EGAN SUMMARY OF THEMES

AI for growth, overseeing sustainability, and good practices after an IPO or M&A

September 2025

On July 14, 2025, the European Growth Audit Network (EGAN) gathered in London for the following sessions:

- **AI for growth: opportunities, risks, and governance** with Greg Ryslik, recently Chief Technology Officer, Compass Pathways
- **Overseeing sustainability in a high-growth environment** with Lina Ruiz, Director of Sustainability and Impact AI, The Social Hub
- **Governance in transition: good practices after an IPO or M&A** (members only)

For a list of meeting participants, see Appendix 1 (page 9).

This *Summary of Themes*[1] provides an overview of the following discussions:

AI for growth: opportunities, risks, and governance

Generative AI can help high growth companies scale efficiently, stretch limited resources, and accelerate innovation. Members met with Dr. Ryslik to explore how growth companies are using AI, the risks and opportunities they are finding, and how they are governing the use of this technology.

Where are growth companies using generative AI?

Members noted a wide range of current applications in their companies:

Chatbots	Data mining	Identifying trends
Coding	Decision making	Market optimization
Customer onboarding	Detecting fraud	Software patching
Customer service	False positive reduction	Research and development

The group highlighted several themes:

- **AI can help companies scale smarter and faster.** Growth-focused companies typically try to run lean, with minimal overhead. AI can help smaller teams by automating routine work and is increasingly able to take on more complex tasks. *"Something that once took 20 people, you'll soon do with three,"* said Dr. Ryslik. Members emphasized that starting to apply AI now can position companies to scale efficiently as AI costs fall and capabilities expand. *"Technology always gets cheaper as it matures,"* said Dr. Ryslik. A member added that public funding can help with tight resources: *"AI is so popular right now, it's not that hard to get public money. Grants are available for qualifying companies."*
- **Build on where AI is already being used.** *"When a company approaches me about where to use AI, one of the questions I always ask is, 'How are your employees or business already using it?'"* said Dr. Ryslik. This bottom-up awareness identifies practical applications and helps avoid overengineered initiatives that miss the mark and waste resources. One member noted the value of

Developing your own AI model

When one member raised the idea, Dr. Ryslik was clear: *"It depends on your use case and what others in your industry are doing. Unless you are an AI company or have significant resources to devote to a very specific use case, you typically shouldn't be building foundational models—it won't compete at this time."*

encouraging teams to experiment: *"I want employees to get in the habit of using AI daily. Once they're doing that, the business cases reveal themselves."* He added that hands-on exposure also builds critical judgment: *"It's the best way to teach people not to blindly trust AI."*

- **Use governance to guide and accelerate***.* *"You shouldn't focus so much on risk that you stop innovation,"* said a member. *"You need to govern AI the same way you'd govern an employee—we all make mistakes; don't assume it's replacing someone who's perfect."* Principle-based frameworks that focus on transparency, fairness, and value can support experimentation while maintaining accountability. *"We already have the governance we need from IT controls,"* said a member. *"We only need to adapt these to controls specific to AI."* Mr. Langlois agreed: *"You need to ask, is your AI doing what you expect? Do you have controls in place? The key is finding the middle ground between encouraging use and maintaining control."* Dr. Ryslik added, *"Using AI creates different vulnerabilities. You'll need experienced people to ensure the output that is created is correct or the code that is generated is secure and functions properly."*

- **Data issues can complicate the business case for AI.** Deploying AI successfully relies on clean, accessible data. *"Most of our data is in cloud-based vendor systems,"* noted a member. *"Retrieving or combining your data can be messy,"* added Dr. Ryslik. He recalled extracting messages from a common company messaging platform: *"It seemed like it should be easy, but the data dump was a nightmare."* Not knowing what data you have or where it is makes it hard to judge whether AI is worth what can become a considerable investment. "*How do you build a business case if you don't even know what data you have or what you're allowed to do with it?"* asked one nonexecutive. Dr. Ryslik urged companies to review contracts with vendors, conduct data audits, and think ahead: *"As you enter into new contracts, consider what data you might need to access apart from that vendor, so that you can do so in the future."*

Who owns the data that trains your AI?

"If a search uncovers something created for a client, can that be used—anonymously or otherwise—for another client?" asked a member. *"Who actually owns the intellectual property behind the data or models being developed?"* Dr. Ryslik noted that many legal questions around intellectual property remain unanswered and while using client data to train AI can make the system smarter, doing so may breach exclusivity or contractual terms. Reviewing contracts with clients to clarify usage rights is an essential first step in managing the risk.

- **Boards that keep up with AI developments are better positioned to support innovation and growth.** *"The IT team is light years ahead,"* said a member. *"There's a* *huge education gap between us and them."* Without basic fluency, boards risk slowing progress. As Dr. Ryslik noted, *"The landscape is evolving very rapidly and can be completely different within several months. Boards need regular updates—whether the company is using AI or not—just to understand the broader ecosystem."* Members agreed that timely updates and self-directed learning are helpful but cautioned against too much detail. *"We're not going to be experts,"* said one. *"Let the company move fast within clear, principle-based parameters and only step in if those break down."* Another added*: "It's about knowing enough to ask the right questions."*

"Am I asking the right questions? How am I participating? Do I know enough to be able to govern effectively?"

Overseeing sustainability in a high-growth environment

Members met with Ms. Ruiz, who has been an executive at two notable sustainable growth companies: Fairphone and WeTransfer. They discussed how boards can support credible, flexible approaches to sustainability while managing the realities of scale, investment trade-offs, and internal alignment. Key themes emerged:

- **Creating a credible sustainability story can strengthen brand, funding, and exit positioning.** *"In the beginning, it felt like growth was being delayed,"* Ms. Ruiz said. *"But it became a real advantage—part of Fairphone's brand story."* When institutional investors were hesitant, she looked for a way to prove traction: *"We ran an equity crowdfunding campaign to show that consumers were willing to invest—it raised €2.5 million. That gave larger investors confidence."* The same link between credibility and market confidence was evident at WeTransfer, where sustainability positioning played a central role in exit discussions. *"We tried to go public but didn't make it due to market conditions,"* she said. *"Still, investors were comfortable—they knew we weren't exposing them to sustainability risk because we were ahead of the game."*
- **A sustainability narrative needs to tie directly to strategy and economic performance.** Ms. Ruiz stressed that sustainability investments cannot be viewed as optional add-ons but need to be integrated with a company's strategy from the start. Investments in sustainability need to have a concrete economic case. *"At both Fairphone and WeTransfer, we connected sustainability to the core of the business,"* she noted. Without this, companies risk falling behind. Embedding sustainability, she emphasized, is no longer optional but a competitive necessity: *"Companies that embed sustainability into their business model survive regulatory changes, while those treating it as a compliance exercise face existential risk."*
- **Early investment comes with risk—but long-term payoff is possible.** Ms. Ruiz described how Fairphone chose to prioritize building a responsible supply chain: "*When you*

begin, it'll cost a lot of money—but if you improve processes and optimize, it becomes very lean. After 15 years, Fairphone is a well-oiled sustainable machine; the cost looks cheap now." Unlike larger companies with complex legacy systems, Fairphone could scale in a sustainable way by doubling down on what it already did well. A member reflected on the challenge of early investment*: "We invested heavily in sustainability and it was expensive. Now the company's ahead, but with the new Omnibus rules coming into force, we're asking: do we keep the pace or ease off a little?"* Ms. Ruiz acknowledged the tension but urged a long-term view: *"Everyone will need to become more sustainable eventually. Energy prices are rising exponentially. If you build lean and optimize now, that becomes your advantage."*

- **Building internal support for sustainability can help embed sustainable growth.** To gain traction, sustainability must be positioned as a performance driver—not a side initiative—and tied to value for each function. At WeTransfer, Ms. Ruiz noted, engineers were motivated to improve energy efficiency, but the advertising team initially saw little relevance. *"They'd say, 'My job is to sell ads—what's the win for me?'"* she recalled. Research showing how many clients needed to report CO_2 emissions helped shift their view. *"It meant the advertising team could start conversations with clients with, 'Have you seen this ad? Did you know it's the most efficient ad online?'"* she said. *"Clients received CO_2 data for their ads and left with a sustainability story—a powerful unique selling point."* She added that the same logic applies at the board level: genuine sustainability support means directors asking sustainability teams hard questions and challenging their responses. *"This is a sign of engagement rather than resistance,"* she said.

- **Strong sustainability practices retain and attract talent.** *"If you can't show strong sustainability credentials, you'll struggle to recruit the next generation—it's important to them,"* noted a member. But attracting talent is only half the challenge. *"We had programs not just to attract people, but to keep them,"* said Ms. Ruiz, describing how WeTransfer doubled retention by introducing programs across the employee lifecycle—from job application, through growth, to eventual departure. *"It wasn't just about maternity leave. We offered support from family planning through return-to-work and flexible hours. It showed we cared."* Regular surveys guided action. But, as one member warned, *"The worst thing with these types of surveys is if you don't do anything*

Adapt the sustainability strategy as priorities shift

As companies grow, they will likely need to reassess earlier strategy choices. Ms. Ruiz noted that WeTransfer once paused its renewable energy investments in order to meet customer demand for faster file transfers. They resumed the sustainability journey once infrastructure improved: *"We told the team, 'We're stopping strategically—not because we'd failed'. It was tough, but it meant we could restart faster later."*

with what you hear. You have to act on what you learn."

- **Prioritize a few material risks.** Without clear priorities, sustainability can lose traction. At WeTransfer, Ms. Ruiz worked with finance and legal to define five sustainability risks that the company saw as existential and modeled the cost of inaction. Clarifying those risks and not trying to measure everything helped steer a productive conversation with the board, avoiding overwhelm: *"It was a discussion: 'do you agree with our assessment?'"* she said, *"Not, 'here's everything to worry about.'"*

- **Reframe return on investment expectations.** *"There's still an expectation that sustainability should deliver the same return as gold or equity,"* said Mr. Langlois. *"Not every investment will generate headline returns,"* a member responded, *"but that doesn't mean it's not worth doing."* Ms. Ruiz shared how WeTransfer addressed this by tying sustainability to growth metrics that investors already cared about: *"Our investors still expected user growth and ad sales. I had to show how sustainability programs were driving both—bringing in new users and clients."* Over time, infrastructure investments paid off as well: *"After three years, we reduced data center costs by 23%. Then investors could see the results."*

Governance in transition: good practices after an IPO or M&A

Many high-growth companies undertake an IPO or initiate M&A at some point in their development. In this members-only session, nonexecutives discussed experiences and good practices for navigating the changes from IPO or M&A actions in a growth environment. Lessons included:

- **IPO and M&A readiness builds long-term strategic muscle.** Preparing for an IPO or acquisition can sharpen capabilities even when a deal does not go ahead. *"The company went through IPO readiness, but didn't actually list. Still, it was incredibly useful,"* said a member. Others agreed that the rigor involved can build valuable discipline. *"Whether or not you execute, there's value in doing it well,"* one said. Another added that repeated M&A undertakings helped teams improve: *"By the third time, they had a data room set up and knew how to handle due diligence. It made the company better at the whole process."*

- **Understand the existing cultures to shape the one you need.** *"Cultural differences are the hardest part. Everything else you can fix more easily,"* said a member. Another agreed: *"If you don't recognize that up front, you waste time. People are uncomfortable with it because it's intangible—but you need to talk about it early, with sensitivity and intention."* Members pointed to common fault lines: entrepreneurial vs. process-led styles, short-term vs. long-term focus, compliance cultures, and the continued influence of founders. One advised asking direct, early questions to understand how the target operates: *"Once you connect, you quickly get a feel for how the business runs."*

- **Transparency builds trust—but speed keeps people.** Uncertainty after a deal can erode morale. *"If you don't set the right expectations, you'll never get alignment, buy-in, or engagement,"* said a member. *"Do it thoughtfully and transparently—be out there; do town halls regularly."* Others agreed that honesty goes a long way: *"People will thank you for being transparent."* But speed matters just as much. One said, *"A year is too long for people to have uncertainty about compensation or titles. You need to sort those in eight months, max."* Mr. Langlois emphasized inclusion: *"Make people more of the process than just recipients of the outcome."*

Clarity on independence matters

Deciding whether the acquired company will operate within the buyer's systems and governance or retain its own is a critical pre-deal conversation. One member warned that unclear expectations around how much independence an acquired company will retain—particularly in founder-led acquisitions—can seriously hinder integration. *"It's a risk and cost issue,"* he said. *"Early clarity is essential: what was promised, what's expected, and whether the target truly understands the level of change coming. I believe our job as a board is to ensure there's a shared understanding of what the level of independence really is."*

- **Prepare teams early for stricter regulations.** Whether going public or acquiring another business, companies on both sides could face increased regulatory demands. *"If the acquirer is subject to SOX, the target will be too,"* said a member. *"It's a big leap for smaller firms—they often think differently about controls and may need education just to understand the purpose of prescribed controls."* A member advised to set expectations early: *"Make it transparent pre-close—both to your own employees and those at the target firm—that stricter compliance requirements are coming."*
- **Align IT controls quickly to reduce post-deal attacks.** M&A often brings mismatched systems and controls. Without quick alignment, gaps can expose the business to risk. A member noted that cyber threats often spike once a deal is public, as attackers know the

Use the deal process to secure the best for employees

The acquisition stage is a rare moment of bargaining power for a target company. *"It's the only time you have leverage—after you're acquired, you have none,"* said a member. *"During the process, they still have to agree."* Members emphasized that this is the moment to ensure employees are treated fairly. One said, *"Once you've agreed the price and brand strategy, then it's about the people and getting the best for them."* She added, *"These commitments have to be written and monitored by the takeover board, and they'll monitor it for a few years."*

company is more vulnerable. "*Emails look different, approvals change—people think it's just a new system. But it might be a phishing attack,"* she warned. *"Bring the security teams together fast to align your controls. Get advisors in. Don't wait."*

A forthcoming ViewPoints will provide additional detail on the key themes discussed during this session.

Appendix 1: Participants

The following members participated in all or part of the meeting:

Nadja Borisova, BlaBlaCar and Pomegranate Investment

Tracy Dunley-Owen, Allica Bank

Christoph Hütten, Brockhaus Technologies

Sandip Kapadia, Molecular Partners and Passage Bio

Linda McGoldrick, Compass Pathways and Alvotech Lux Holdings

Barbara Richmond, Lonza

EY was represented by the following in all or part of the meeting:

François Langlois, Partner, Global Markets Leader, Assurance Advisory & Forensics and Integrity Services

The following Tapestry Networks representatives participated in all or part of the meeting:

Beverley Bahlmann, Executive Director

Jonathan Day, Chief Executive

Laura Koski, Project and Event Manager

Todd Schwartz, Executive Director

Hannah Skilton, Associate

Endnotes

[1] *Summary of Themes* reflects the network's use of a modified version of the Chatham House Rule whereby names of members and their company affiliations are a matter of public record, but comments are not attributed to individuals or corporations. Quotations in italics are drawn directly from members and guests in connection with the meeting but may be edited for clarity.