PORTABLE FIELD GUIDE · FICTIONAL COMPOSITE

Qualifying Competitors for a B2B SaaS Company

Commercial substitutability before feature comparison

> A SaaS competitor set is a row of doors in the same buying hallway, not every logo in the building.
> A direct door must lead the same buyer to the same material job at the same buying stage and survive implementation, security/procurement and switching reality.

This guide is a worked decision product, not a client case study, market-share report, product recommendation, security certification or claim that named public vendors compete in a specific deal.

Updated 19 August 2026 · No Semrush or keyword-volume platform used.

1. Answer first and scenario boundaries

A candidate earns direct competitor status only when the same buyer could realistically choose it for the same material job at the same buying stage and still pass the adoption gates that make the purchase workable.

Boundary	Fictional case	Why it matters
Buyer	Mid-market operations/compliance leader	Prevents consumer, SMB-only or enterprise-only products entering automatically.
Material job	Collect evidence, coordinate control work, prepare auditable workflow	Separates outcome ownership from generic automation.
Buying stage	Shortlist/evaluation for a system to own the workflow	Separates product finalists from discovery/ intermediary entities.
Implementation	Integrations, identity, permissions, migration, admin and change	Feature overlap cannot erase adoption burden.
Security/ procurement	Buyer-defined supplier requirements	Assurance evidence is scoped, not a universal score.
Switching/exit	Export, contract, transition, configuration portability	Replacement must be practically reversible where material.

> Refusal rule: unknown, stale, wrong-dimension or materially contradictory evidence cannot earn direct status.

2. Candidate roles before feature comparison

Archetype	Governed role	Permitted use
Regulated-workflow specialist	Direct if all gates match	Role-qualified product/offer comparison.
Compliance automation platform	Conditional direct when core fit matches but adoption evidence is partial	Collect missing implementation, security or switching evidence.
General orchestration suite	Adjacent	Architecture, workflow boundary and positioning research.
Consultancy / managed service	Substitute	Build/buy/service comparison outside software-only feature grid.
Marketplace / review directory	Intermediary / discovery	Query, review and ecosystem discovery.
Security / standards authority	Authority / reference	Requirements, terminology and bounded assurance context.
Internal build / do nothing	Substitute / no-action	Compare ownership, cost, timing and risk.

> Signal ≠ role. Visibility, category presence, integrations, ratings and familiar logos can surface candidates. They do not grant direct-competitor permission.

3. The six material evidence dimensions + evidence state

Dimension	Question	Common false positive
Buyer	Would the same accountable buyer evaluate it?	Similar customer logos or broad category labels.
Material job	Does it own the same outcome, not one feature?	Both products “automate” something.
Buying stage	Would it appear on the same realistic shortlist?	Marketplace visibility or partner listing.
Implementation	Are integration, migration, admin and change conditions workable?	Connector exists, therefore deployment is equivalent.
Security / procurement	Can current evidence satisfy the buyer's scoped requirements?	One badge or acronym equals complete readiness.
Switching / exit	Can the customer replace the route at acceptable operational/commercial burden?	“Migration supported” equals frictionless switching.
Evidence state	Is the fact current, observed, owned and correctly dimension-bound?	Retyping stale or foreign evidence downstream.

> V1.1.0 integrity rule: each of the six evidence slots must point to a distinct valid Evidence ID owned by the same candidate and whose Evidence Dimension exactly matches the slot. One BUYER record cannot satisfy job, stage, implementation, security and switching.

4. Conflicts and fail-closed evidence integrity

A material disagreement is an evidence object, not a reason to invent a confidence score.

Conflict	Observation A	Observation B	Governed response
Implementation	Product page suggests quick setup.	Implementation evidence shows material configuration/support work.	Keep conditional; collect current implementation proof.
Switching	Migration is described as supported.	Exit evidence shows manual configuration rebuilding.	Keep switching burden material in replacement claim.
Security	Trust page advertises assurance.	Buyer requirement/current evidence remains unresolved.	Pause direct promotion until scoped requirement is verified.

A governed conflict requires two distinct valid Evidence IDs, the same candidate, nonblank opposing statements, controlled material/status values, an owner and a reopen trigger.

> Wrong-dimension and evidence-reuse tests are permanent regressions. A valid Evidence ID is not enough; the record must be valid for the dimension it is being asked to prove.

5. Decision semantics: MATCH, PARTIAL, UNKNOWN and NO are different

State	Meaning	Direct-role effect
MATCH	Current evidence supports the required dimension.	Potentially direct if every material gate matches.
PARTIAL	Some fit exists, but material limitations remain.	Potentially conditional direct only when buyer/job/stage are core matches.
UNKNOWN	Evidence is missing or unresolved.	UNRESOLVED; collect evidence.
NO	The material substitution gate fails.	EXCLUDE DIRECT. It must not be relabeled conditional direct.

> Switching is not an exception. If switching/exit is NO, practical direct substitution fails. PARTIAL may remain conditional; UNKNOWN remains unresolved.

What the decision changes

Before: a folder of feature-overlapping products, marketplaces, services, authorities and internal routes. After: only evidence-qualified product finalists enter direct comparison; other roles still inform strategy without contaminating the direct set.

6. Buyer evaluation and supplier due diligence

NIST SP 1326 (July 2026) frames due diligence as researching pertinent information about an ICT supplier or product so acquirers can make informed acquisition decisions. NIST SP 1305 adds the requirement-setting side: acquirers should define and communicate supplier requirements.

> Practical sequence: define buyer requirement → collect scoped supplier/product evidence → decide whether the candidate can survive the same buying process.

G2's 2026 buyer study is vendor-generated market research, not a universal law. It reports evaluation as the longest buying stage for 40% of respondents and identifies IT-security review, budget approval and implementation planning as major post-selection delays. This supports a practical boundary: discovery similarity is not purchase equivalence.

AICPA's 2026 SOC overview is used only as bounded third-party/service-organization assurance context. A SOC label can answer a scoped buyer question; it does not independently prove implementation fit, commercial substitution or product superiority.

7. Implementation, identity and technical evidence

Evidence area	Examples	Boundary
Identity	SSO/SAML, SCIM, role model, privileged access	Each capability answers a specific buyer/ implementation requirement.
Integration	API scope, webhooks, connector permissions, rate limits	Connector presence does not prove workflow equivalence.
Operations	Audit logs, data residency, admin burden, sandbox, observability	Check current scope, tier and limits.
Resilience	Continuity, backup/DR evidence, recovery objectives where material	Relevant only when the buyer's decision requires it.

RFC 7644 defines SCIM as a protocol for cross-domain identity provisioning. Supporting SCIM may matter to the buyer; it does not make two products direct competitors by itself.

Current Workato documentation illustrates the difference between broad orchestration and a specialist compliance workflow: its platform spans integration, process automation, data orchestration, governance and many enterprise use cases. That breadth can make it strategically adjacent without proving the same buying job.

8. Switching and exit reality

For EU-scoped data-processing services, the EU Data Act makes switching, contractual terms, exportable data, digital assets, transition assistance and continuity explicit concerns. That jurisdiction-specific rule is not generalized to every SaaS market.

Exit question	Evidence to collect
Can data move?	Export formats, APIs, schema/documentation and egress conditions.
Can workflow state move?	Configuration portability, automation definitions, permissions and historical context.
Can operations continue?	Transition assistance, parallel run, migration timing and continuity requirements.
Can the customer leave commercially?	Contract term, notice, renewal, termination and switching charges where applicable.

> Switching burden changes commercial equivalence. It does not prove a product is good or bad; it determines whether one route can realistically replace another.

9. Audience, JTBD and pain-to-solution map

Audience / JTBD	Pain	Decision value
Founder / product leader	Feature matrices make every lookalike direct.	Clearer market/category boundary.
Product marketer	Alternative pages compare whoever ranks.	Role-qualified comparison content.
Sales / revenue	Battlecards differ from actual deal losses.	Tie competitors to shortlist/win-loss evidence.
Security / IT	Marketing hides supplier/implementation gaps.	Exclude or escalate before deep evaluation.
Finance / procurement	Price is visible; transition/contract burden is not.	More realistic total-decision comparison.
Implementation / CS	Connector presence hides migration/admin effort.	Adoption evidence becomes part of competitor role.
RevOps / deal desk	CRM competitor fields lag live deal evidence.	Reopen roles using actual shortlist/ objection data.
SEO / AEO	Keyword/AI visibility promotes intermediaries into direct set.	Search research downstream of role qualification.

10. Query, keyword-gap and entity research — without volume claims

No keyword-volume platform was used. These are qualitative territories from current manual SERP and source research.

Territory	User job	Information gap
SaaS competitor analysis	Build credible set	Role permission before feature comparison.
[vendor] alternatives	Find replacements	Buyer-stage, procurement and switching constraints.
Compliance automation comparison	Compare apparent finalists	Deal-level substitutability vs public positioning.
SaaS security review / questionnaire	Pass diligence	Current scoped evidence and ownership.
SaaS implementation checklist	Estimate adoption	Admin/change/migration burden, not connector count.
SaaS switching / lock-in	Assess replacement effort	PARTIAL vs UNKNOWN vs NO semantics.
Data portability / exit strategy	Plan reversibility	Exportable data, digital assets and continuity.
SOC 2 / SCIM / SSO	Meet enterprise gates	Capability/evidence scope, not acronym scoring.
Workflow vs compliance automation	Separate adjacent products	Same job/stage proof before direct role.
Build vs buy vs consultancy	Compare non-software routes	Substitutes outside a software-only matrix.

> Human-first anti-spam rule: query variants are research clues, not a page factory. Consolidate unless the user task and evidence boundary are genuinely different.

11. Current competitor/content benchmark patterns

Public product pages are used only to establish bounded positioning facts. Vanta and Drata emphasize automated evidence collection and continuous compliance/monitoring; Secureframe emphasizes compliance automation plus APIs/custom integrations; Workato emphasizes broad enterprise orchestration and integration. Those facts help map candidate roles but do not prove deal-level competition.

Observed content pattern	Useful signal	Governance gap to close
Feature/framework grids	Product capability discovery	Do not infer same buyer/job/stage.
Integration counts / connector lists	Implementation possibilities	Verify scope, permissions, tier and workflow ownership.
Pricing signals	Commercial discovery	Keep negotiated price/TCO unresolved until verified.
Review ratings / “best for” labels	Experience and discovery themes	Do not convert ranking or rating into direct-role proof.
Security/trust badges	Potential assurance evidence	Bind to exact buyer requirement and current scope.
Alternative/versus pages	Candidate discovery and user-intent clues	Verify whether the pair is actually substitutable in the same decision.

> Information gain: the missing layer is not another bigger feature grid. It is the permission system that decides which evidence is allowed to move a candidate into direct, conditional, adjacent, substitute, intermediary or reference status.

12. Controlled action and portable handoff

Role	Permitted next action
Direct	Offer/CRO/product comparison with evidence limits.
Conditional direct	Collect missing implementation/security/switching evidence before like-for-like claims.
Exclude direct	Retain only the bounded adjacent/substitute/research role supported by evidence.
Adjacent	Architecture, positioning and workflow-boundary research.
Substitute	Build/buy/service/no-action comparison.
Intermediary	Discovery, query, review and ecosystem research.
Authority	Requirements, terminology and scoped assurance context.

The portable handoff includes Candidate ID, six distinct dimension-bound Evidence IDs, evidence freshness/state, open conflicts, governed Decision ID/state, one linked READY Action ID, owner, reopen trigger and prohibited inference.

> QA fixture rule: late-row QA is inserted temporarily for testing and cleared before public freeze. Product counts and handoff must represent only the worked example.

13. What remains unresolved

Public evidence does not establish a real deal shortlist, win/loss rate, negotiated price, customer-specific implementation effort, current security-review outcome or migration burden for a particular deployment. Those remain unresolved until first-party buyer, commercial or implementation evidence exists.

> “Not established by this evidence packet” is a valid decision output.

The next genuine research step is governed first-party evidence: shortlist/win-loss interviews, implementation effort, buyer security-review outcomes, negotiated commercial terms and switching experience. More generic competitor articles would add less value than those records.

14. Source roles and evidence limits

Primary / authoritative context

- NIST SP 1326 — ICT supplier/product due diligence: https://csrc.nist.gov/pubs/sp/1326/final
- NIST SP 1305 — C-SCRM supplier requirements: https://csrc.nist.gov/pubs/sp/1305/final
- AICPA & CIMA — SOC for Service Organizations Overview (2026): https://www.aicpa-cima.com/resources/download/soc-for-service-organizations-engagements-overview
- IETF RFC 7644 — SCIM protocol: https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc7644/
- EU Data Act: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2023/2854/oj?locale=en

Market / positioning context

- G2 2026 Buyer Behavior Report: https://sell.g2.com/2026-buyer-behavior-report — vendor-generated buyer research.
- Vanta automated-compliance material; Drata compliance automation/monitoring; Secureframe API/custom integrations; Workato documentation — first-party positioning examples only.

These sources inform the method and current market context. They do not validate the fictional composite, prove that named vendors compete in a particular deal, or establish market share, pricing, customer outcomes or product superiority.