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EVIDENCE BRIEF
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EVIDENCE BRIEF · INNOVATION AND NETWORKS

Everyone Has an Ecosystem, Few Define It

What is an innovation ecosystem?

Event organizers, cities and corporations all describe their networks as ecosystems, and the term has boomed in research too. Reviews of definitions, a theory of ecosystems, a special issue of Research Policy, a review of 340 studies on company linkages and a bibliometric study show what the term means, and where conferences and trade shows fit.

By Eventamin · How we work 12 November 2026 Worldwide

●●●●● 5 studies

innovation ecosystem definition | business ecosystems | platform ecosystems | complementarity | modularity | open innovation | industry networks | conferences and trade shows | innovation systems | ecosystem strategy

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KEY FINDING

Innovation ecosystem has no single definition: 21 distinct definitions share only one component, actors, and most stress collaboration while ignoring competition. Recent theory narrows it to autonomous firms whose offerings complement each other through modular products, and treats conferences and trade shows as linkages that source knowledge and open paths to market.

Five studies, 2016–2024

Key findings

- **The term has boomed.** Business journals indexed in Scopus published 12,794 articles on ecosystems between 1993 and 2022, with more than 2,000 a year by the end of the period [1].
- **Definitions diverge.** A review of 120 publications found 21 distinct definitions of innovation ecosystem [2].
- **Actors are the only common ground.** All 21 definitions include actors and 16 include collaboration or complements, but only six include competition or substitutes [2].
- **Modularity is the dividing line.** Ecosystems arise where modular products let autonomous firms coordinate through complementary offerings without a single hierarchy [1,3].
- **Events are ecosystem linkages.** A review of 340 studies classifies conferences and conventions as channels for sourcing knowledge and trade shows as paths to market [4].

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FOR THE MARKET

Market outcomes

What the studies mean for each part of the industry.

Organisers & associations	Conferences and trade shows are among the linkages that hold ecosystems together: conferences source knowledge early in the innovation process, trade shows open paths to market later. Positioning an event within a clearly defined ecosystem is more credible than using the label loosely.
Exhibitors & sponsors	Ecosystem strategy depends on complements: firms gain from ecosystems where their products fit with others' through shared standards or platforms, and lose where rivals offer substitutes the definitions often ignore.
Investors & advisers	An ecosystem in the strict sense requires autonomous firms, complementary offerings and a modular architecture; networks that lack these are alliances, supply chains or communities, with different risks and returns.

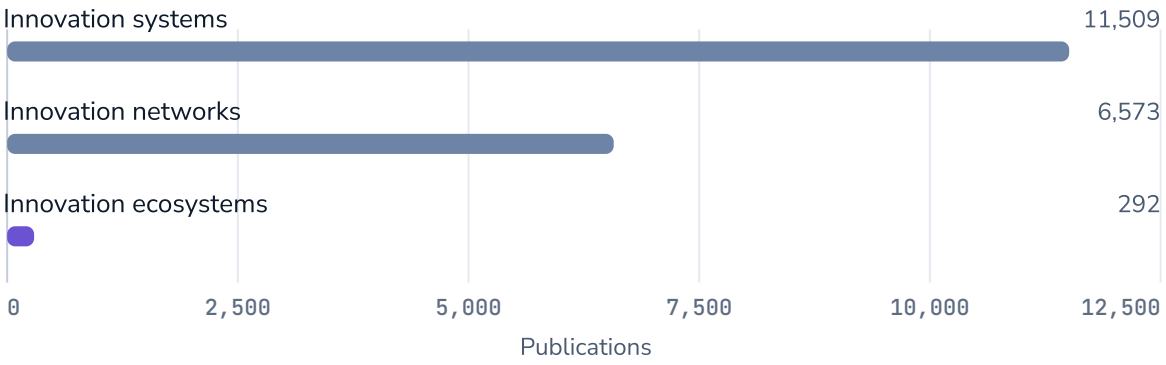
An overused word

Ecosystem has become a standard word in business. Business journals indexed in Scopus published 12,794 articles on ecosystems between 1993 and 2022, rising from almost none to more than 2,000 a year[1]. In the Web of Science, the ecosystem stream remained small next to research on innovation systems and networks, with 292 contributions against 11,509 and 6,573, but 218 of them appeared between 2010 and 2014 alone[5].

The three streams rarely overlap: only 35 of 18,374 publications belong to all three[5]. Reviews and theory papers show what the term actually means.

Publications on innovation systems, networks and ecosystems in the Web of Science

Number of publications.



Source: D'Auria et al. · Release date: 2016 · Region: Worldwide · Database: Web of Science Core Collection

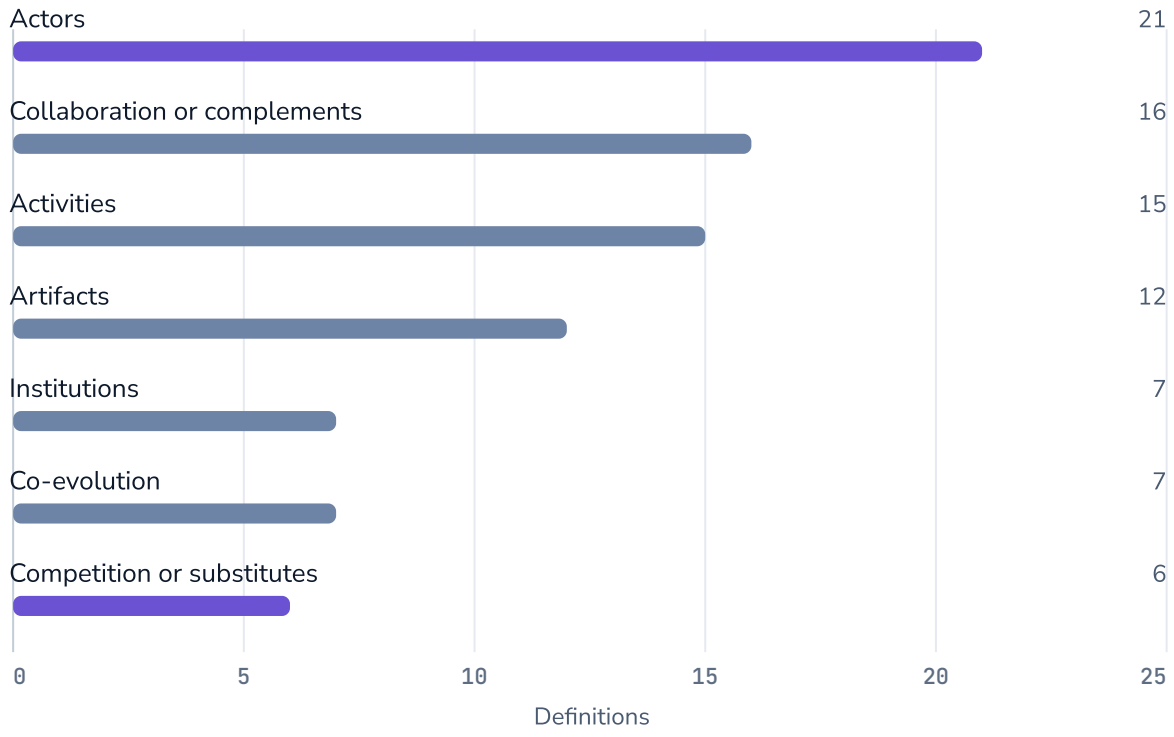
Twenty-one definitions

A review of 120 publications found 21 distinct definitions of innovation ecosystem[2]. Actors appear in all of them, collaboration or complements in 16 and activities in 15, while artifacts such as products and technologies appear in 12 and competition or substitutes in only six[2]. The concept has become one-sided, stressing cooperation while real ecosystems also involve rivalry[2].

The authors propose a definition that includes both: the evolving set of actors, activities and artifacts, and the institutions and relations, including complementary and substitute relations, that matter for the innovative performance of an actor or a population of actors[2].

Components included in definitions of innovation ecosystem

Number of definitions out of 21.



Source: Granstrand & Holgersson · Release date: 2019 · Region: Worldwide · Definitions reviewed: 21

What makes an ecosystem

Theory narrows the definition. Ecosystems differ from markets, alliances and supply chains because they coordinate firms whose products are complements, and a modular architecture lets those firms stay autonomous without a hierarchy above them[3]. A synthesis of a special issue of Research Policy proposes three tests: autonomy, complementarity and modularity, met by ecosystems from smart home products and healthcare IT to semiconductor platforms and small satellites[1].

Earlier work framed ecosystems around a focal firm, a focal innovation or a platform; the leading formulation describes an ecosystem as the alignment structure of the partners that must interact for a value proposition to materialize[3].

SOURCE	DEFINITION IN BRIEF	FOCUS
Adner (2006), cited 292 times [S204]	Collaborative arrangements through which firms combine offerings into a customer-facing solution [2]	A focal innovation and its complements [3]
Jacobides et al. (2018) [S205]	Firms with complementary offerings coordinated through a modular architecture [3]	When and why ecosystems emerge [3]
Granstrand & Holgersson (2019) [S204]	Actors, activities, artifacts, institutions and relations, including substitutes [2]	Innovative performance [2]
Baldwin et al. (2024) [S206]	Groups meeting three tests: autonomy, complementarity, modularity [1]	Identifying ecosystems in the economy [1]

Where events fit

Events are among the linkages that make an ecosystem open. A review of 340 management studies sorted company-to-company linkages into three types of open innovation activity [4]. Conferences and conventions belong with patents, acquisitions and R&D alliances as ways to source knowledge; trade shows belong with outsourcing and business transactions as paths to market; alliances, clusters and communities are shared activities [4].

Openness itself has several dimensions: the breadth and depth of linkages, their freedom from formal contracts, and the number of phases and actors involved [4]. Sourcing linkages concentrate on early phases of innovation, paths to market on later phases, and shared activities span the most [4].

Company linkages in open innovation ecosystems, by type of activity and phase of innovation

Classification of the study's mapping.



Source: Öberg & Alexander · Release date: 2018 · Region: Worldwide · Studies reviewed: 340 · Classification: Eventamin

Notes on the data

The figures are based on five studies published between 2016 and 2024: a conceptual review of 120 publications, a theory paper, a special-issue synthesis using 12,794 Scopus-indexed articles, a review of 340 management studies and a bibliometric analysis of 18,374 Web of Science publications [1–5]. Publication counts depend on the databases and search terms used. The grid of linkages simplifies the study's mapping of linkages to openness dimensions and phases and is Eventamin's classification.

Sources

● Study ○ Industry source

1 Baldwin, C. Y., Bogers, M. L. A. M., Kapoor, R., & West, J. (2024). Focusing the ecosystem lens on innovation studies [Journal article]. *Research Policy, 53(3), 104949*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2023.104949 First-hand

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4 Öberg, C., & Alexander, A. T. (2018). The openness of open innovation in ecosystems – Integrating innovation and management literature on knowledge linkages [Journal article]. *Journal of Innovation & Knowledge*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jik.2017.10.005 First-hand

5 D'Auria, A., Tregua, M., Spena, T. R., & Bifulco, F. (2016). Exploring innovation contexts: system, network and ecosystem innovation [Journal article]. *International Journal of Management and Enterprise Development, 15, 127–146*. First-hand

The evidence

5 studies

SAMPLE

Five studies: a review of 120 publications yielding 21 definitions, a theory paper, a special-issue synthesis with 12,794 indexed articles, a review of 340 studies on company linkages and a bibliometric analysis of 18,374 publications

YEARS

2016–2024

METHOD

Conceptual reviews, theory building and bibliometric analysis

About Eventamin

Eventamin reads the peer-reviewed research on events, exhibitions and hospitality, sets it against industry data and states what it means for the market. Every brief is published by Eventamin as an organisation: its sources, method and corrections are open.

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