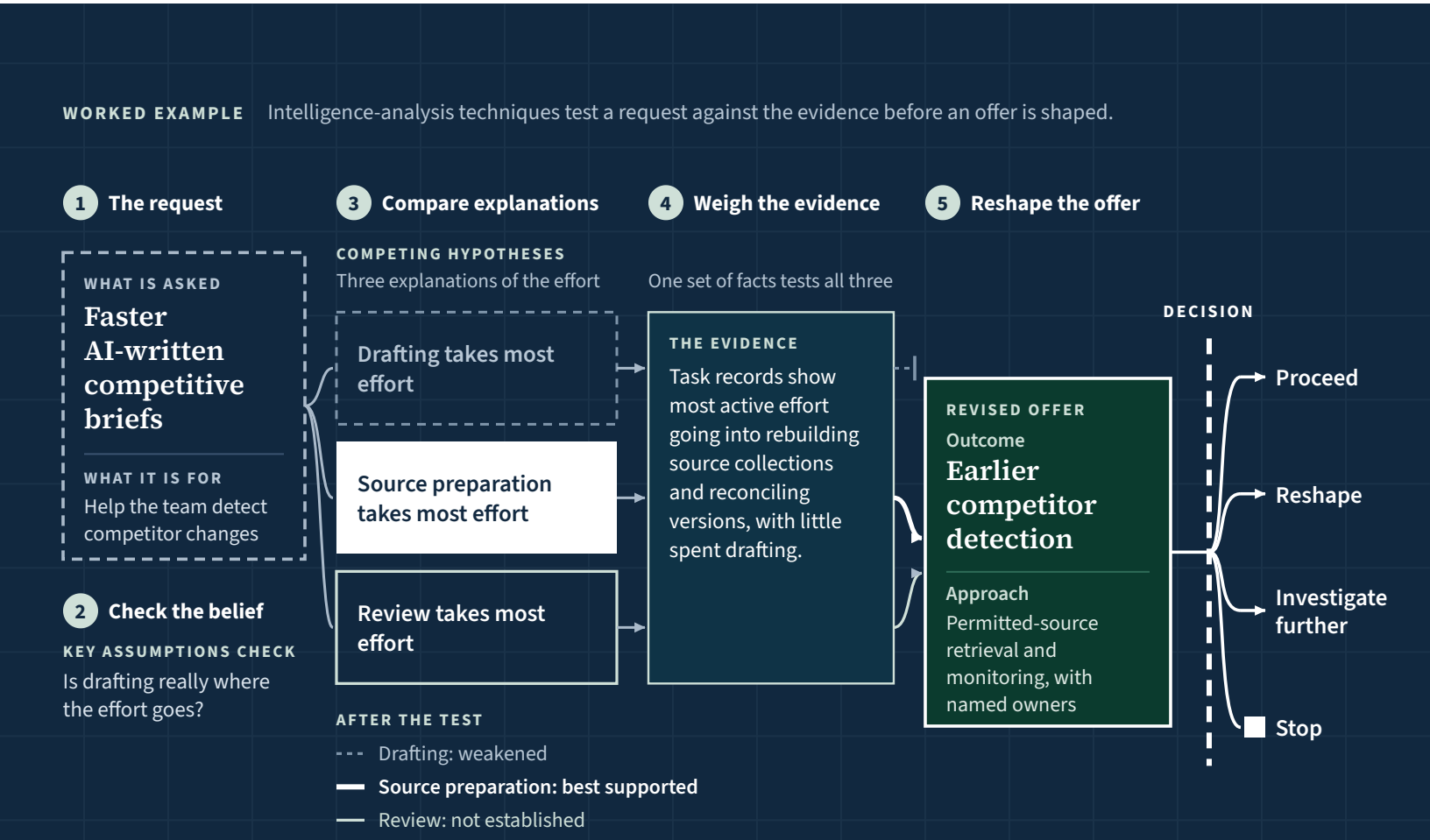
Deal Formation: From Interest to a Pilot Decision

Structured analytic techniques from intelligence analysis, applied to forming enterprise AI partnerships in pharmaceutical commercial operations.
Where to use each one, and why.



Eight analytical techniques
A clearer basis for the next partnership decision

October 2026 | Revised 17 November 2026

EXECUTIVE PERSPECTIVE

Decide what the pilot must answer

Before committing to an AI pilot, buyer and partner need a shared view of the problem, the evidence and the decision that will follow.

Outside partners are central to how pharmaceutical commercial teams plan to use AI. In IQVIA's May 2025 survey of 107 senior commercial leaders, 89% said their organizations were already co-developing AI with external vendors or actively considering it (Kotakonda & Awasthi, 2025, p. 1). In a separate 2026 ZS survey of 223 pharmaceutical and biotechnology technology executives, 60% cited data and technology infrastructure readiness and 59% cited regulatory and compliance uncertainty as barriers to scaling AI (Majeed, 2026).

These surveys ask different questions, and neither explains why a particular partnership stalls. They do point to questions worth asking early in any opportunity. Does this workflow need AI? May the partner use the required data? Who will run the service after the pilot? What would justify further spending? The answers can change the scope, the price or the choice of partner.

This report applies structured analytic techniques (SATs) to those questions. Intelligence analysts use them to work with incomplete and ambiguous information, where people tend to perceive what they expect to perceive. The U.S. Government's tradecraft primer notes that seasoned analysts can be more susceptible to this, because their mental models have served them well (U.S. Government, 2009, pp. 1–2). The techniques make assumptions explicit, test rival explanations against the same evidence and identify the signs that would change a judgment. Partnership formation works under similar conditions, and a wrong call can produce a pilot that answers the wrong question.

Agree why this partnership makes sense

The partnership rationale is the shared explanation of why this buyer should act now. It states the business problem, how the proposed service would help, what the buyer could do instead, each party's responsibilities and the next decision. As new evidence arrives, both sides should update that explanation together.

Test the reasoning before making the commitment

Start by checking the assumptions the proposal depends on. Once the offer is specific enough to examine, ask why a responsible buyer might reject or change it. Run that challenge before approving a pilot, while the scope and responsibilities can still change.

The result should be a clear next step: investigate an unanswered question, reshape the offer, authorize a pilot with defined limits, or stop. The chapters explain which technique helps with each choice.

Each stage asks for a different commitment, and different evidence.

Investigate	Shape	Evaluate	Commit
Confirm the business problem and the question worth answering.	Agree a scope, responsibilities and offer that the evidence supports.	Run a limited pilot with permissions, success criteria and a named next decision.	Obtain the funding, permissions and operating acceptance needed for what follows.

GATE 2: PILOT AUTHORIZATION

© 2026 Ernesto Encarnacion | Licensed use

THE ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

Five conclusions for partnership leaders

A promising conversation becomes a credible partnership when both sides can explain what they are trying to achieve, what remains uncertain and who decides next.

1 **Clarify which outcome you are examining.**
These are different outcomes: an opportunity ends without a decision, a pilot never reaches routine use, staff do not adopt a tool, or the buyer chooses an existing platform. Keep them separate when interpreting research and deciding what to investigate. Pages 4 to 7.

2 **Check what the proposal depends on.**
An AI writer may look attractive because everyone assumes drafting is slow. A Key Assumptions Check asks whether that is true and whether a different finding would change the offer. Pages 17 to 19.

3 **Include data rights and review responsibilities in the proposed service.**
Licensed sources, promotional review and safety reporting can change what the partner may deliver and what it costs. Identify these conditions while shaping the offer. Pages 7, 18 and 27 to 30.

4 **Confirm each person's authority.**
A sponsor can support the idea without controlling the budget, data permissions or workflow. Identify who holds each decision on both sides. Page 8.

5 **Agree what happens after the pilot.**
State the next business decision, who will make it and what evidence they need. A successful technical test alone does not authorize production. Pages 39 to 42.

Pharmaceutical sponsors

Use the decision-owner map (who holds each approval, p.**8**), the premortem (imagining the pilot has failed, p.**31**) and the pilot charter (the agreement on the test, p.**40**) to decide what a partner must show before you commit resources.

AI partners

Use Outside-In (starting from the buyer's market, p.**14**), Competing Hypotheses (testing rival explanations, pp.**23** to **25**) and the red team (why a buyer might decline, p.**27**) to shape an offer the buyer can own and approve.

Both, together

Use the technique finder (which technique fits which question, p.**12**) and the indicator record (events that change the next decision, p.**37**) to keep a shared view of what has changed and who decides next.

HOW TO READ THE EVIDENCE

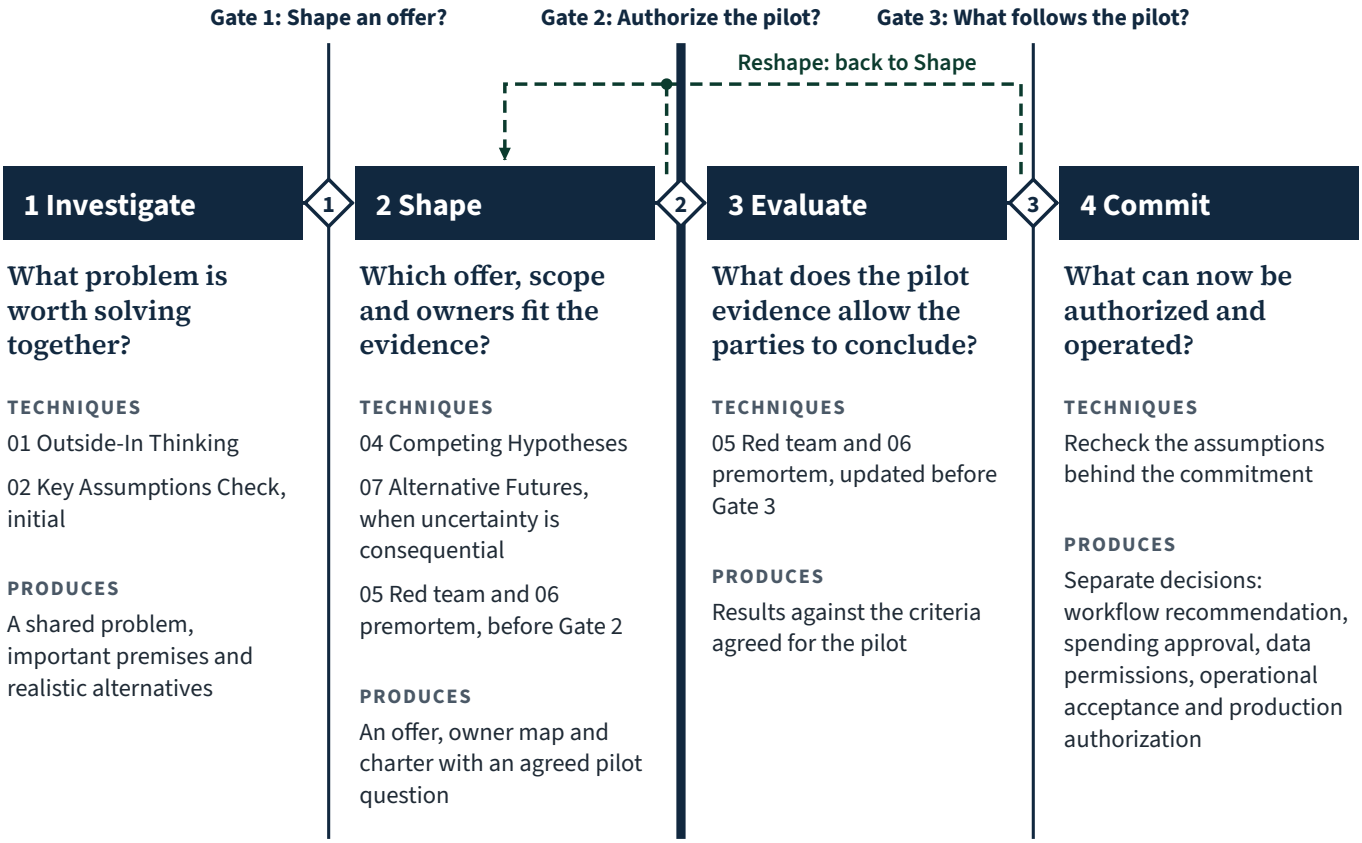
Author–date citations identify published findings and methods; full details are in the References (p.**46**). Unless a citation says otherwise, the choice and sequence of techniques, the commercial examples and the recommended responses are the author's applications.

© 2026 Ernesto Encarnacion | Licensed use

THE FORMATION WORKFLOW

How the partnership moves toward a decision

Four stages and three gates organize the work. Gate 2 authorizes the pilot; Gate 3 decides what happens after it.



What problem is worth solving together?

TECHNIQUES

01 Outside-In Thinking

02 Key Assumptions Check, initial

PRODUCES

A shared problem, important premises and realistic alternatives

Which offer, scope and owners fit the evidence?

TECHNIQUES

04 Competing Hypotheses

07 Alternative Futures, when uncertainty is consequential

05 Red team and 06 premortem, before Gate 2

PRODUCES

An offer, owner map and charter with an agreed pilot question

What does the pilot evidence allow the parties to conclude?

TECHNIQUES

05 Red team and 06 premortem, updated before Gate 3

PRODUCES

Results against the criteria agreed for the pilot

What can now be authorized and operated?

TECHNIQUES

Recheck the assumptions behind the commitment

PRODUCES

Separate decisions: workflow recommendation, spending approval, data permissions, operational acceptance and production authorization

RESPONSE	Where it leads at Gate 1	Where it leads at Gate 2	Where it leads at Gate 3
→ **Proceed**	Move to 2 Shape	Start 3 Evaluate within the agreed limits	Move to 4 Commit
↰ **Reshape**	Reframe the problem in 1 Investigate (no offer yet)	Return to 2 Shape to change the offer, scope or responsibilities	
⇠ **Investigate further**	Return to 1 Investigate to resolve the question blocking the decision		
⊣ **Stop**	Available at every gate: end the effort and record the reason		

THROUGHOUT

02 Key Assumptions Check **03 Quality of Information Check** **08 Indicators and Signposts**

Numbers refer to the techniques in the finder (p.**12**), not a required sequence. Gate details follow on the next page.

© 2026 Ernesto Encarnacion | Licensed use

04 Competing Hypotheses

STAGE Shape

Understand the cause before choosing the solution

Use Competing Hypotheses when several explanations could fit the same problem or buyer behavior, but the team is acting on only one.

> **RUNNING EXAMPLE** The sponsor asks for faster competitive briefs. The provider hears a need for an AI writer, but the delay could come from collecting sources, composing the brief or waiting for review. Until buyer and provider know which explanation fits the work, they cannot tell which change would help.

Analysis of Competing Hypotheses tests several explanations against the same evidence and gives most weight to evidence that disconfirms them (U.S. Government, 2009, pp. 14–15). A fact that fits every explanation does little to tell them apart.

Look for evidence that tells explanations apart

If analysts spend most of their time finding sources, faster writing may leave the main burden untouched. If finished briefs wait in approval queues, the team should examine review responsibilities. If analysts struggle to reconcile conflicting claims, links to the original evidence may matter more than draft generation.

For each explanation, ask what evidence would count against it. Several causes may contribute at once. Start with a short comparison; use a fuller evidence matrix when the complexity and consequences warrant that effort.

Separate the cause from the response

Finding that source preparation takes most of the effort identifies a problem, not a solution. Buying retrieval, improving existing search or deferring investment are possible responses. Establish the cause first, then compare those responses against the buyer's objectives, available tools and constraints.

Use the same reasoning when a buyer goes quiet

A buyer's silence can also fit several explanations. The comparison on page **25** shows why a priority change, an approval queue and unconfirmed funding call for different evidence and next steps.

The analysis should change the team's next move. Rather than arrange another demonstration, it may need a data owner's confirmation, a review-process discussion, a narrower offer or a test of an existing tool.

RUNNING EXAMPLE Task records show most active effort going into rebuilding source collections and reconciling versions, with little spent drafting. Source preparation is the better-supported starting point for a test; its effect on elapsed time is still unmeasured. Buyer and provider therefore shift the offer toward retrieval from permitted sources.

© 2026 Ernesto Encarnacion | Licensed use