible entry approaches	Team capacity limits; partner management capability; ability to run PoVs; ability to standardise delivery	Internal interviews (I1–I3)
Access mechanism	Partnerships provide relationship-based access to qualified accounts	Warm introductions; referral pathways; access via partner channels/events; shortened time to first qualified meeting	Internal interviews (I1–I3) + Customer interviews (C1–C2)

Legitimacy mechanism	Partner association reduces perceived risk and increases credibility	Endorsement effects; faster internal buy-in; reduced perceived risk; higher willingness to pilot	Customer interviews (C1–C2) + Internal interviews (I1–I3)
Complementarity mechanism	Partners provide missing capabilities needed locally	Implementation capacity; local domain expertise; service coverage; regulatory navigation; technical integration support	Internal interviews (I1–I3) + Customer interviews (C1–C2) (where relevant)
Governance Trade-off (control vs dependency)	Partner-enabled entry gains speed/access but reduces control and increases dependence	Customer ownership conflicts; pricing control issues; exclusivity demands; incentive misalignment; quality assurance concerns	Internal interviews (I1–I3) + Customer interviews (C1–C2) (where relevant)
Evidence-building / proof requirements	Pilots/PoVs/references reduce information asymmetry and enable adoption	Required pilot design/KPIs; reference requirements; security/SLA expectations; criteria for pilot, rollout	Customer interviews (C1–C2) + Internal interviews (I1–I3)
Early international traction (outcome)	Credible early signals of market acceptance	Access to qualified stakeholders; progression to pilot/PoV; early customers; referenceability; perceived likelihood of rollout	Internal interviews (I1–I3) + Customer interviews (C1–C2)

4.4.1 Coding strategy (deductive + inductive)

A preliminary coding scheme is derived deductively from the conceptual framework and the propositions developed in Section 3.4. Core codes include market-level conditions, firm-level conditions, access, legitimacy, complementarity, governance trade-offs (control vs dependency), and evidence-building/early traction. This deductive structure ensures alignment between theory and empirical analysis and supports comparability across interviews.

At the same time, inductive sub-codes are developed iteratively to capture emergent themes (e.g. specific procurement bottlenecks, recurring objections, partner enablement requirements). This interaction between theory and data helps refine interpretations and avoid forcing evidence into predefined categories.

4.4.2 Pattern matching against propositions

The analysis employs a pattern-matching logic: case evidence is compared against the propositions guiding the study. This does not imply statistical testing; rather, it involves assessing whether triangulated evidence supports, refines, or contradicts the expected

relationships. The analysis explicitly seeks both confirming and disconfirming evidence to strengthen credibility and avoid post-hoc rationalisation.

4.4.3 Cross-source comparison and triangulation

Triangulation is implemented through structured comparison across (i) internal roles (Founder vs. CEO vs. Partnership Manager) and (ii) customer perspectives. Internal role comparison helps identify both convergence and meaningful divergence in assumptions, priorities, and perceived mechanisms. Customer interviews provide an external plausibility check on adoption requirements, proof thresholds, and the perceived credibility effects of partner involvement.

Market-level conditions reported in Chapters 5 and 6 are treated as evidence-based only where supported by interview material; where such conditions reflect assumptions rather than observed facts, they are framed explicitly as perceptions or internal assessments to prevent over-generalisation beyond the case.

4.4.4 From findings to strategy artifact

Finally, the analysis is structured to support the dissertation's applied output. Key Findings are synthesized into (i) conditions under which entry approaches are preferable, (ii) mechanism explanations of partnership-enabled traction, and (iii) governance implications for designing partner-enabled entry. This provides the case-grounded foundation for the partner-enabled entry approach playbook presented later in the thesis.

Building on the operationalisation and analysis steps outlined above, the key findings are reported in two stages. Chapter 5 synthesizes interview evidence on the market- and firm-level conditions under which direct, partner-led, or hybrid entry approaches are perceived as preferable. Chapter 6 then traces the partnership mechanisms (access, legitimacy, complementarity) through which entry approaches shape early international traction and examines the governance trade-offs (control versus dependency) that qualify these effects.

4.5 Research quality criteria and ethics

4.5.1 Research quality

The study addresses qualitative trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

- **Credibility** is supported through triangulation across internal roles and through the inclusion of customer interviews to validate key adoption-related claims (e.g., proof requirements and perceived risk).

- **Transferability** is addressed through analytical generalisation: findings are presented as case-grounded insights derived from encentive, with explicit boundary conditions and without claims of representativeness across markets.
- **Dependability** is strengthened by transparent documentation of the interview mapping, construct operationalisation (Table 1; Appendix A), and the coding and pattern-matching procedure.
- **Confirmability** is supported by maintaining a clear chain of evidence from interview excerpts and documents to themes, findings, and implications.

4.5.2 Ethics and confidentiality

Participation in interviews was voluntary and based on informed consent. Interviewees were informed about the academic purpose of the study, the intended use of the data, and their right to skip questions or stop the interview at any time. Interviews were conducted in German and recorded with consent; recordings were used solely to enable accurate transcription. In the thesis, identifiable information and commercially sensitive details are anonymized or generalized (e.g., interviewee labels such as Internal I1-I3 and Customer C1-C2). Where quotations are presented, they are translated into English by the author. Interview files and transcripts are stored securely with restricted access.

4.5.3 Methodological limitations

This dissertation is anchored in a single case and a small number of interviews. While the internal interviews capture complementary perspectives across key decision roles and the customer interviews strengthen external plausibility for adoption-related claims, the case base remains limited.

First, the study does not include partner-side interviews; therefore, partnership mechanisms and governance trade-offs are primarily interpreted through internal decision-maker perspectives and customer perceptions rather than through the partner viewpoint. Second, the customer sample (n=2) is intentionally exploratory and cannot be treated as representative for broader market-level generalisations. Third, interview-based evidence may be subject to recall bias and strategic framing. These limitations are mitigated through systematic coding, explicit construct operationalisation, cautious case-based claims (internal assessments vs. externally validated facts), and the inclusion of disconfirming evidence where present.

5 Key Findings I: Conditions shaping entry approach effectiveness

5.1 Defining early international traction in the case of encentive

In this thesis, early international traction is defined as the first credible evidence that a chosen entry approach generates commercially meaningful acceptance in the target context, before long-term performance outcomes can be observed. In the case of encentive, interview evidence suggests that “traction“ is interpreted through two complementary lenses: an internal execution and unit-economics lens, and a buyer-side adoption and risk-clearance lens. Internally, early traction is primarily framed through indicators such as (i) early revenue performance relative to a domestic baseline, (ii) sales-cycle length, (iii) initial contract value, and (iv) efficiency measures such as “cost per country“ or team cost relative to generated revenue. Buyer-side evidence, by contrast, emphasises that early traction depends on clearing adoption “gates” that precede scalable deployment: the ability to run a pilot without destabilizing mission-critical processes, the existence of explicit risk-mitigation and quality-assurance procedures, and the clearance of IT/security approvals (in some cases at very senior levels) before meaningful data exchange is permitted. In addition, customer interviews highlight that early traction may be signaled by a buyer's willingness to authorize a first “test balloon” (pilot/PoV) under a manageable budget threshold and by the transition from pilot permission to rollout readiness once governance and technical prerequisites are met.

Table 2: Operational indicators of early international traction

Traction Dimension	Internal Perspectives (I1-I3)	Customer Perspective (C1-C2)
Qualified access	Access to decision-makers and qualified opportunities that can realistically progress to PoV/pilot	Vendor becomes a “serious candidate” (right stakeholders engaged; willingness to invest time)
Progress to proof	PoV/pilot initiated within feasible delivery capacity and timeline	Pilot allowed and practically feasible (data access, integration pathway, operational feasibility)
Gate clearance	Reduced friction in critical process steps (e.g., faster cycle, fewer blockers)	Operational risk mitigations + IT/security/procurement approvals cleared sufficiently to proceed
Validation / referenceability	A proof point that can be reused (case, reference, repeatable narrative)	Pilot results credible enough to justify rollout consideration; confidence increases beyond “trial”
Efficiency / unit economics	Cost-to-enter vs. early returns (e.g., cost per country, team efficiency, ACV)	Less central; mainly relevant insofar as budget threshold and cost-benefit make a pilot acceptable

5.2 Market-level conditions shaping entry approach preferences

In the incentive case, market-level conditions are not primarily discussed as a country-ranking exercise. Instead, interviewees repeatedly refer to context features that determine whether early traction is realistically achievable through direct, partner-led, or hybrid entry. These features cluster around (i) differences in national market logics that affect the transferability of the value narrative, (ii) buyer-side adoption gates driven by operational risk and IT/security governance, and (iii) strong attention filters on the buyer side that make early access and differentiation non-trivial.

Transferability of the value narrative across national contexts

Internal accounts highlight that the energy-market logic that underpins a convincing value proposition is not automatically transferable across countries. The Partnerships Manager describes that Germany's volatility-driven context supports a flexibility narrative that may not apply in the same way in markets with different generation mixes (e.g., nuclear-dominated systems) and different tariff or settlement logics. In practical terms, this implies that direct entry becomes more demanding when the firm must re-validate what exactly drives value and how to communicate it credibly to buyers. Beyond market structure, the same interview emphasises that buying processes and trust formation can differ culturally and institutionally. For instance, trust may be built predominantly through business-case logic and numbers in some contexts, while in other contexts it requires more personal interaction before any commercial evaluation is taken seriously; procurement thresholds and tendering conventions may also differ. These differences increase the cost of learning-by-doing through direct entry, because the firm must discover not only whom to sell to, but also how decisions are made and which forms of proof are persuasive.

Buyer-side adoption gates: operational risk and IT/security governance

Customer interviews show that early traction in this setting is constrained by adoption gates that precede scalable deployment. C1 frames the core barrier as operational risk in a mission-critical process: the refrigeration system is described as a "holy grail" where failure can produce severe damage. This shifts vendor evaluation from "interesting optimisation" to risk governance, where explicit mitigation logic and fallback procedures are expected.

C1 also highlights that human error in implementation (e.g., changes in PLC programming) can be an underestimated risk, motivating governance measures such as a "four-eyes" principle for changes that affect primary control logic.

In parallel, C2 describes IT/security as a formalised gate that is triggered once a vendor becomes “seriously interesting”: IT seeks early involvement and uses a structured questionnaire, which moves evaluation into a formal approval pathway. At a later stage, buyer-side evidence shows that IT governance can tighten over time and may differ between “pilot exceptions” and “rollout standards”, implying that early progress does not automatically translate into scalable rollout without revisiting security and network architecture.

A related market-level condition concerns integration heterogeneity. C2 illustrates that implementation timelines can be driven less by the focal provider than by third-party components (e.g., controller compatibility, metering access, PV integration, network segmentation), which can create long delays and required exceptions from standard IT rules. This matters for entry approach choice because markets with high integration complexity increase the risk that direct entry consumes disproportionate delivery effort before referenceable proof points emerge.

Buyer attention filters and the need for credible differentiation

Both customers describe strong filtering dynamics. C1 notes that a very large share of inbound ideas is screened out quickly through rough evaluation, and that a solution “making it through” is rare. In this context, traction depends on meeting a high bar for relevance and feasibility at the very first contact. In C1, a critical entry condition is low initial investment: the solution is framed as attractive precisely because it does not require million-euro CapEx up front (which would compete with alternative strategic investments).

C1 also provides a clear illustration of differentiation logic: generalized “energy savings” pitches are described as uninteresting, whereas specialized domain capability (e.g., deep know-how in refrigeration) is framed as an “entry ticket” that differentiates the provider from “a thousand” generic providers. In addition, a free potential analysis based on a real load profile is described as a strong opener that reduces perceived downside of initiating evaluation.

Implications for entry approach feasibility

Taken together, these market-level conditions imply that early traction requires both (i) a transferable and persuasive value narrative in the target context and (ii) deliberate evidence-building designed to clear operational and IT/security gates. This increases the relative attractiveness of entry approaches that can reduce the cost of learning and access - Yet it also

sets boundary conditions: partner involvement only helps if it supports progress through these gates rather than adding friction or ambiguity (mechanisms examined in Chapter 6).

5.3 Firm-level conditions shaping entry approach preferences

Firm-level conditions are primarily framed as feasibility constraints: whether incentive can execute an entry approach under limited capacity without delaying evidence-building and without creating an unfavorable cost-to-learning ratio. Internally, three firm-level themes dominate: (i) economics of country entry (personnel cost exposure vs time-to-cash), (ii) process readiness (repeatability of sales and delivery), and (iii) partner model maturity and governance capacity.

Economics of country entry: personnel cost exposure as the binding risk

The CEO explicitly frames the primary uncertainty of internationalisation as personnel cost exposure: if relevant data is available, risk is perceived as low; risk increases when data is “hidden” and requires “people on the ground” to uncover. This framing implies that direct entry becomes problematic when it requires building a local team primarily to learn basic market conditions, rather than to scale an already validated playbook. The same interview links access strategy to financing realities: cold outreach can yield large deals, but it requires long nurturing cycles (e.g., “12 months plus”) that must be pre-financed. In the CEO’s logic, the feasibility of direct entry therefore depends on whether the firm can sustain long sales cycles and whether early traction can emerge quickly enough to justify country-level investments.

Repeatability and internal readiness: scaling imperfect routines multiplies friction

A second firm-level condition concerns internal maturity. The CEO describes a central goal as building a “repeatable sales process”, explicitly noting that current successes are not yet reliably replicable. The Founder similarly stresses that internal processes are not yet sufficiently stable and scalable to “roll out internationally without chaos” and emphasises capital constraints and the cost of running failed foreign experiments. This readiness condition has two implications. First, direct entry can be valuable because it accelerates learning from direct customer interaction. Second, however, direct expansion across multiple countries can multiply complexity quickly (local hiring, coordination, and management overhead). The Founder frames the cost of direct internationalisation as requiring a local team and additional coordination costs even beyond sales itself.

Partner models as a continuum: feasibility depends on product/process standardisation

Internal interviews show that partner-led entry is not treated as a binary category. Instead, the CEO outlines a continuum from direct entry to lead-sharing and door-opening, to partner-owned customer contracts, to models where the partner has already purchased licenses and the provider's role becomes more supportive. In addition, the Partnerships Manager describes that the current reseller motion still involves incentive in delivery; partner responsibility is expected to increase as partner capability and enablement mature (e.g., as tools become web-based and the partner can execute more independently).

Crucially, the CEO emphasises that becoming “fully out” of delivery is not merely a go-to-market decision: it requires product and process adaptation so that integration becomes sufficiently standardisable for partner execution (“self-service suite”). This constitutes a firm-level condition for deeper partner-led configurations: partner-led scalability depends not only on partner incentives and contract structure, but also on internal product readiness and the ability to codify delivery.

Governance and learning trade-offs: partner entry buys time but can slow learning

The CEO articulates a clear trade-off: partner channels can slow down conversion through coordination, “silent post” effects, and low initial conviction, which reduces conversion rates compared with direct selling. At the same time, partner involvement becomes attractive when the partner provides upfront commitment (e.g., pre-buying licenses), effectively “buying time” for the longer partner cycle. The CEO also notes that a partner can provide a “quality seal” and reduce the intensity of IT/security discussions, while stressing that partners do not replace an internal sales team and may reduce learning from direct customer contact.

The Partnerships Manager frames partner selling as a multiplier: training a small number of partner sellers can enable access to many accounts that the startup could not cover directly at the same scale. This highlights a feasibility condition for partner-led entry: it becomes more attractive when partner enablement is sufficiently mature to create scalable access without consuming disproportionate internal bandwidth.

Finally, the Founder highlights governance as a practical constraint. Managing multiple partners can create tension, and exclusivity can become a negotiation lever for large incumbents, reflecting a power imbalance that the startup must handle carefully to avoid closing doors to other ecosystem actors.

5.4 Synthesis: decision logic for entry approach preference

Across the five interviews, entry approach preference is shaped by the interaction of buyer-side gates and startup-side feasibility constraints. The data supports three case-grounded statements that structure the remainder of the findings.

1. partner-enabled entry becomes attractive when the binding constraint is fixed country-entry cost under uncertainty. Internally, internationalisation risk is repeatedly framed as personnel cost exposure relative to early revenue predictability. In this logic, partner-enabled routes are preferable when they reduce the need to build local commercial capacity early or when partners provide commitment mechanisms (e.g., pre-buying licenses) that reduce time-to-cash risk.
2. Direct entry remains important where speed of learning and control are critical. Internal evidence suggests that partner channels can slow down progress and reduce learning from direct customer interaction, particularly when the product and sales process are still evolving. This implies that direct entry is more feasible when the firm can carry longer cycles and when the marginal learning benefit outweighs the incremental cost of local execution.
3. Regardless of entry approach, early traction is constrained by buyer-side approval gates and integration heterogeneity. Customer evidence shows that operational risk governance and IT/security approvals can determine whether pilots can proceed at all, and that implementation timelines can be strongly shaped by third-party dependencies and local infrastructure constraints. Consequently, entry approaches should be assessed partly by their ability to support evidence-building that clears these gates under limited internal capacity.

These findings motivate the mechanism analysis in Chapter 6. If partnerships shape early traction in the case of incentive, they should do so through observable channels - access pathways, legitimacy/credibility effects, and complementary capabilities - while simultaneously introducing governance and learning trade-offs that qualify their net benefit.

6 Key Findings II: Partnership mechanisms and governance trade-offs

A key observation in the case is that partner-led entry is not treated as a binary choice. The CEO describes a continuum from direct entry, to lead sharing and partner introductions, to co-selling, to partner-owned customer contracts with the startup “docked behind”, and in the longer run, partner-executed delivery. This continuum is analytically relevant because each configuration affects traction via different combinations of access, credibility, role allocation, and dependency.

6.1 Access: reaching decision-makers under capacity constraints

Across internal interviews, partnerships are primarily valued to reduce the cost of reaching qualified accounts and decision-makers in new contexts. Both internal and customer evidence highlight the practical advantage of warm introductions. The CEO frames warm intros as the most effective path to decision-makers compared with cold outreach (which can work but requires long nurturing cycles). The Founder confirms that warm intros are consistently preferable.

The Partnerships Manager adds an important nuance: access effectiveness is stage dependent. When a well-established partner approaches customers and positions the solution as “one of ours”, access becomes materially easier than for an unknown startup. In other words, partnerships can function as an “access shortcut” particularly when buyer attention is scarce (as shown in Chapter 5).

Customer interviews provide a concrete illustration of access via networks rather than direct selling. In C2, the initial introduction to encentive occurred through a trusted third party (a general contractor), which triggered engagement with the founders. This supports the case logic that early traction depends not only on message quality but also on how the first credible contact is created.

6.2 Legitimacy: reducing perceived risk and enabling proof to be taken seriously

In the focal case, legitimacy is not discussed as abstract brand value. It is operationalised as reducing perceived risk and signaling that the startup will execute reliably in a high-stakes B2B context. The Founder links references to “structured processes” and professionalism (responsiveness, prepared meetings, a serious “appearance”), which together make buyers perceive the firm as credible and execution-capable.

The CEO frames references similarly: references do not necessarily create the first introduction, but they help “to be heard” at all - i.e., to pass early credibility screens. This aligns with the buyer-side logic that a vendor needs to be perceived as serious before more demanding evaluation gates (e.g., procurement, IT/security) are activated.

Customer evidence strengthens this mechanism by specifying what counts as credibility in practice. C1 emphasises that generic energy-saving pitches are not persuasive; credibility is created through differentiated domain capability (in that interview, deep refrigeration know-how) that makes the provider worth engaging. C2 also indicates that once a provider becomes “seriously interesting”, internal IT demands early involvement via a structured questionnaire, shifting evaluation into a formal gate. Legitimacy, therefore, is not only a “nice-to-have”; it conditions whether buyer-side gates can be approached without the process collapsing due to perceived risk.

The case also indicates that legitimacy transfer through partners is not uniformly positive. C2 explicitly notes that involving a large partner can create additional friction or concerns (e.g., “more unrest”) depending on how the constellation is perceived. This boundary condition matters for governance design: the same partner that increases credibility can also increase perceived bureaucracy if roles are unclear or if buyers interpret the arrangement as reducing vendor independence.

6.3 Complementarity: scaling reach and allocating roles

Complementarity in the case is primarily framed as the partner’s ability to provide commercial reach and to enable scaling beyond what a small internal team can cover. The CEO explicitly links the attractiveness of partner-enabled expansion to the ability to “borrow” an external sales force abroad, thereby reducing personnel cost exposure. The Partnerships Manager similarly frames partner channels as a scalable route when a partner can address a broader customer base than the startup can reach through direct selling.

Complementarity also appears as division of labour. The Founder describes partner-led configurations as attractive when they reduce complexity by concentrating contracting and customer relationship ownership on one side, enabling the startup to focus on product and value delivery. In this view, complementarity is not only “capacity”; it is the allocation of activities to the actor best positioned to execute them (sales/customer interface vs. product/value realization).

At the same time, internal accounts qualify complementarity as contingent on readiness: partner-led selling becomes harder when a solution is complex and requires constant refinement of arguments and processes, because partners do not engage with the product daily. This is a

practical boundary condition: complementarity is strongest when messaging, enablement, and delivery routines are sufficiently stable to be executed through partners without heavy ongoing vendor involvement.

6.4 Governance trade-offs: control, dependency, and learning

The case evidence makes clear that partnerships are not a “hands-off” solution. Mechanisms that generate access and complementarity can also create dependency and reduce learning. Internally, governance is discussed explicitly through contracting structures and non-negotiables.

1. Governance risk increases as the configuration moves along the continuum toward partner-owned contracting. The CEO describes scenarios where the customer has the contract with the partner and the startup is “docked behind,” which reduces direct control over the customer interface and increases dependency on partner priorities and execution.
2. Internal stakeholders define clear non-negotiables. The CEO names exclusivity and margin constraints and highlights data visibility as critical: even if customer ownership is held by the partner, the startup needs sufficient data exposure to learn and improve the algorithm, otherwise partner-led scaling can undermine the product’s long-term improvement process. This is a case-specific trade-off: partnerships can increase reach, but they may also limit learning if data access is restricted.
3. Governance includes power asymmetries. The Founder notes that large incumbents can use exclusivity as a negotiation lever, which can reduce strategic optionality and affect the ability to work with multiple ecosystem actors.

Finally, the CEO points to a practical performance trade-off: partner-led configurations can be slower due to coordination and reduced conviction, while direct selling can be faster but requires capacity and the ability to pre-finance long sales cycles. This reinforces the thesis logic that entry approach choices involve a systematic trade-off between speed/access/credibility benefits and control/learning/dependency risks.

These findings set up Chapter 7, which synthesises the results and interprets entry approaches as alternative learning architectures under a gated progression.

7 Discussion and Implications

7.1 What this case finally says about “entry approach performance”

Across Chapters 5 and 6, one pattern dominates the case: early international traction is not a funnel; it is a gated progression. Interest is comparatively cheap; credible progress is not. What determines whether momentum builds, is the ability to clear the gates that matter in this context - operational risk, IT/security clearance, and proof requirements - without exhausting scarce commercial and delivery capacity. Seen through this lens, entry approach performance is essentially the question of which configuration gets the firm through the next gate at acceptable cost while preserving learning and proof-point transferability.

This reframing also makes the trade-off between direct and partner-enabled routes more precise. Direct entry maximises learning density and control because the startup owns the customer interface and can iterate quickly on messaging, proof design, and delivery routines. The cost is that the firm must also pay the full price of access and persuasion in a network-mediated buying environment. Partner-enabled configurations can reduce this cost by borrowing network position and credibility, which can accelerate access to serious consideration. Yet the case shows that the “price” does not disappear - it often shifts into a second set of constraints: coordination overhead, diluted messaging along the channel, and governance risks that increase with partner ownership. In practice, the more a channel scales, the fewer direct customer touchpoints the startup retains; that weakens learning and erodes control over proof-point ownership unless deliberately safeguarded.

Finally, the case complicates the assumption that partners simply reduce uncertainty. They often do so through access, legitimacy, and complementary reach, but buyer-side evidence indicates that partner involvement can also introduce friction (e.g., perceived bureaucracy or questions of independence), depending on how the partner is positioned in the customer journey. The implication is straightforward: partnership value is configuration dependent. It hinges on role allocation and governance choices - especially the boundary between what is delegated and what remains vendor-owned for learning, proof design, and customer-interface visibility.

7.2 Connecting the findings to the conceptual lens

Chapter 3 developed P1-P4 as a contingency model; the discussion below uses these propositions to interpret what the interviews add, especially the “gated progression” logic and the learning consequences of different governance configurations.

7.2.1 Conditions as “learning costs” and “gate intensity” (P1)

Internationalisation is described as a staged perspective on foreign expansion, as a process of learning under uncertainty and slow commitment when uncertainty becomes manageable (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). In the focal case, that mechanism is visible but has a modern form: uncertainty is less “country knowledge” and more the cost of finding out what matters - which value narrative works, which stakeholders need to be brought along, and which compliance gates will stop the project. This is very much in line with the revised Uppsala emphasis on outsidership: the constraint is not just lack of information but lack of position in relevant networks and relationships (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009).

Interview evidence sharpens this point. In the focal case, early progress is shaped less by “country knowledge” and more by the cost of discovery under adoption gates: being taken seriously, clearing risk concerns, and securing formal approval for data access and proof steps. This makes the relevant conditions highly specific. When gate intensity is high and the cost of field engagement is non-trivial for a small team, partner-enabled configurations become attractive not because markets are complex in the abstract, but because partners can reduce the cost of reaching, and progressing through, gated proof stages.

There is also a boundary condition: some uncertainty is researchable (e.g. tariff structures), other uncertainty only becomes visible through field engagement. The CEO’s distinction - risk is low “as long as the data is available,” and rises when “people on the ground” are needed - captures why direct entry becomes costly quickly for small firms. Entry modes can thus be viewed as alternative architectures for paying the learning bill: pay it directly with your own people (direct entry) or borrow it partly through relationships and channel structures (partner-enabled entry).

7.2.2 Partnerships as a mechanism bundle: access, legitimacy and complementarity (P2-P3)

Network-based internationalisation research expects relationships to matter for access (Coviello & Munro, 1997; Ellis, 2000). The case adds a useful clarification: access is not “more leads”. It is the ability to reach the right decision-makers through pathways that survive attention scarcity and screening. In practice, warm introductions matter because they compress the distance to serious consideration. Legitimacy then becomes the mechanism that allows access to turn into proof. Under information asymmetry, buyers look for credible signals that reduce perceived downside (Connelly et al., 2011), and legitimacy work highlights endorsements and visible successes as key inputs into perceived appropriateness and capability (Suchman, 1995).

In the focal case, legitimacy is built through (i) execution signals (structured process, professional interaction, referenceability) and (ii) association effects when partners are involved. However, the interviews also show a boundary condition: partner association is not uniformly positive. In some buyer contexts, being “together with a utility” can trigger concerns about independence or bureaucracy, raising friction rather than removing it.

Complementarity primarily concerns reach and role allocation. Consistent with the relational view (Dyer & Singh, 1998), partners can contribute coverage and capabilities the startup cannot rapidly build, but this benefit depends on standardised messaging and delivery routines; otherwise, weaknesses multiply when executed through a partner channel.

7.2.3 Governance trade-offs are not “side issues” (P4)

A focus of channel governance research is to govern interorganisational relationships to address issues of coordination, incentive and conflict (Heide, 1994; Wathne & Heide, 2004). A strong case can be made for this, partner-enabled selling is not a shortcut to bypass internal effort. It is a re-allocation of effort from direct selling to training, enablement, coordination and relationship management.

Two trade-offs are prominent:

1. **Speed versus channel friction:** Partner-enabled entry can reduce access and legitimacy-building but can also delay conversion because of the “telephone effect”, low partner conviction and coordination overhead.
2. **Learning / control vs scaling:** The more a sales channel is expanded, the fewer direct customer touchpoints the startup retains. This limits the learning effect, weakens control over the customer interface, and leads to diluted margins.

The CEO’s direct statement that partners do not replace the sales team but instead “flank” it is theoretically consistent with governance perspectives: partner channels need internal governance capacity and do not obviate the need for an internal commercial core.

7.3 Direct responses to the sub-questions

The following case-grounded answers draw on evidence from the case to ensure that the discussion remains decision-relevant.

Sub-question 1 (Conditions): Partner-led or hybrid entry is preferable to direct entry when (i) buyer-side adoption gates are strong (operational risk, IT/security clearance, and formal evaluation steps) and (ii) the firm cannot justify “people on the ground” before time-to-cash is sufficiently predictable. Direct entry is preferable when learning from unmediated customer contact is strategically valuable and the firm can sustain longer cycles and iterative discovery without overstressing delivery capacity.

Sub-question 2 (Mechanisms and trade-offs): Partnerships shape early traction through a bundle of mechanisms: access to qualified decision-makers under attention scarcity, legitimacy effects that reduce perceived downside and increase willingness to pilot, and complementarity that expands reach and reallocates roles. These benefits are systematically qualified by governance trade-offs that intensify with partner ownership: slower conversion due to coordination and diluted conviction, reduced customer-interface visibility and learning, and dependency risks (including exclusivity dynamics).

Sub-question 3 (Implications): Partner-enabled entry is primarily a governance and enablement task. Early traction is more likely when roles across selling, contracting, delivery, and customer success are explicitly allocated; non-negotiables (visibility, data access, independence constraints) are defined upfront; and a standardised proof architecture makes pilots/PoVs and references repeatable and teachable across markets and partners.

7.4 Implications for encentive (pre-playbook, non-duplicative)

The implications below are stated as principles; Chapter 8 translates them into a concise playbook-style set of recommendations.

(1) Base entry approach on explicit feasibility criteria, not labels

The case implies that the most useful decision frame is: What must be true for this approach to provide credible evidence within our capacity constraints? That moves the discussion from an ideological “direct vs. partner-led” perspective to things like time-to-first proof, internal delivery bandwidth, and anticipated gate intensity.

(2) Treat partnership strategy as governance design and sequence with maturity

Partnerships are best when the message/delivery is stable enough to be taught, but early enough that access and credibility are still bottlenecks. This means sequencing: starting with lighter partner involvement (introductions/co-selling) where learning is still high, before moving to stronger partner ownership once proof architecture and onboarding are sufficiently standardised.

(3) Make evidence-building a systematic rather than an ad hoc process

Buyer-side evidence indicates that proof requirements extend beyond technical savings and include operational risk governance, formal IT/security clearance, and clear pilot-to-rollout criteria. Treating pilots/PoVs as a standardised “proof architecture” increases repeatability for direct entry and makes partner-enabled execution more reliable by reducing variance in messaging, delivery, and reference creation.

7.5 Other explanations and limitations of the cases

There are two other possible explanations. First, differences in early traction may reflect differences in product-use-case fit across contexts that are only partially explained by entry approach design. Second, variance that cannot be fully controlled through GTM design can be created by individual champions and organisational idiosyncrasies on the buyer side that strongly influence progress through gates.

This study is a single case study based on 5 interviews. It is therefore not statistical generalisation but a mechanism-oriented explanation in terms of an actual decision setting.

The implications are best understood as case-grounded decision logic and boundary conditions that might be relevant for comparable resource-constrained B2B ventures entering regulated markets, given the specific buyer gate structure and partnership configurations observed in this case.

8 Conclusion & Playbook

8.1 Conclusions

This thesis explains why different entry approaches lead to different levels of early international traction in the case of encentive and through which partnership mechanisms these differences arise. The overall conclusion is that early traction in regulated European B2B contexts is best understood as a gated progression rather than a linear funnel: beyond initial interest, progress depends on clearing adoption gates linked to operational risk, IT/security governance, and proof requirements, while remaining feasible under limited commercial and delivery capacity.

Theoretical contribution

This dissertation makes three theoretical contributions. First, it reframes early international traction in regulated European B2B contexts as a gated progression rather than a linear funnel: progress depends on clearing discrete adoption gates - operational risk, IT/security, and proof requirements - under capacity constraints. Second, it interprets entry approaches as different learning architectures: direct entry maximises learning density and control, whereas partner-enabled entry lowers the cost of reaching gated proof steps but can weaken learning when the customer interface becomes mediated. Third, the case qualifies network-based internationalisation by suggesting that legitimacy transfer is conditional on partner role: association with an established actor can either reduce perceived adoption risk or, depending on partner positioning, raise concerns about vendor independence or coordination overhead.

Managerial contribution

For encentive, the findings imply that entry approach choice should be treated as a feasibility decision under gate intensity and capacity constraints, not as a generic preference for “direct” or “partner-led” growth. Partner-enabled routes can be advantageous when access and credibility are the binding bottlenecks, but only if the partner model is explicitly configured and governed. In practice, three levers matter most. First, make the configuration explicit (who opens doors, who sells, who contracts, who delivers, who owns customer success) and tighten governance as partner ownership increases. Second, define non-negotiables early - especially customer-interface visibility and the minimum transparency needed to preserve learning. Third, standardise a proof architecture (PoV design, risk mitigation logic, IT/security requirements, and pilot-to-rollout criteria); in this case, it is the most practical way to improve repeatability in direct entry and reliability in partner-enabled execution.

Answers to the sub-questions

Conditions

Partner-led or hybrid entry is preferable when buyer-side adoption gates are strong and when the cost of learning and credibility-building through direct market activity is disproportionate for a small team. Direct entry is preferable when learning from unmediated customer interaction is strategically valuable and the firm can sustain longer cycles without degrading delivery quality. Hybrid configurations are particularly relevant when partner involvement is needed for access/credibility, but the firm must retain control over critical activities (e.g., PoV design, key account steering, customer success) to preserve learning and execution quality.

Mechanisms and trade-offs

Partnerships shape early traction through access to qualified stakeholders, legitimacy effects that reduce perceived downside and increase willingness to pilot, and complementarity that expands reach and supports role allocation. These benefits are qualified by governance trade-offs - especially coordination overhead, reduced customer-interface control and learning, and dependency risks - that intensify with stronger partner ownership. A boundary condition is that partner association is not universally beneficial; depending on buyer interpretation and partner role, it may also increase perceived bureaucracy or raise independence concerns.

Implications

Successful partner-enabled entry is less about “picking partners” in the abstract and more about specifying and governing the partner model, while standardising evidence-building so pilots/PoVs and references become repeatable and teachable.

Overall, the thesis does not claim that partner-led entry is always superior. It argues that partner-enabled configurations can be highly effective under the gate structure and constraints observed in the focal case, if governance preserves sufficient control and learning to sustain proof-point creation and future scaling.

8.2 Mini playbook for incentive: partner-enabled entry under resource constraints

The case insights are summarised in this playbook into decision rules and design choices that can be repeatedly applied to evaluate international opportunities and partnership configurations.

1. Begin with the “gates”, not the country

Before choosing an entry approach, identify the dominant adoption gates in the buyer context you are entering. In the focal setting, early traction depends on overcoming (i) operational risk concerns in mission-critical processes, (ii) IT/security involvement and formal evaluation steps, and (iii) proof thresholds that justify a pilot and subsequent rollout. Let these gates be the first design input. The problem is what configuration is capable of clearing them within the realistic internal capacity, and then choose the entry approach accordingly.

2. Entry decision rules

Use the following rules of thumb as a starting point - and note the reason for each market attempt:

- **Use direct entry when** you want the highest learning density and control (e.g. the value narrative is still emerging) and you can tolerate longer time-to-cash without compromising on delivery quality.
- **Use hybrid entry when** partner involvement is needed to gain access or credibility but the incentive needs to retain control over critical activities to protect learning and outcomes (PoV design, success criteria and customer success steering).
- **Partner-led entry** should only be an option if two things are true: (i) the partner can realistically drive qualified access at scale, and (ii) delivery and proof steps are standardised enough to be executed reliably through the partner without constant vendor intervention.

3. Make partner model explicit (continuum not label)

Assume “partner-led” is a continuum and write down the configuration in one paragraph before implementation:

- Who opens doors (introductions, events, channels)
- Who drives sales? Who owns the commercial story?

- Who contracts (customer-interface ownership)?
- Who's got delivery ownership and escalation for that?
- What is left “provider-owned” by design (e.g. success metrics, PoV methodology, quality gates)?

If you cannot answer these questions clearly, you are not “hybrid” yet, you are ambiguous. Ambiguity is the beginning of the cost of coordination and dependence.

4. Non-negotiables (protect learning, prevent dependency)

This case suggests that partner-enabled traction can be attractive but that governance issues increase as partner ownership rises. A short list of non-negotiables prevents underperformance driven by dependency. Make it brief and repeatable:

- **Customer interface transparency:** defined points of contact, escalation routes and clarity on who is responsible for results.
- **Learning and data transparency:** Be transparent enough to improve the product and not be a “black-box channel”.
- **Exclusivity boundaries:** don't lock the firm out of alternative ecosystem routes unless the partner invests appropriate commitment.
- **Quality assurance:** Defined standards for implementation and changes that affect critical operational processes (including review/approval routines).
- **Commercial viability:** Margin/role clarity to maintain model sustainability (particularly in deeper partner owned configurations).

5. Proof architecture: make it learnable

Early traction is generating evidence to open buyer gates. Standardise proof architecture and use for conversion and partner enablement:

- **PoV blueprint:** success metrics, baseline logic, measurement plan, decision thresholds
- **Risk package:** operational safeguards, fallback procedures and a simple “risk register” logic that buyers can understand.
- **IT/security package:** The minimum documentation buyers expect, plus a clear description of how things connect and how data is handled.
- **Pilot to rollout criteria:** what needs to be true to scale (technical, organisational, and governance prerequisites).

When there is a partner involved, enablement is not “slides”: it is the ability to deliver the proof architecture consistently.

6. Dual lens for early tracking of traction

Use a small set of leading indicators rather than a long list of KPIs.

- **Buyer side progress:** stakeholder engagement, gate clearance (IT/security + operational risk), PoV started, rollout readiness/referenceability
- **Internal feasibility:** time-to-proof, delivery load and whether the approach is better or worse for economics of country entry.

The objective is not perfect measurement, but to identify which arrangements of entries repeatedly yield credible proof under constraints.

8.3 Limitations

This dissertation is a qualitative single case study, and it makes case grounded claims instead of statistically generalisable ones. The evidentiary basis is five interviews (three internal decision roles and two customer perspectives). This allows for an explanation on a mechanistic basis with sufficient depth and sets the boundaries of what the thesis can credibly claim.

First, the evidence reflects the focal firm’s decision context and two buyer perspectives but not partner-side interviews. This redefines the governance trade-offs of partner-enabled entry, which are mainly based on internal evaluations and buyer interpretations rather than the partner’s incentive logic and operational restrictions.

Second, early international traction is perceived as a partial trajectory (progress toward proof, gate clearance, and referenceability) rather than long-run market performance.

Third, interview data are prone to strategic framing and recall, especially when interviewees discuss “what would work” for future market entry rather than only what has already been done. These limitations do not detract from the central contribution, but they require a cautious interpretation: The thesis explains how and why entry approaches are perceived to perform differently in the incentive case under the observed gate structure and constraints, and it provides decision-relevant boundary conditions rather than universal prescriptions.

8.4 Future research

The case offers several high-value directions for future research beyond what this MSc dissertation can cover.

Including partner-side evidence is a natural next step. Interviews with utilities, integrators, and reseller organisations could test whether the mechanisms identified here (access, legitimacy, complementarity) are reflected by partner incentives, and whether governance “non-negotiables” differ systematically across partner types. It would also help to clarify when partner involvement decreases friction and when it increases bureaucracy due to the partner’s own compliance logic.

Another approach is comparative design. A small multi-case study across energy-tech startups (or across multiple expansions within the same firm) could explore whether the “gated traction” pattern persists across different buyer contexts, and how the entry-approach continuum, from referral and co-selling through partner-owned contracting to partner-led delivery, evolves with product standardisation and organisational maturity.

Finally, future work can explore “proof architecture” as a research object, e.g. how pilots/PoVs are designed, what proof thresholds are most decisive for rollout, and how evidence-building interacts with governance and channel design over time. A longitudinal design would be especially useful for observing whether early partner-enabled traction translates into scalable performance or whether dependency and reduced learning eventually dominate.

IV. Appendices

Appendix A

Construct (Code)	Working definition (used in this thesis)	Inclusion / exclusion (what counts vs. what does not)	Interview indicators (what to look for in transcripts/notes)	Standard prompts (core + probes)	Main stakeholder sources
Market-level conditions	External characteristics of regulated European B2B markets shaping feasibility/effectiveness of direct, partner-led, or hybrid entry	Include: regulatory/institutional complexity; ecosystem gatekeeping; procurement formality; trust/legitimacy thresholds; channel norms. Exclude: internal firm constraints not tied to market context	References to gatekeepers; “how vendors are typically evaluated”; procurement steps/length; compliance/security expectations; “standard” buying journey	“What makes entry difficult in your context?” “Who controls access to buyers?” “How formalized is procurement?” “What compliance/security requirements are non-negotiable?”	I1-I3; C1-C2; S (context only)
Firm-level conditions	Internal resources/capabilities that constrain or enable feasible entry approaches	Include: team capacity; delivery/CS readiness; partner-management capability; ability to run PoVs/pilots; ability to standardise delivery. Exclude: generic opinions not linked to capabilities/constraints	Statements about bandwidth limits; implementation effort; capacity bottlenecks; capability gaps; internal learning needs	“What are the binding constraints for international entry?” “Where do capability gaps show up in practice?” “What would need to be true to execute entry approach X?”	I1-I3
Access mechanism	Partnerships provide relationship-based access to qualified accounts and decision-makers	Include: warm introductions; pipeline inclusion; installed base access; faster first meeting/pilot. Exclude: vague “partners help” without concrete access channel	Warm intros; partner-originated leads; faster conversion to qualified meeting; access to otherwise unreachable roles/accounts	“How do new vendors typically get considered?” “Would you engage without an introduction?” “What specifically changes with a partner?”	I1-I3; C1-C2
Legitimacy mechanism	Partner association transfers credibility and reduces perceived adoption risk	Include: endorsement effects; reduced risk perception; faster internal buy-in; reduced proof burden.	“We only consider if endorsed by...”; risk language decreases; compliance comfort; quicker	“What makes a vendor credible enough to pilot?” “Does an endorsement change risk	C1-C2; I1-I3

		Exclude: generic brand admiration not linked to adoption decisions	approvals; fewer reference demands	perception? How?" "Which stakeholder is most risk-sensitive?"	
Complementarity mechanism	Partners contribute capabilities/resources the startup cannot rapidly build locally	Include: implementation/service capacity; local domain/regulatory expertise; integration support; service coverage; escalation handling. Exclude: pure lead-sharing without capability contribution	Expectations that partner implements/supports; mention of "local presence required"; partner closes feasibility gaps; delivery risk mitigated	"Who do you expect to implement/support the solution?" "What local capabilities must exist?" "What would you not trust a small vendor to do alone?"	I1-I3; C1-C2 (where relevant)
Governance Trade-off (control vs dependency)	Partner-enabled entry gains speed/access but reduces control and increases dependency	Include: customer ownership; pricing/margins; exclusivity; data access; quality assurance; incentive alignment; channel conflict. Exclude: generic "partnerships are hard" without governance substance	Disputes/concerns about account ownership; limits on pricing; exclusivity demands; partner priority risk; quality inconsistency; limited learning visibility	"Who should own the customer relationship?" "What dependency risks are unacceptable?" "How do you ensure delivery quality?" "What role split is workable?"	I1-I3; C1-C2 (where relevant)
Evidence-building / proof requirements	Pilots/PoVs/references as credibility signals reducing information asymmetry and enabling adoption	Include: PoV success metrics; reference requirements; security/SLA requirements; rollout criteria. Exclude: marketing claims without evidence thresholds	Stage-gates (interest, PoV, rollout); KPI expectations; what counts as credible reference; internal approval requirements	"What evidence is required to move to rollout?" "What KPIs matter most?" "What makes a reference credible in your context?"	C1-C2; I1-I3
Early international traction (outcome)	First credible signals of commercially meaningful acceptance in a foreign market	Include: qualified access; PoV/pilot progress; early customers; referenceability; perceived rollout likelihood. Exclude: vanity metrics (e.g. intro-calls)	Mentions of timeline to PoV; number/quality of qualified opportunities; PoV-to-rollout likelihood; emergence of credible proof points	"What would early success look like?" "What is a realistic timeline to a PoV/pilot?" "What determines PoV-to-rollout?"	I1-I3; C1-C2

Appendix B

Code	Interview Type	Role	Date	Duration	Mode	Recorded & Transcribed
I1	Internal	CEO	Apr 28	24:17 min	in-person	Yes
I2	Internal	Partnership Manager	Apr 29	42:52 min	in-person	Yes
I3	Internal	Founder	May 05	29:34 min	in-person	Yes
C1	Customer	Controller / Energy manager	May 13	31:40 min	online	Yes
C2	Customer	Projektmanager / Energy manager	May 13	31:51 min	online	Yes

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