A high-level overview of starting an industry-sponsored project

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Office of the Vice President for Research

Starting a new industry-sponsored engagement

OSATT serves as a primary point of contact for engagement with industry and other non-federal sponsors to develop and launch research collaborations

Industry Sponsored Research Agreements (ISRA)

Master Research Agreements (MRA)

Sponsored Consortia

OSATT supports:

- Single-project agreements with industry sponsors (ISRA)
- Master or multi-project research agreements (MRAs) with sponsors
- Consortia or Institute-wide alliances
- Large, complex, or international engagements
- Frameworks for building industry engagements

Email osatt@mit.edu → Expect initial response in 1–2 days

What faculty & PIs can do proactively:

- Reach out to OSATT as soon as possible
- Work with OSATT to develop a framework
- Understand the sponsor's interests and needs
- Develop a statement of work (SOW) collaboratively
- Share sample term sheets and explain key principles for MIT industry engagements

How to pitch your research to an industry sponsor

1. Start learning about their problem

- What technical or strategic challenge are they facing?
- Where are current solutions falling short?
- *“We’re working on approaches that could address X limitation in [their domain]…”*

2. Translate your research into relevance

- What capability could this enable? (performance, cost, speed, insight)
- Why is your approach different?
- Focus on **why it might matter**, not full technical detail

3. Show a credible path to impact

- What could success look like? (range of outcomes, not a promise)
- What would they learn or gain from engaging?
- Think: *“This could open a path toward…,”* not *“We will deliver…”*

How to pitch your research to an industry sponsor

4. Frame the work as research, not a product

- Emphasize uncertainty, exploration, and iteration
- Avoid deliverable language (no guarantees, no specs)
- *"This would be a **research collaboration to explore**…"*

5. Align on goals; be wary of discussing agreement terms

- Are they looking for:
  - Insight?
  - Early access?
  - Commercialization pathways?
- You are aligning on **intent**, not negotiating structure

Confidential conversations:
As you progress, discussions can take place confidentially under an NDA.

Request an NDA through the Hermes portal.

Questions to ask an industry sponsor:
Help clarify intent without committing to terms

- “How do you envision using the outputs of this research?”
- “What is most important to you in a potential collaboration – access to research results, opportunities to evaluate resulting IP, or something else?”
- “Are there specific fields of use or applications you care most about?”
- “Do you have particular timing considerations around publications or public disclosures?”
- “Will you be providing proprietary data or materials we should plan around?”
- “What would make this collaboration successful from your perspective?”

→ Inform OSATT of conversation and sponsor’s answers

Know when to pause and bring in OSATT

If the conversation shifts to specifics of agreement terms:

- IP ownership or licensing
- Publication or confidentiality
- Financial terms

→ Loop in OSATT!

“That’s something our research office will help structure.”

When discussing industry-sponsored projects with a sponsor, keep in mind:

- **If it touches IP, publication, confidentiality, liability, or licensing** → defer these discussions to OSATT
- **If it sounds like the sponsor is looking for product development or a guarantee of specific results**→ flag and discuss with OSATT
- **If it could affect students' ability to publish or graduate** → escalate immediately to OSATT
- **If it involves licensing or access to existing MIT IP** → loop in TLO
- **Treat non-technical terms as (potentially) negotiable by OSATT, not commitments you can make.**
- **Avoid informal assurances like "we can agree to that" on legal/business terms.**
- **When in doubt, say:** "Our research office (OSATT) will review and negotiate that."
- Share sample term sheets

Common “red flag” requests to recognize

“Let’s just get started while the agreement is being worked out.”

IP Ownership
- “We’d like to own any IP from this project.”
- “Can we have rights to future improvements?”

Publication Restrictions
- “We need approval before anything is published.”

Confidentiality
- “All results should be confidential.”

Deliverables/Expectations
- “We expect a working product/guaranteed performance.”
- “Can you commit to achieving X result?”

Legal / Risk Terms
- “We’ll need indemnification.”
- “We need warranties on the results.”

These are signals to pause and bring in OSATT ASAP.

How PIs Could Respond

“That’s something our research office will need to review and negotiate.”

“We typically follow standard university terms on IP and publication—OSATT can walk through options.”

“I can share a sample term sheet with you.”

“I can describe the science, but our office handles contractual terms.”

“Let me flag that for our research office so we structure it correctly.”

What PIs c*an* safely do

- Clarify scientific goals and scope
- Identify where research flexibility might exist (e.g., sequencing of work, general deliverables)
- Surface sponsor priorities early for OSATT
- Explain realistic timelines and uncertainties for administrative process:
  - “A single project ISRA can take a 3-4 months to process, which takes into account back and forth between MIT and sponsor to negotiate terms.” (Keep in mind: Our data show that at least half the time, on average, the agreement is with the sponsor.)
  - “If special reviews are required (e.g. human subject, export control, non-standard IP model*); it can take longer.”
  - “I can share examples of term sheets that give a flavor of variations that are straightforward to do; so we can align early and move faster.”

** Proposed terms that would diverge from MIT’s standard IP models may need to be escalated by OSATT for review by the VPR, which would likely add to the timeline for negotiation.*