



CIRCULAR REPUBLIC is Europe's leading implementation platform for the circular economy. As part of UnternehmerTUM, Europe's largest center for innovation and business creation, the initiative empowers established companies and startups to design circular innovations and scalable business models. By connecting key stakeholders across the entire value chain, **CIRCULAR REPUBLIC** drives the systemic transformation required for a resilient, sustainable, and prosperous global economy.

## OUR ECOSYSTEM

**2800**  
CIRCULAR STARTUPS

**16**  
CORPORATE PARTNERS

**10**  
WORKSHOP FORMATS

**4**  
PARTNERSHIP FORMATS

## Archetypes of collaboration

### Co-Innovation

**We spark cross-company collaboration**

We connect corporates and startups to jointly run projects and build the foundations for long-term relationships.

**We pilot circular value chains & business models**

We create the space and structure for industry-scale pilots, moving quickly from concept to measurable outcomes and scalable solutions.

**We set up circular processes**

Together, we explore the operationalization of circular strategies, related success factors and framework conditions.

### Match Making

**We empower circular innovation through strategic matching**

Startups are key drivers of the circular economy, but finding the right partners in a fragmented market can be challenging. Without a structured approach, critical opportunities get lost.

Our annual Circular Startup Landscape 2026 provides the ultimate solution. Powered by a comprehensive database of over 2.800 startups, we have the precise insights needed to seamlessly match circular innovators with corporations seeking sustainable solutions, turning fragmentation into impactful partnerships.

### Ecosystem

**We expand your network**

We connect decision-makers and practitioners from industry, policy, research, and startups - curated by topic and maturity level.

**We increase visibility**

We elevate circular progress and success cases in front of the right audiences through industry stages and trusted channels.

**We build thought leadership**

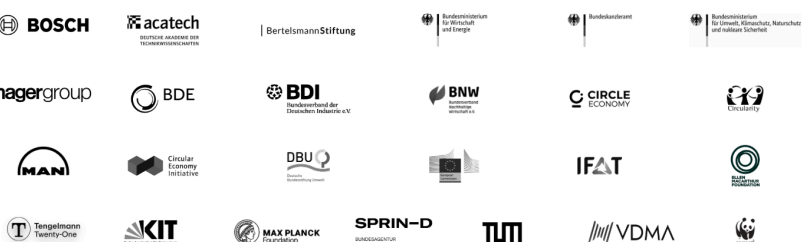
We position key insights, partner organizations and startups in the public discourse through co-authored, publication-ready content.

## Partners

### Industry Leaders (selection)



### Institutions & Networks (selection)



# Startup-corporate collaboration in practice: Startup examples



Closing Europe's critical raw material gap requires both bold technology and industrial commitment. The **Knorr-Bremse Circular Technology Award**, developed in partnership with CIRCULAR REPUBLIC, brought together 50+ startups tackling exactly this challenge. Four were recognized: **R3 Robotics** and **Hiro Robotics** for AI-driven automated disassembly, **DEScycle** and **HyProMag** for next-generation critical material recovery. DEScycle's Deep Eutectic Solvent process, extracting metals from e-waste without conventional refinery heat, was simultaneously highlighted by Handelsblatt as a prime example of Europe's emerging recycling leadership. Now, the most promising approaches move into funded proof-of-concept projects, where industrial scale meets startup agility to turn deep tech into market-ready solutions.



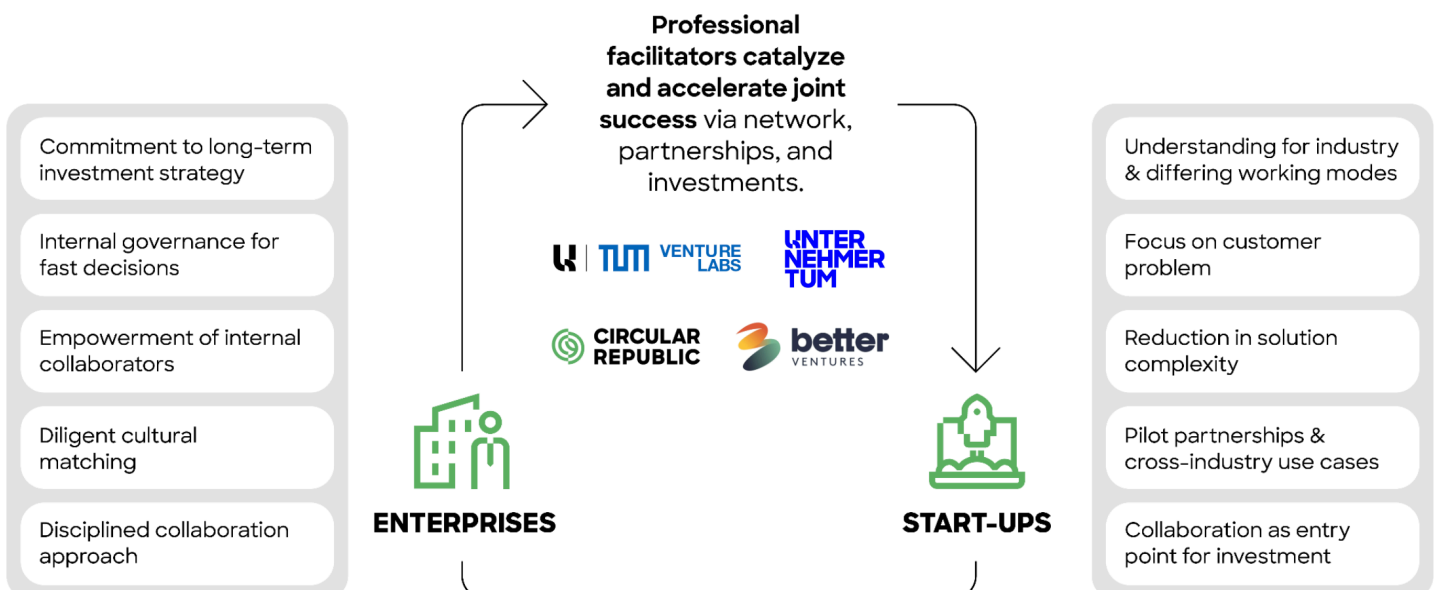
Making sustainable consumption effortless requires both smart infrastructure and the right retail partners. **reo**, supported through CIRCULAR REPUBLIC's involvement in the **Zero Waste Innovation Hub Munich**, built exactly that: a digital platform connecting cosmetics brands with existing deposit machine infrastructure in retail. Five corporate partners joined the pilot: **Kaufland, VollCorner, Kneipp, Laverana and Logocos**. Customers simply return empty cosmetic packaging at checkout and receive 29 cents per item. The pilot demonstrates how startups can leverage established retail ecosystems to scale circular solutions fast, without asking consumers to go the extra mile.



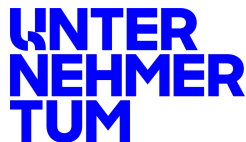
Extending the life of premium textiles is one of the most powerful levers for closing the loop in fashion, but it only works when material innovation and resale infrastructure come together. **Trove** addresses a white-label recommerce platform that enables premium brands to take back, refurbish, and resell their own garments at scale. Through CIRCULAR REPUBLIC's textile innovation network, **Trove** was connected with online retailer **Bergezeit** and fabric producer **Gore**: by combining durable materials and a re-commerce platform with Trove's operating system, the collaboration created a seamless circular pathway for technical outdoor apparel, keeping high-value garments in circulation instead of in landfills. The partnership highlights how corporate material expertise and startup-driven resale infrastructure can turn durability from a product claim into a lasting business model.

## Close the loop together:

How to avoid common pitfalls for both enterprises and startups to collaborate most effectively



# Startup-Corporate collaboration: Frameworks from our network



UnternehmerTUM Company Innovation is where Europe's largest innovation center meets corporate transformation. It bridges the gap between established companies and the startup world, enabling corporates to systematically access, pilot, and scale new technologies through venture building, venture clienting, and intrapreneurship programs, next to designing new business models, giving strategic guidance and enabling organizations on innovation. By combining structured processes with deep expertise and access to Europe's leading startup ecosystem, UnternehmerTUM's team driving Company Innovation turns corporate-startup collaboration into a scalable, measurable capability.

## OUR NUMBERS

**10+ years**  
VENTURE CLIENTING  
EXPERIENCE

**200+**  
STARTUP COLLABORATION  
PROJECTS

**>90%**  
STARTUPS STILL ALIVE

**4-6 month**  
AVERAGE POC RUN TIME

## Archetypes of collaboration

### Venture Building

We empower companies to design and launch new business models and revenue opportunities. The goal is to build new revenue pools while retaining full ownership of the process, including control over execution, IP, and venture direction. This model gives corporates the flexibility to draw on internal teams, external talent, or a combination of both to approach venture creation in a way that fits their needs.

### Venture Clienting

We enable companies to build and operate Venture Clienting as a systematic capability, from clear use case definition to scalable implementation across business units. Through structured processes, access to Europe's leading startup ecosystem, and operational support, we reduce complexity and accelerate measurable results. Our approach combines setup and operations into an end-to-end solution for sustainable innovation partnerships.

### Intrapreneurship

We design and run intrapreneurship programs focused on internal venture teams. Beyond fostering innovative thinking within organizations, a distinctive feature of our approach is the integration of internal startup teams into the broader UnternehmerTUM ecosystem. These teams can participate in our programs alongside external startups, leveraging shared infrastructure while learning from and competing with founders building from the ground up.

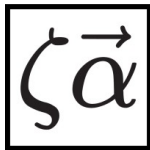
## Corporate Partners



# Startup-corporate collaboration in practice: Startup examples



**Wacker Chemie AG** faced a pressing challenge in its production operations: manual quality control processes were slow, error-prone, and increasingly strained by a shortage of skilled labor. To modernize its assembly verification and defect detection, Wacker partnered with **ANTICIPATE**, an AI-driven visual inspection startup, through UnternehmerTUM's Venture Client program. ANTICIPATE's software combines intelligent camera systems with real-time image analysis to detect foreign objects and deviations on the production line, eliminating the need for manual inspection. Within a short pilot phase, an AI model was trained, optimized, and validated at Wacker's plant, demonstrating reliable object detection with high accuracy. The collaboration reduced operator dependency in quality control, cut associated costs, and unlocked a scalable path to automated assembly verification across production sites. This case shows how structured corporate-startup programs can turn cutting-edge AI into deployable, operational solutions the fast way.



**Festo**, a leading family-owned company in pneumatic and electric automation technology, sought to leverage generative AI to optimize its manufacturing processes and technical workflows. Through UnternehmerTUM, Festo was matched with Dutch startup **Zeta Alpha**, whose platform structures unstructured data to enable better-informed decision-making. What began as a single pilot project rapidly expanded into a five-application collaboration driven by early alignment on values and trust, shared AI expertise on both sides, weekly syncs and workshops, and strong executive involvement that kept focus sharp and expectations consistently exceeded. The partnership delivered results beyond the initial scope: Festo established itself as a reference client for high-tech AI applications, while Zeta Alpha gained access to new geographies and industries. The pilot concluded with a long-term contract, a testament to how structured corporate-startup matchmaking, combined with operational discipline, can turn a proof-of-concept into lasting strategic value.

## SIMPLIFYBER

The footwear industry faces mounting pressure to reduce its environmental footprint, yet most production methods rely on synthetic, non-biodegradable materials that compromise sustainability without delivering gains in quality or design. **HP Tech Ventures** partnered with **Simplifyber**, a startup specializing in fully biodegradable footwear and clothing made from natural fibers to tackle this challenge head-on. Using Simplifyber's proprietary cellulose-based formula and molding technology, combined with HP's additive manufacturing capabilities, the collaboration produced the world's first fully biodegradable, plant-based shoe. Beyond the product itself, the PoC established a new, efficient textile development process that validated a unique manufacturing use case at scale. The partnership continued well beyond the pilot, underscoring the broader potential of this approach to reshape sustainable fashion manufacturing.

## 4 guiding principles for successful startup-corporate collaboration

### Anchor collaboration in a clear, shared value proposition

Define objectives, expectations, and success metrics from the outset — ensuring corporates, startups, and innovation hubs operate with clarity, transparency, and a shared sense of purpose.

### Keep collaboration startup-friendly and founder-led

Provide startups with access to corporate expertise and networks while preserving their agility — making decisions quickly, keeping agreements simple, and ensuring founders remain in control.

### Enable early industry validation

Enable startups to test and pilot solutions in real corporate environments through structured matchmaking — accelerating learning and reducing market risk from day one.

### Use trusted intermediaries to bridge cultural and structural gaps

Leverage innovation hubs to act as translators between startups and corporates — aligning expectations, managing relationships, and maintaining momentum through continuous engagement.