



*Do Improved connections between
incubators lead to trust &
collaboration?*

What's Inside

Abstract.....	3
Key words.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Methodology.....	4
Findings and Discussion.....	5
Geographic and Sectoral Concentration in Existing Research.....	19
Gaps and Limitations in existing literature.....	19
Recommendations from the reviewed Literature.....	21
Conclusion and Scope for Future Research.....	24
Bibliography.....	25

Abstract

This literature review examines whether enhanced connections among impact incubators lead to increased trust and collaboration within entrepreneurial ecosystems. Drawing from 30 peer-reviewed and practitioner sources published between 2015 and 2025, the review synthesizes evidence across themes including network structure, social capital, orchestration, competition and contextual barriers. Findings indicate that both formal and informal connections, shaped by deliberate orchestration, dense ties and shared values, are critical in fostering trustful and collaborative behavior. However, sectoral and geographical concentration in existing studies and a lack of longitudinal and comparative research, constrain broader applicability. By integrating incubator-specific and cross-sector evidence, the review highlights the need for robust, context-sensitive network design and recommends focusing future research on underrepresented incubator types and sectors, alongside adaptive, multi-level empirical approaches. These steps are essential for unlocking the full potential of incubator networks to drive resilient and inclusive ecosystem development.

Key words

Impact incubators, Entrepreneurial ecosystems, Inter-organizational networks, Trust, Collaboration, Network structure, Network orchestration, Connection, Social Network, Peer Network, Innovation Ecosystem.

Introduction

Impact incubators play an increasingly pivotal role in entrepreneurial ecosystems, particularly for ventures addressing social and environmental challenges. Beyond supporting startups, these organizations form networks that connect similar incubators, promising to strengthen trust and collaboration among members. Trust and types of trust between stakeholders and actors emerged as central to the measuring effectiveness of networks (Farrugia et al., 2022). Establishing whether improved connections within these networks drive meaningful trust and collaborative activity is critical, especially for practitioners seeking to replicate proven models and policymakers aiming to foster robust ecosystems. However, the causal pathways through which inter-incubator connections translate into trust and collaboration remain insufficiently theorized. This review synthesizes the peer-reviewed and practitioner literature on the question, extending its lens to analogous networks of homogenous organizations- including health consortia and nonprofit collaborations- to draw lessons relevant for the impact incubation field.

Methodology

The review draws on 30 academic and practitioner sources identified through systematic and snowball searches of open-access journals, reports and case studies roughly between 2015 and 2025, while also including one case relevant source from 2005. Inclusion criteria focused on works addressing the impact of network structures on trust and collaboration among incubators or similar organizational clusters. In acknowledging gaps in sector-specific literature, sources on nonprofit, health and service delivery networks were also included where their network organizational model, context or collaboration mechanisms paralleled those of impact incubators. Methods represented across the literature include qualitative case studies, surveys, systematic and scoping literature reviews and field-level reports.

Findings and Discussion

The literature consistently affirms that improved inter-organizational connections among impact incubators- and similar homogenous organizations- are pivotal in building both trust and collaboration, although the mechanisms and contexts for these outcomes are multifaceted. Much of the evidence underscores that the quality and type of inter-incubator relationships play a determinative role in shaping trust-building processes and the nature of collaborative activities that follow. While conducting a thorough review of open-access literature, we came across the following themes-

1. Network Structures and Coopetition

A substantial body of research indicates that the structure of networks among impact incubators play a crucial role in fostering trust and laying the groundwork for collaboration. Robust, well-managed networks are characterized by either intentional formalization or the nurturing of organic, informal ties, each offering unique benefits and challenges.

Recent studies focusing on incubators reveal that both **formal and informal networks** hold potential for cultivating trust, but they do so through distinct mechanisms. Bibeau et al. (2024) in its review found that some researchers recommend maintaining informal and relational networks that ensure the free flow of information and knowledge between stakeholders, even noting the limited impact of formalizing such cooperation (Schwartz and Hornyk, 2010). From this perspective, others point out that not all network structures help the development of incubated entrepreneurs (Shih and Aabo, 2019). *Therefore, while formal networks can provide clear rules for engagement and accountability among network members, it has been observed that informal, organically-grown networks help deepen relationships through peer learning and day-to-day interaction generating deepest levels of interpersonal trust.*

This theme is echoed in Eveleens et al. (2017), who highlight that network-based incubation is associated with improvements in the sense of belongingness and trust for incubated start-ups. In these settings, trust is fostered along with interactive and sharing culture, inducing strong ties among start-ups. Such network models offer knowledge and resource sharing, and the frequent exchange of tacit information- activities that are often less dependent on rigid structures. Therefore, while formal networks can set a foundation for accountability and resource exchange, Eveleens et al. (2017) argue in their study that when the organizations are weakly tied (in more informal settings), the relationship is easier to maintain as they usually connect actors from different contexts holding different (new) information. [Therefore, a balance between both kinds of network settings can result in social capital benefits for these organizations.](#)

Complementing these qualitative accounts, Antunes et al. (2021) demonstrate that when incubators take on an orchestrator's role- setting up the network, encouraging cooperation, recruiting and selecting members- they "set the tone" for mutual accountability among participating organizations, catalyzing trust and collaboration. On the other hand, Theodoraki and Messeghem (2020) provide empirical support for **"coopetition"** models wherein while incubators are encouraged to collaborate with ecosystem members such as policymakers, service providers (venture capitalists, consultants, law firms, real estate agents, accountants), competitors (other incubators), and complementors (research entities, universities) for access to resources, they also compete to gain competitive advantages. Therefore, co-opetition emerges in dynamic environments that bring together heterogeneous actors with divergent individual and collective goals. [This cooperation mixed with competitive pressures builds collaborative momentum and tends to improve member performance over time.](#) These orchestrated approaches mitigate the risks of fragmentation and thus creating a predictable foundation for subsequent collaborative action.

This pattern is not unique to the incubation field. Looking across to nonprofit clusters and health networks, parallel mechanisms are documented. For example, Reiter et al. (2018) describe how past acquaintances, mutual experiences and shared visions raise the level of trust, which in turn affects the reciprocal relations and therefore the collaboration process resulting in higher social effectiveness for social services. Notably, they also found that even when the goals and visions are not shared, high levels of trust is achieved through interpersonal relationships.

Similarly, Hente and Schlesinger's (2024) examination of health management networks in Germany concludes that trust emerges not from formality, but from shared purposes, sense of familiarity and mutual support, which enhanced the degree of trust between each other. This aligns with the broader literature on trust, which posits that authentic trust is "relational," built gradually through repeated interactions and significant resource allocation (Zaheer & Harris, 2006.). IBM in their review on Inter-organizational networks also suggested that leadership in a network is not viewed as the purview of a single leader in a formal leadership position, but rather seen as something more organic in nature that is supported and grown across the network where leadership processes can be shared, distributed, collective, relational, dynamic, emergent and adaptive. The role of a network manager as leader is to nurture this kind of leadership (Popp et al., 2014).

Understanding the relationships and processes occurring through the network structure is as important as understanding the structure itself. If a network is to thrive and achieve its goals, the type of work and the way in which it is conducted must support the ongoing development of relationships and collaborative processes (Popp et al., 2014).

2. Network Capacity and Cognitive Social Capital

Moving beyond structure, the network capacity, quality of the network ties and the accumulation of **social capital** are consistently identified as primary drivers of collaboration among incubators. [Dong et al. \(2023\)](#), using quantitative modelling across 234 Chinese technology business incubators, found that network capacity (network resource patching ability and network cross-organization learning ability) has a significant positive impact on the service innovation performance of technology business incubators. This leads to higher levels of trust across the network which may indirectly strengthen trust and collaborative dynamics. These outcomes range from information and resource sharing to the joint development of service offerings and programs.

In line with this, a review by [Li et al. \(2017\)](#) on incubated enterprises revealed that cognitive social capital provides an opportunity for incubated enterprises to deepen cooperation with other subjects, helps effectively resolve conflicts of interests in the process of cooperation, create a harmonious atmosphere of cooperation thus promoting exchanges of intangible resources. The review suggests strengthening this **cognitive social capital** through cohesion of the incubation network, exploring valuable innovation points from the frequent communication and interaction with other network subjects and promoting the “sharing economy” model of innovation resources. [Interactions between incubator managers, repeated over long periods, foster an environment where risk-taking and mutual reliance are normalized.](#) This social capital becomes a platform through which incubators can coordinate action, resolve disputes amicably and build cross-network trust, even in intensely competitive sectors.

Field reports and case studies provide rich illustrations of these claims. Prim et al. (2019), through a deep dive into a technological incubator of cooperatives in Brazil, show that in an innovation network, it is a highly collaborative process, where the interaction between members becomes a determining point in the effectiveness and success of their work. Here, incubators advance from basic information sharing to joint social innovation projects, reinforced by a sense of belongingness and shared vision. In this sense, the collaboration network formed by the projects, the incubator and the partners create strong bonds and lasting ties (Prim et al.; 2019). Social capital thus generates a willingness to collaborate among mobilized individuals and a sense of solidarity that can facilitate network members to take action (Eveleens et al., 2017).

However, analogous lessons from beyond the immediate incubation ecosystem also exist. Popp et al. (2014), in a cross-sector review, synthesizing more than a decade of evidence from health networks, found that despite the increase in density of ties as the network evolved, measures of trust across the network showed a slight decline. In these analogous sectors, as with incubators, social capital is not static but grows with time, experience, and repeated positive interactions.

Therefore, quantitative and qualitative findings converge on the value of multi-stranded, cohesive, high-frequency relationships- those which foster shared missions, regional proximity, mutual understanding and a shared vision (Hente and Schlesinger's 2024; Reiter et al. 2018; Li et al., 2017). The resulting "cognitive social capital" underlies the ability of incubators to co-create services, share innovations and build long lasting relationships. Such patterns are mirrored in analogous networks, where social capital predicts the success of network-level trust and building of formal, unique ties beyond the group (Popp et al., 2014). As also shown in Prim et al. (2019), collaborative initiatives thrive where a foundation of trust allows actors to move beyond formal exchanges and embrace collaborative solutions.

3. Network Orchestration and the Sustainment of Trust

The mechanisms by which networks are actively facilitated- and conflicts or challenges are mediated- emerge as a third central theme in building trust and sustaining collaboration. Antunes et al. (2021) argue that the presence of a "**network orchestrator**," such as a lead incubator or a dedicated intermediary organization, is often helpful in coordination and governance of the group. These orchestrators act as neutral brokers, aligning incentives, maintaining collective momentum and grouping resources and capabilities for the group members. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the orchestrator to ensure the creation, development and maintenance of relationships between network members (Antunes et al., 2021). Trust is described as the lubricant that makes cooperation possible between these actors, and higher levels of trust are believed to lead to increasing network effectiveness (Popp et al. 2014).

In a study by Ratinho et al., 2020, as a facilitator, broker, or mediator, the incubator manager serves as a lever to initiate and maintain the sharing of resources and knowledge between external networks and incubated entrepreneurs. Supporting this insight, Shih and Aaboen (2019) argue that incubators, by developing external networks, perform actions related to facilitation, mediation and brokerage. By facilitating introductions, setting shared agendas, and encouraging open communication channels, these mediating entities ensure organizational differences become a source of creative partnership rather than a barrier.

The value of orchestration and mediation extends to analogous fields as well. The literature on inter-organizational health networks in Germany highlights that third-party coordination- via a mediator- reduces networking hesitation and fosters long-term trust. They found that the coordinator generally maintained very close personal relationships with participants and invested time in them and this acted as a value addition as there was a direct person at the top (Hente & Schlesinger, 2024).

Therefore, the importance of leadership and deliberate orchestration should not be underestimated. Studies by Antunes et al. (2021) and Shih and Aaboen (2019) demonstrate that network orchestrators or mediating organizations can proactively shape the evolution of trust within the network members. They do so through continued interaction, by convening actors and facilitating shared resources, knowledge, information and experiences. In this way, the impact incubation field can adapt to the findings from health and nonprofit networks, where active stewardship and ongoing relationship management are repeatedly shown to be determinants of development and sustainment of trust & meaningful relationships and successful cooperation among those networks (Popp et al., 2014; Hente & Schlesinger, 2024).

4. The Role of Competition, Incentives and Environmental Dynamism

The intersection of network connections, market pressures and environmental dynamism forms another nuanced aspect of the trust-collaboration relationship. Results of a study by Theodoraki and Messeghem (2020) showed that the cooperation strategy positively impacts incubator performance while the competition strategy negatively impacts performance. However, the **“coopetition”** strategy, which results from the interaction between cooperation and competition, has a positive and significant effect on the incubator performance.

Further, Wu et al., 2020 suggest that incubators operating in more dynamic, rapidly changing environments are especially dependent on strong, trust-based networks to navigate market uncertainty. Therefore, a **dynamic environment** drives new ventures to strengthen communication and cooperation with other network members. Adding depth, Wu et al. (2020) in their study on 205 new ventures in Chinese Business Incubators found that Environmental dynamism has a positive moderating effect on BIs’ internal and external networks which means when environmental dynamism is high, the internal and external networks improve the Entrepreneurial Orientation of new ventures, and vice versa. The study also found that when facing high environmental dynamism, new ventures integrated resources creatively through BIs’ external networks to support innovativeness, proactiveness and risk taking. Theodoraki and Messeghem (2020), on the contrary, note that incubators operate in a dynamic environment in which a diversity of services are provided to tenants. This multiplicity of interdependent actors and the diversity of provided services may create a feeling of hostility or rivalry among ecosystem actors.

Additionally, Dong et al. (2023) in their research on Chinese incubators found that through incubator networks, incubators gained more opportunities for business collaboration and gained more access to scarce resources. Farrugia et al. (2022) further noted in their review on research and innovation networks that success factors of high value innovation networks were having diverse partners, financial leverage, third-party gatekeepers and partners who were proactively engaged. Engagement and interactions within such networks, in turn, build trust among network members which is necessary to be able to communicate within the network. However, argue that a high level of trust is to be avoided as it can lead to a very rigid system or lost opportunities for less trusting partners/stakeholders in acquiring strategic resources.

Therefore, literature from multiple sectors cite the necessity of a balancing open collaboration with inevitable competition for resources, with long-term trust only emerging through repeated positive engagements.

5. Contextual Barriers and the Limits of Network-Driven Trust

While the literature is largely optimistic about the potential of improved connections, important barriers and caveats are noted. Not every network achieves its trust-building aims automatically. Bibeau et al., 2024 in their study on network management revealed that the choice of whether or not to formalize certain practices in management of a network is configured according to factors such as the preferences and comfort level of the entrepreneurs and stakeholders involved (e.g., based on their previous professional experience, level of autonomy, ways of doing, capabilities, profile and personality), the nature and moment of the support (e.g., financial or not, later entry process), the available resources (e.g., time granted for support rather than reporting, context of the start-up of the incubator, initial links closer to a manager) and managers (e.g., profile, experience, time and context of decision-making in the incubator's development). Therefore, it is important to recognize the **dynamic nature of the social capital** in the ongoing interactions.

In Latin America, Ramirez et al. (2019) analyzed the intellectual capital (a combination of Human Capital, Structural Capital and Relational Capital) of 39 business incubators from 7 different countries and its impact on business incubator and highlighted in their review that in case of small businesses, inter-firm networks are identified as the source of new knowledge, competencies (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) and capabilities. Therefore, the ability to enter dynamic collaborative networks allows them to actively manage their intellectual capital. The incubated companies of these Latin American BIs share a common language and perspective which helps them build trust, mutual identification and strong relationships further improving their social capital.

Furthermore, sectoral context and geographic setting mediate outcomes. For example, Bachmann (2014) describes how Impact Hub, a global network of innovation spaces, had to connect diverse people coming from different worlds into meaningful relationships. The report also mentions a remark by a member saying “Ultimately, it’s all about cultivating personal relationships around a shared intent. It’s this strong personal connection- our having built something together- that unites us”. [Bachmann also mentions how revamping of the Impact hub encouraged the network members to be collectively responsible for the impact that they all want to create despite their individual differences.](#)

Strikingly, evidence from non-incubator sectors reminds us that network effectiveness is contingent on **transparency, resource parity and mutuality of incentive**. Reiter et al. (2018) describe cases where the levels of trust diminished among the network members because of divergence of their agendas. [They found that lack of mutual agenda](#), despite repeated meetings, led to differences in attitudes toward the project as a whole, resulting in personal negative feelings toward the leading managers. These realities reinforce the importance of carefully curating network designs along with their close monitoring.

Therefore, trust is not a guaranteed result of simply joining a network. Reiter et al., 2018 in their study cautioned that when the networks are structured well but the vision or agenda of the interacting members diverge over time, it can engender mistrust or disengagement from these participants. Likewise, when the ecosystem suffers from a multiplication of new players and decreasing financial resources, opportunistic behaviours and competition may emerge (Theodoraki & Messeghem, 2020). Network effectiveness, then, depends as much on the design of relational processes and governance as on the **parity of connections** themselves.

Furthermore, environmental and contextual factors play a decisive role in shaping how networks influence trust and collaboration. As Wu et al. (2020) show, organizations embedded in dynamic or rapidly changing environments depend heavily on such networks to navigate risk and uncertainty. In these settings, the agility and mutual support conferred by peer-based trust are vital to organizational survival and ecosystem resilience. Conversely, in more stable or homogenous contexts, formal mechanisms may suffice to maintain collaboration, but they will rarely suffice alone to drive innovation or learning.

6. Lessons from Cross-Sector Analogies

A final, unifying theme is the robust transferability of lessons from analogous networks to the context of impact incubation. Studies spanning Health networks (Popp et al., 2014; Hente & Schlesinger, 2024), and global research alliances (Farrugia et al., 2022) demonstrate that intentional, well-orchestrated network connections foster trust and enable collaborative impact, regardless of sector as long as the organizations come forward to fulfil the same vision. These analogies not only validate the mechanisms observed in incubator-focused research but also offer cautionary tales and tools for adaptation, particularly regarding governance, capacity-building and sustaining member engagement across contexts.

Therefore, transferability of models across contexts is promising, but requires adaptation. This review has found strong analogical support from nonprofit, health and research consortia, suggesting that certain network-building mechanisms- and their effects on trust- are not sector-specific but rather can be broadly applicable (Popp et al., 2014; Farrugia et al., 2022). Nonetheless, these analogies come with caveats: trust and collaboration thrive most when network interventions are tailored to local realities and contexts, participant incentives and the evolving balance of power and resources. Bachmann (2014), in his article on the global Impact Hub network, highlights the power of letting Hubs innovate with the model in their local context and sharing the best practices. He further mentions that the relationships within their organization should be transparent as an impact network, unlike a business network which is transactional, is more collaborative in nature.

In summary, while the literature overwhelmingly affirms that enhanced connections among impact incubators can foster trust and facilitate collaboration, realizing this potential depends on a constellation of factors: the formality and flexibility of the network, the presence of active orchestration, the diversity of social capital, the strategic management of co-competition and the broader environmental context. These findings underscore the necessity for practitioners and policymakers to approach network building as a deliberate, dynamic endeavour requiring dedicated investment in relationship management, leadership, and adaptive governance structures. The nuanced insights presented also highlight important systemic and contextual contingencies that require ongoing research and sensitive application.

Geographic and Sectoral Concentration in Existing Research

The existing research exhibits notable geographic and sectoral concentrations, with distinct distinctions between studies focusing directly on impact incubator networks and those examining analogous networks of homogenous organizations. A pronounced bias was noticed towards Global North in most of the studies reviewed, with limited comparative data from low-income regions. Except for a few studies from Latin America and South Asia, the bulk of the literature sources appears biased toward higher income regions of Europe and North America. Sectoral concentration is equally evident. Tech and Business incubators currently dominate the academic discourse in terms of global analysis whereas impact incubators remain significantly understudied and underrepresented, despite their growing relevance in Global South ecosystems.

Gaps and Limitations in Existing Literature

Despite growing research, significant gaps persist. This literature review is an attempt to analyse and identify the critical research gaps in existing literature as presented below:

1. **Lack of Longitudinal and Comparative studies:** There is a shortage of longitudinal research that follows incubator networks over time to observe how trust and collaboration evolve. Most current studies are cross-sectional and provide only a snapshot, limiting understanding of the durability or adaptability of trust and collaboration in response to changes and challenges. Similarly, comparative studies across different types of incubators, geographies, and sectors are rare, hindering insight into how contextual variation shapes these dynamics (Bibeau et al., 2024; Theodoraki & Messeghem, 2020).
2. **Neglect of Internal Capabilities and Contextual Diversity:** Some strands of the literature tend to overemphasize the influence of external network ties, sometimes neglecting the role of internal capacities and absorptive abilities of the incubators themselves. There is insufficient research on how differences in internal context- such as organizational culture, management expertise or absorptive capacity- affect the development and sustainability of trustful collaborations (Dong et al., 2023). Additionally, few scholars have also tried to unpack how specific network capabilities impact collaboration dynamics within incubator networks (Dong et al., 2023).
3. **Underrepresentation of Diverse Geographies and Sectors:** Research remains skewed towards more mature and technologically driven incubator environments, with far less attention paid to social, cultural, or community-focused incubators especially in emerging economies. As a result, there is a paucity of granular knowledge about how context- such as regional conditions, the developmental stage of the ecosystem or the sectoral scope- shapes the processes and outcomes of trust and collaboration (Ramirez et al., 2019).

4. **Underdeveloped Network- Level Analysis:** There is a recurring call for research that goes beyond one-on-one interactions and examines multi-actor, systemic, and network-level phenomena. Many current analyses focus on relationships either between individual incubators or between incubators and their incubatees, missing out the complexities, power dynamics, and emergent properties of broader network structures and governance (Antunes et al., 2021).

While existing studies provide important foundations for understanding how improved connections may foster trust and collaboration in incubator networks, progress is held back by methodological constraints, limited theorization of underlying mechanisms, lack of longitudinal and comparative research, insufficient multi-actor analysis and contextual biases. Addressing these gaps will be essential to develop more nuanced, actionable, and equitable insights for impact incubators and their networks worldwide. Therefore, future research aimed at creating a better understanding of how these incubator networks operate can be useful for all stakeholders.

Recommendations from the reviewed literature

Recommendations across literature stress on the importance of incubator networks not only for entrepreneurs but also incubators themselves. They can be noted as follows:

- **Deliberate Network Orchestration:** Effective facilitation and management of incubator networks are critical for cultivating trust and sustained collaboration. Incubators should not passively assume that connections alone will generate collaborative value; instead, network orchestration- not only through formation, coordination and governance of the group but also through expand on the value offers that are usually practiced within the group - should be treated as a core operational priority with dedicated roles, regular convenings and relationship management (Antunes et al., 2021; Prim et al., 2019). Establishing clear structures while allowing for organic inter-organizational interactions maximizes the benefits of both formal and informal connections.
- **Balance Between Formalization and Flexibility:** While formal network processes (e.g., structured events, collaborative agreements etc.) can create accountability and lower entry barriers for collaboration, flexibility is equally essential as informal relationships are relatively cheaper to maintain. Incubators should allow informal relationships and spontaneous exchanges to flourish, recognizing that agile responses to participants' evolving needs often drive the strongest trust and creative outcomes (Antunes et al.,2021; Eveleens et al., 2017).
- **Cultivation of Shared Values and Norms:** Trust and collaboration are sustained where there is alignment around shared goals, values, and community norms. Network leadership should invest in collective vision-building and develop a culture of openness, mutual learning, and reciprocity- especially important in diverse environments or multisectoral networks (Reiter et al. (2018).

- **Build Cross–Sector and External Linkages:** Incubators should look beyond their immediate networks and proactively build connections with external partners—universities, funders, governmental bodies, and global knowledge networks. Such bridges expand trust, enable resource access and incentivize knowledge diffusion, with evidence suggesting these broader ecosystems amplify collaboration spillovers (Ramirez et al., 2019). Ramirez et al. (2019) even mentioned that for “scalable entrepreneurship”, alliances at an international level are essential.
- **Continuous Capacity Building:** Trust and collaboration are dynamic, evolving with member turnover, market changes and ecosystem shifts. Wu et al., 2020 through their research on Chinese business ventures (and how they are benefitted from business incubator networks) found that environmental dynamism increases the risk-taking capacity of these ventures as these ventures integrate all resource types from the external network. As a result of a diverse network, collaboration further improves in the times of shift in the business environment.
- **Emphasize Empirical Evaluation and Adaptive Learning:** Incubators and policymakers are encouraged to rigorously evaluate the outcomes of their network and trust-building efforts- using both qualitative and quantitative measures- and to incorporate feedback into ongoing design. Sharing lessons and failures transparently strengthens the collective knowledge base for the entire ecosystem and furthers trust among network members.

Many of the benefits described in the literature (e.g., shared risk, advocacy, positive deviance, innovation, flexibility and responsiveness) suggest that the creation of inter-organizational networks can be a strategy for developing a structure that is more nimble and able to create change, and/or be more responsive to change, than bureaucratic organizations (Popp et al., 2014). There are known challenges to working in inter-organizational networks (e.g., achieving consensus on the network purpose and goals, culture clashes, loss of autonomy, coordination fatigue, the time and effort it takes to develop trusting relationships, power imbalances) that practitioners need to seriously consider and work diligently to mitigate (Popp et al., 2014).

In summary, the literature highlights that trust and collaboration are not automatic products of increased connections, but deliberate outcomes of ongoing investment in orchestration, environment design, shared culture and continuous evaluation.

Incorporating these recommendations into practice will help incubator stakeholders maximize the value and impact of improved connections, building more robust and adaptive entrepreneurial ecosystems for the future.

Conclusion and Scope for Future Research

This review demonstrates that improved connections between incubators are pivotal in fostering trust and collaboration, yet the mechanisms through which they do so remain only partially understood. Current evidence highlights the importance of both formal and informal structures, dense ties and cognitive social capital, orchestration and mediation, and adaptation to dynamic environments. However, most studies are limited in geography, sector and methodology, constraining the development of generalizable best practices.

Future research should therefore focus less on abstract mechanisms and more on identifying **practical approaches** that consistently build trust and collaboration. First, comparative work on **network structure** should clarify how incubators balance formal accountability with informal relational trust and how cooperation can be productively managed. Second, studies on **network capacity** should examine how incubators cultivate denser networks and cognitive social capital without creating rigidity, documenting tools and routines that sustain collaboration. Third, the roles of **orchestrators and mediators** deserve deeper investigation to establish best practices for sustaining momentum and preventing conflict as networks evolve.

Finally, more attention should be paid to **environmental and contextual factors**— from incentives and competition in dynamic markets to the influence of geography, sector and culture on network effectiveness. By grounding future inquiry in these five interrelated areas— structure, capacity, orchestration, environment and context— scholars can generate actionable insights that move beyond “whether” connections matter to “how” they can be designed and managed most effectively.

Bibliography

1. Bibeau, J., Meilleur, R., & St-Jean, É. (2024). To formalize, or not to formalize, business incubators' networks: That is not the question. *Technovation*.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.technovation.2023.102904>
2. Dong, H., Murong, R., & Li, J. (2023). Research on network capacity, absorptive capacity and service innovation performance of technology business incubators — based on PLS-SEM and fsQCA methods. *Frontiers in Environmental Science*.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fenvs.2023.1154162>

3. Prim, M. A., Dandoline, G. A., Silva, S. M., & de Souza, J. A. (2019). Collaboration networks for social innovation: A case study in a technological incubator of popular cooperatives. *International Journal for Innovation Education and Research*.

<https://scholarsjournal.net/index.php/ijer/article/view/2023/1408>

4. Theodoraki, C., Messeghem, K., & Audretsch, D. B. (2020). The effectiveness of incubators' co-opetition strategy in the entrepreneurial ecosystem: Empirical evidence from France. *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management*.

<https://doi.org/10.1109/TEM.2020.3034476>

5. Peña Ramírez, C., Arias Mora, B. A., Serafim da Silva, S., & Gonçalves do Amaral, M. (2019). Incubadoras de negocios en red: Capital intelectual de incubadoras de negocios de Latinoamérica y la relación con su éxito. *REAd – Revista Eletrônica de Administração*

<https://www.scielo.br/j/read/a/WrgNr998nqJzF8QkpXVBgXk/>

6. Wu, W., Wang, H., & Tsai, F.-S. (2020). Incubator networks and new venture performance: The roles of entrepreneurial orientation and environmental dynamism. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/JSBED-10-2019-0325>

7. Eveleens, C. P., van Rijnsoever, F. J., & Niesten, E. M. M. I. (2017). How network-based incubation helps start-up performance: A systematic review against the background of management theories. *Journal of Technology Transfer*.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10961-016-9510-7>

8. Bachmann, M. (2014, Winter). How the Hub found its center. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

https://ssir.org/articles/entry/how_the_hub_found_its_center

9. Popp, J. K., Milward, H. B., MacKean, G., Casebeer, A., & Lindstrom, R. (2014). *Inter-Organizational Networks: A Review of the Literature to Inform Practice (Collaborating Across Boundaries Series)*. IBM Center for The Business of Government.

[https://www.businessofgovernment.org/sites/default/files/Inter-Organization
al%20Networks.pdf](https://www.businessofgovernment.org/sites/default/files/Inter-Organization%20Networks.pdf)

10. Hente, L., & Schlesinger, T. (2024). Benefits and functionality of an interorganisational workplace health management network – insights from the companies' perspective. *Frontiers in Public Health*.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1380032>

11. Zaheer, A., & Harris, J. D. (2006). Interorganizational trust. In O. Shenkar & J. J. Reuer (Eds.), *Handbook of strategic alliances*. SAGE Publications.

<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452231075.n10>

12. Antunes, L. G. R., de Castro, C. C., & Mineiro, A. A. C. (2021). Network orchestration: New role of business incubators? *Innovation & Management Review*.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/INMR-12-2019-0151>

13. Li, Z., Li, F., & Wang, J. (2017). Impact of incubated enterprises' cognitive social capital on innovation performance in incubation network: Acting through intangible resources acquisition. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2017.510007>
14. Schwartz, M., & Hornyach, C. (2010). Cooperation patterns of incubator firms and the impact of incubator specialization: Empirical evidence from Germany. *Technovation*.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.technovation.2010.05.001>
15. Human, S. E., & Provan, K. G. (1997). An emergent theory of structure and outcomes in small-firm strategic manufacturing networks. *Academy of Management Journal*.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238181638_An_Emerging_Theory_of_Structure_and_Outcomes_in_Small-Firm_Strategic_Manufacturing_Networks
16. De Wever, S., Martens, R., & Vandenbempt, K. (2005). The impact of trust on strategic resource acquisition through interorganizational networks: Towards a conceptual model. *Human Relations*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726705061316>
17. Ratinho, T., Amezcua, A., Honig, B., & Zeng, Z. (2020). Supporting entrepreneurs: A systematic review of literature and an agenda for research. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2020.119956>

18. Farrugia, D. M., Vilches, S. L., & Gerber, A. (2022). Effective inter-organisational networks for Responsible Research and Innovation and global sustainability: A scoping review. Open Research Europe.
<https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.13796.2>
19. Hernández-Chea, R., Mahdad, M., Minh, T. T., & Hjortsø, C. N. (2021). Moving beyond intermediation: How intermediary organizations shape collaboration dynamics in entrepreneurial ecosystems. Technovation.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.technovation.2021.102332>
20. Bøllingtoft, A., & Ulhøi, J. P. (2005). The networked business incubator—leveraging entrepreneurial agency? Journal of Business Venturing.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-9026\(03\)00124-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-9026(03)00124-1)
21. Shih, T., & Aaboen, L. (2019). The network mediation of an incubator: How does it enable or constrain the development of incubator firms' business networks? Industrial Marketing Management.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2017.12.002>
22. Liu, T., Wu, F., Wu, D., & Bai, W. (2025). Coopetition and innovation performance: A network orchestration perspective. Management Decision. Advance online publication.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-12-2023-2361>

23. Caetano, D. M. C. (2019). Contextos de incubação, redes e desempenho organizacional: Criação de valor em incubadoras de empresas [Doctoral dissertation, Universidade do Algarve]. Sapiencia – Repositório Científico da Universidade do Algarve.
https://sapiencia.ualg.pt/bitstream/10400.1/13617/1/Tese%20PhD_Dinis%20Caetano%202019%20vf2.pdf
24. Opolski, K., Modzelewski, P., & Kocia, A. (2019). Interorganizational trust and effectiveness perception in a collaborative service delivery network. Sustainability.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su11195217>
25. Kusa, R. (2025). Mediating role of inter-organizational collaboration in entrepreneurial context: Multidimensional analysis. International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11365-025-01124-2>
26. Wegner, D., Hölsgens, R., & Bitencourt, C. C. (2023). Orchestrating collaborative networks for social innovation: Orchestrators' roles in socially innovative initiatives. Technological Forecasting and Social Change.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2023.122786>
27. Molino, A. (2024, November 20). Impact incubator partnerships & collaboration: Insights from the field. Network Weaver.
<https://networkweaver.com/impact-incubator-partnerships-collaboration-in-sights-from-the-field/>

28. Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs. (2024). ANDE South Asia: Collaboration showcase (ANDE South Asia Collaboration Showcase 2024) [PDF]. Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs.
<https://andeglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/ANDE-South-Asia-Collaboration-Showcase-2024.pdf>
29. OECD/European Union. (2019). Policy brief on incubators and accelerators that support inclusive entrepreneurship (OECD/European Union policy brief) [PDF]. OECD Publishing.
https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2019/05/policy-brief-on-incubators-and-accelerators-that-support-inclusive-entrepreneurship_b95cd664/d7d81c23-en.pdf
30. Reiter, V., Tzafirir, S. S., & Laor, N. (2018). Patterns of trust and collaboration among nonprofit organizations and health funds: A case study. *Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs*.
<https://doi.org/10.20899/jpna.4.2.134-155>

If you want to go fast, go alone.

If you want to go far, go together.

~ African Proverb

Go with us!

