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Issuer briefing

Virtual cards at scale

From growth ambition to execution reality



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Foreword

Virtual cards are firmly established in commercial payments, yet adoption still falls short of the opportunity. For issuers, the question is what will unlock the next stage of growth across travel and wider B2B payments.

For me, this is not only about issuing more cards. It's about considering whether virtual payments are easy for customers to use and suppliers to accept? Do they deliver the data and reconciliation needed to scale? Customers recognise the benefits: greater control, stronger security and better visibility. Now we need to make them easier to realise.

Acceptance is fundamental, but it cannot be solved in isolation. Data, reconciliation and payments embedded into familiar systems must work together. Issuers are central to that progress: they understand their customers, see where demand is changing and can help remove the barriers holding adoption back.

This briefing looks at what is working, what still needs to change and where issuers could focus. I hope it prompts an honest discussion about how we can turn the opportunity into meaningful progress.



Rachel Devonshire
Head of Issuing, Conferma

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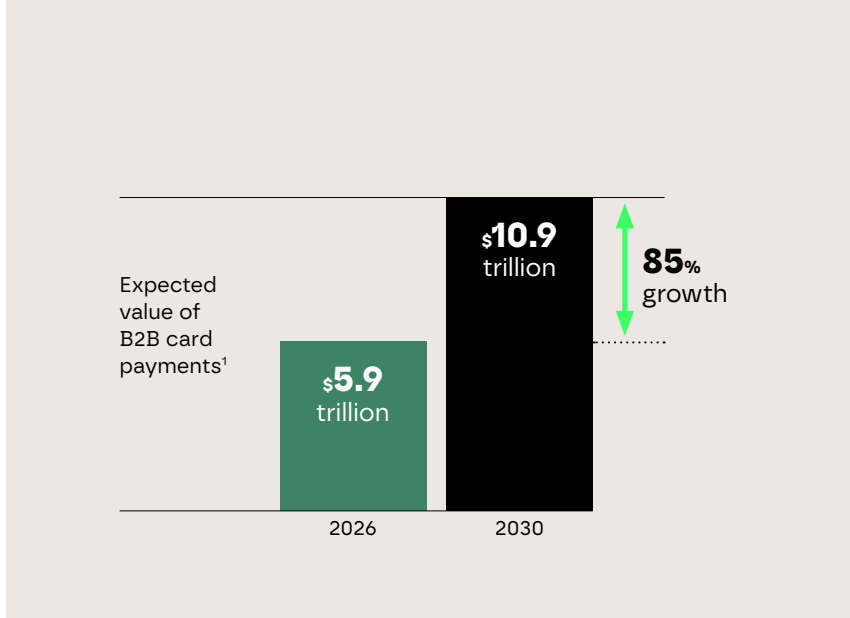
The future of commercial payments 20

About this briefing

This briefing draws on published industry research, interviews with ten issuers and broader conversations across the commercial payments ecosystem, combined with Conferma's experience supporting virtual card programmes globally. It is intended as a discussion paper to explore the opportunities and challenges associated with scaling virtual cards, and to provide a starting point for debate rather than a definitive industry view.

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Market inflection: intent has outpaced execution



Corporate appetite for automation in commercial payments has never been higher. CFOs and finance leaders increasingly expect payment flows to deliver control, visibility and efficiency as standard – supporting working capital discipline, reducing operational risk and integrating cleanly with the systems that govern spend, manage reporting and deliver reconciliation.

Recent industry forecasts reinforce the scale of the opportunity. Juniper Research expects the value of B2B card payments to grow from $5.9 trillion in 2026 to $10.9 trillion by 2030, representing 85% growth and significantly outpacing the wider B2B payments market[1]. The question for issuers is therefore less whether demand exists and more how effectively they can convert that demand into scalable execution.

Virtual cards have evolved from a specialist payment solution into a proven layer of commercial payments infrastructure. As organisations seek greater control, richer data, stronger fraud protection and improved working capital outcomes, issuers are increasingly investing in the ecosystem around the card, including supplier enablement, embedded payments, reconciliation and workflow integration.

Corporate appetite has never been higher, and that is precisely why execution now matters so much. Across the market, intent has outpaced execution: demand for virtual cards is strong and growing, but performance in practice depends on how consistently acceptance, reconciliation and settlement hold inside real workflows. Closing that gap is the growth opportunity. The issuers best positioned for the next phase are those that treat execution as the route to unlocking demand that already exists, rather than waiting for new demand to be created.

1 Juniper Research, How B2B payment cards are streamlining corporate expenses, March 2026

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What the industry data says

Recent industry research reinforces the growth story. Mastercard's European study of B2B supplier payment acceptance found that one in three suppliers receive late payments because a buyer's preferred payment method is not offered. Suppliers accepting cards are 14 percentage points more likely to describe their business as highly efficient at maximising working capital. 92% of European businesses are looking for payment tools tailored to the specifics of their industry, underlining the case for workflow-specific virtual card design.[2]



As payments move deeper into travel platforms, expense tools, ERP systems and vertical software, success is defined less by card issuance alone and more by how reliably payments perform across the full lifecycle. For issuers, the opportunity is to close the gap between interest and execution by delivering payment infrastructure that supports acceptance, reconciliation and operational confidence at scale.

2 Mastercard, The state of commercial card acceptance in Europe, October 2025

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Regional nuance: the intent–execution gap is not uniform

The ecosystem has often over-indexed on buyer enablement, treating supplier acceptance as something that would follow rather than the gating factor it actually is. Platform and ERP complexity play a role, but they are typically secondary: without suppliers enabled, educated and incentivised, workflow integration gains don't translate into reliable, repeatable execution.

Drilling down, the intent–execution gap varies by country, vertical and supplier type rather than following a simple Europe-versus-North America pattern.



Europe is often treated as a region but behaves more like a collection of distinct payments markets, each with different supplier dynamics, acceptance economics, payment behaviours and levels of execution maturity. As a result, what works in one market cannot be assumed to translate to another, making country-and-sector combinations a more useful lens.



North America is generally more uniform, supported by favourable economics, a more consolidated supplier base and earlier investment in supplier enablement. Even so, acceptance and execution constraints persist in some segments, reinforcing that scale is ultimately determined by ecosystem readiness rather than geography alone.



In Australia, interchange fee caps introduced in October 2026 have changed the economics of commercial card programmes. Issuers are responding by placing greater emphasis on demonstrating value beyond interchange, including control, data, working capital and operational efficiency. The growth opportunity remains, but the business case increasingly depends on delivering and evidencing these broader benefits.



In Japan, settlement cycles of at least two weeks, compared with next-day settlement in Western markets, make card acceptance less attractive than cash or bank transfer. This is not a demand or product problem but a local market infrastructure constraint that requires partnership-based solutions to unlock acceptance at scale.

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Virtual cards as commercial payments infrastructure

Adoption is increasingly use-case-specific, with virtual cards selected as an additional payment method alongside bank transfer and plastic based on spend type, control requirements, automation needs and the quality of data required for reconciliation and reporting.

As a result, issuer differentiation has shifted. Value comes not from issuing more virtual cards, but from orchestrating reliable execution across the full payment lifecycle. This broader shift is reflected in industry research, which identifies controls, visibility and integration as becoming key differentiators in modern commercial card programmes.[3]

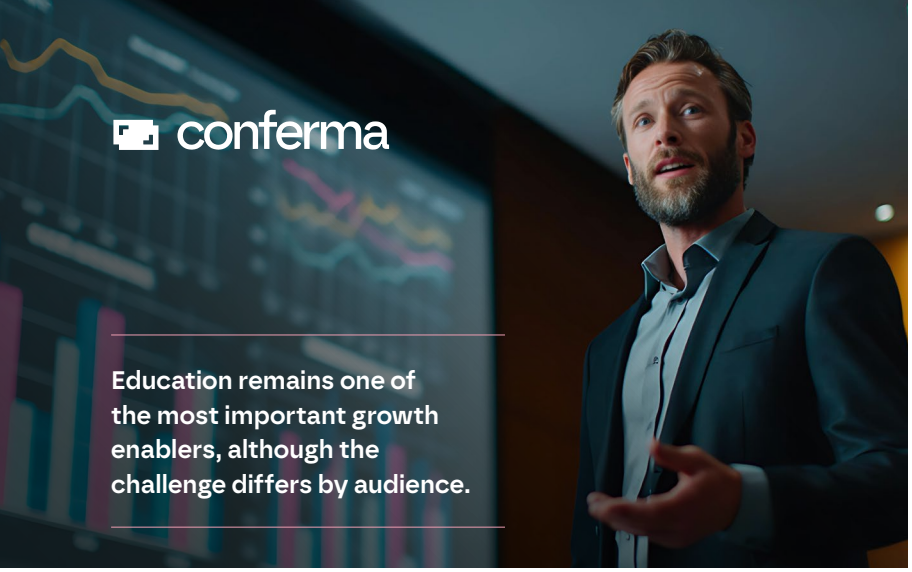
Value is first created when virtual cards eliminate manual processing, increase reconciliation efficiency, reduce fraud exposure, strengthen compliance with T&E policy and support working capital outcomes for suppliers. These benefits must be quantified and communicated to unlock adoption. Once that value is evidenced, differentiation increasingly comes from orchestrating reliable execution across the full payment lifecycle, so that initiation, approval, settlement and reconciliation hold consistently inside operational workflows.



Crucially, this value is rarely realised by a single stakeholder. Finance teams benefit through improved reconciliation, working capital visibility and cash flow management. Procurement teams gain stronger supplier payment processes and policy compliance. Operational teams reduce manual administration and exception handling. Successful programmes therefore require engagement well beyond traditional card or travel stakeholders, bringing together finance, procurement, treasury, operations and category owners around a common value proposition.

Supplier acceptance remains one of the most important factors influencing programme scale, but momentum is increasingly moving in the right direction. Issuers, schemes, acquirers and infrastructure providers are investing more heavily in supplier enablement, richer

3 Juniper Research, How B2B payment cards are streamlining corporate expenses, March 2026



remittance data, education and workflow integration. Increasing evidence shows that suppliers accepting commercial cards can realise benefits including faster payment cycles, improved working capital visibility and operational efficiencies, creating a stronger foundation for long-term ecosystem growth.

The value of virtual cards is increasingly well understood. The next growth phase depends on scaling supplier acceptance, embedding payments within business workflows and ensuring reconciliation, settlement and controls operate consistently at volume.

Education remains one of the most important growth enablers, although the challenge differs by audience. Existing virtual card users often understand the product well, while procurement, finance and operational stakeholders may be less familiar with how virtual cards can improve supplier payment performance, controls, reconciliation and working capital outcomes. Growing adoption therefore depends on targeted education across the buying organisation as well as supplier communities, supported by a clear and consistent value narrative from issuers, schemes, acquirers and ecosystem partners.

ERP integration is increasingly viewed as a strategic route to growth because it embeds virtual cards directly within purchasing, approval and reconciliation workflows. Scaling, however, requires more than connectivity alone. ERP environments are highly customised, and issuers consistently report that success depends on prioritising the right ecosystems, customer segments and use cases rather than assuming uniform readiness across the market.

As ERP and payables platforms expand their payment capabilities, collaboration across the ecosystem becomes increasingly important. Schemes are investing in connectivity, ERP providers are embedding payment functionality, and infrastructure partners play a critical role in enabling orchestration, supplier acceptance, reconciliation and workflow integration. Rather than competing for ownership of the payment experience, success increasingly depends on each participant contributing distinct capabilities that together create a seamless experience for buyers, suppliers and issuers.



Issuer perspective

One issuer told us that having the technical connection in place was only part of the job. The programmes that gained traction were those where the payment fitted naturally into the customer's workflow, suppliers were enabled and customers continued to use the solution after launch. Across all spend categories, the same requirements recur:

- Embedded issuance within approval workflows
- Active supplier enablement
- Strong controls, reconciliation and settlement processes
- Sustained activation beyond go-live.

When execution is designed into the flow, virtual cards operate as invisible infrastructure. Controls hold, payments settle cleanly and unit costs fall as volume grows.

When it isn't, scale amplifies friction. More exceptions, more manual reconciliation, less predictable settlement and margin pressure. For issuers, the implication is simple: growth without execution infrastructure compounds cost, not value.

Not all of this gap is infrastructure. Manual onboarding processes, internal resourcing constraints and credit appetite ceilings sit inside issuer organisations. Cross-functional misalignment between finance and procurement sits inside corporates. No orchestration layer can remove constraints that sit within an organisation itself.

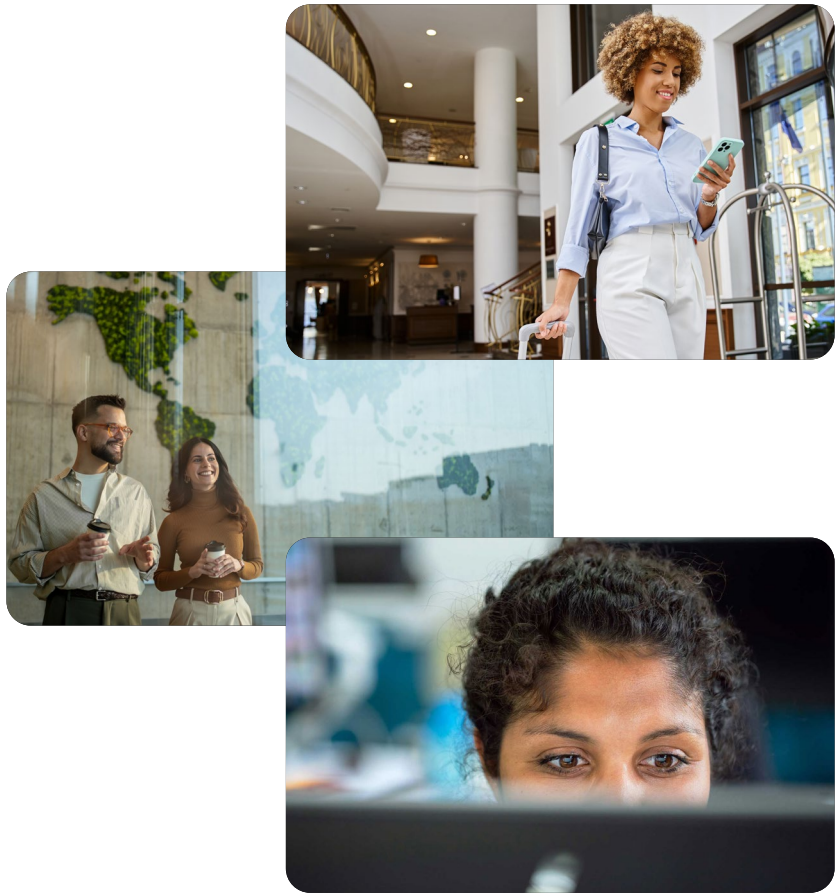
What changes is where execution pressure surfaces, how quickly scale exposes weakness and which economic levers matter most at each stage of maturity.

Issuers increasingly point to straight-through processing as the single most underestimated factor in whether programmes hold at scale. Where it exists, the operational burden stays manageable as volume grows. Where it doesn't, growth simply multiplies manual effort. The cost shows up later, and larger, than most business

cases assume. Close behind is ramp-up: getting a supplier to accept a first transaction is not the same as sustaining usage at scale and programmes that plan for the former routinely underestimate what the latter demands.

The following sections apply this same infrastructure lens to three distinct spend categories: corporate travel, leisure and Online Travel Agency (OTA) travel, and supplier payments. Each faces different constraints, maturity levels and economics – but all are governed by the same underlying execution requirements.

Closing the execution gap therefore depends less on issuing more virtual cards and more on ensuring acceptance, value articulation and execution are designed into the ecosystem from the outset.



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Application 1: Corporate travel

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Optimise

Why this category matters to issuers now

Travel overall remains the most mature and proven virtual card category for commercial card issuers, with corporate travel specifically as a key use case. The scale of spend, the predictability of demand and the role travel plays as a gateway to broader commercial payment relationships make this a foundational pillar of issuer portfolios.

Expectations have shifted. Buyers now assume automation, control and reconciliation are inherent. For issuers, the opportunity has moved from adoption to optimisation: improving efficiency, consistency and operational performance at scale.

Where execution friction persists despite maturity

Even in this mature category, execution breaks down in predictable ways: exact-amount charging rules create declines from minor tax or rounding differences. Hotel front-desk staff apply inconsistent processes. Gaps between booking systems and PMS tools lead to missed or mishandled payment events.

Acceptance and performance vary by region, brand and property structure. As a result, progress depends on coordinating consistently across the ecosystem, not a single deployment that's then left to run itself.

Progress has required sustained investment in:

- Deep integration with booking and property management systems
- Experience improvements for travellers and agents
- Ongoing education across demand and supply.



What good looks like

In high-performing travel and hotel programmes:

- Virtual cards embedded invisibly in booking and expense workflows
- Controls applied consistently and aligned to policy and context
- Reliable acceptance across a broad hotel footprint
- Clean reconciliation data flowing into downstream systems.

Success comes from these pieces working together – booking systems, property teams and suppliers all pulling in the same direction – not from any single product feature.

Issuer priorities in the optimisation phase

For issuers, the optimisation opportunity centres on improving execution quality rather than expanding scope. Key priorities include:

- Increase acceptance consistency across supplier networks and regions
- Reduce manual reconciliation and exception handling
- Improve settlement reliability and data completeness
- Maintain controls without degrading user experience.

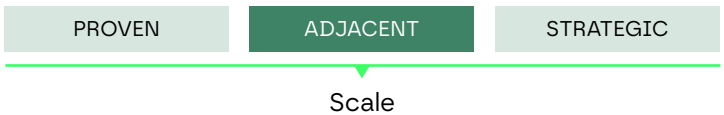
What issuers should demand from partners

Optimising corporate travel and hotel payments requires partners with proven infrastructure across the full payment lifecycle, including:

- Deep integration into booking and hotel ecosystems
- Scalable enablement to improve acceptance consistency across regions
- Controls plus reconciliation/settlement data that support straight-through processing.

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Application 2: Leisure and OTA travel payments



Why this category matters to issuers now

Leisure and OTA-driven travel payments are among the fastest-scaling segments of commercial card usage given the cross-industry appetite for seamless payment solutions. Platform-based booking models and global consumer demand have driven rapid volume growth, making OTAs strategically relevant intermediaries for issuers seeking scale.

Unlike managed corporate travel, this category is shaped by scale first, structure second. Transactions are high volume, margins are thinner and execution must function reliably across multiple geographies, currencies and supplier relationships. As a result, the issuer focus is on settlement discipline, operational efficiency and consistent performance at platform scale.

Where execution friction emerges at scale

Execution friction shifts downstream into settlement, reconciliation and cash flow management. For OTAs, scale turns operational imperfections into structural cost. Each booking generates a unique virtual card, creating high volumes of payment events to monitor and reconcile. As volume grows, execution pressure concentrates in a small number of predictable areas:

- Aggregator settlement models, with mismatched collection and payment times
- Inconsistent remittance data, complicating supplier reconciliation
- Fragmented settlement logic across suppliers and geographies
- High exception volume from modifications and cancellations
- Credit appetite ceilings, which cap how far volume can grow independent of demand.

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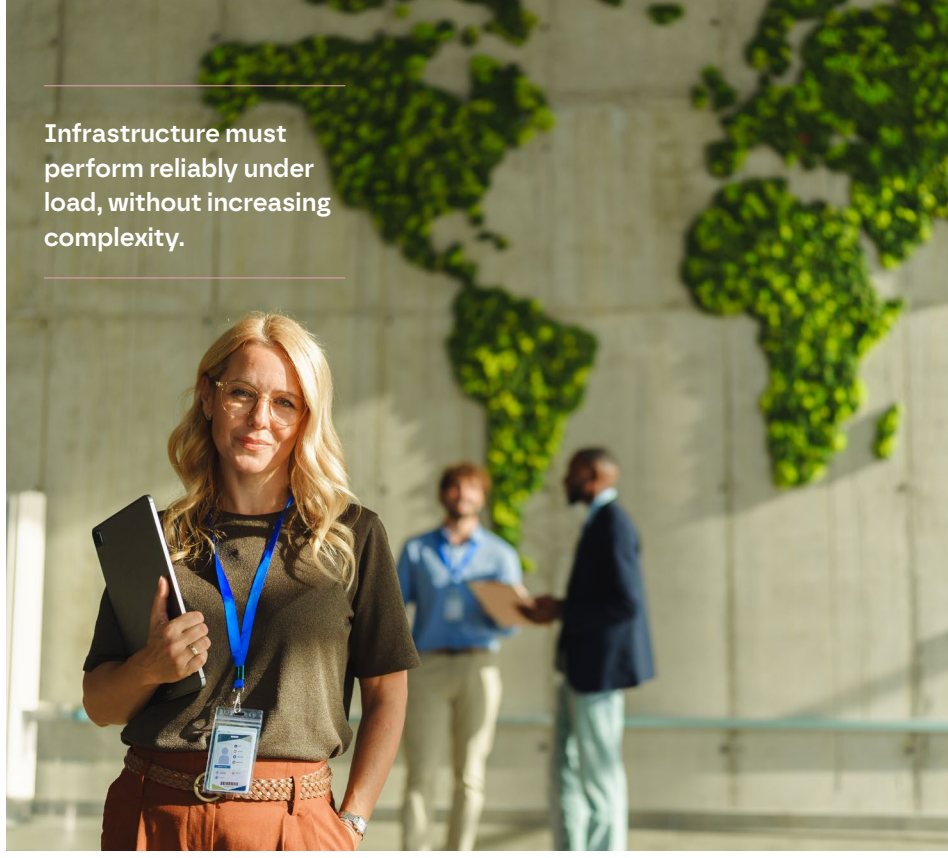
As volumes grow, minor inefficiencies compound quickly. Transaction volume rises, but operational cost and risk rise faster unless settlement, data and exception handling are explicitly designed for scale. Issuer experience highlights how scale pressures often surface first in how value is articulated to OTAs and intermediaries.

What good looks like

In high-performing OTA payment models, virtual cards are embedded directly within platform settlement workflows rather than treated as discrete payment events.

Effective programmes are characterised by:

- Automated issuance aligned to booking logic and supplier contracts
- Dynamic orchestration capabilities that optimise acceptance, interchange economics, supplier outcomes, working capital efficiency and credit utilisation in real time
- Consistent controls applied at scale without manual intervention.



- Settlement processes designed into the flow, rather than managed downstream
- Remittance data travelling with the payment, enabling efficient supplier reconciliation.

Infrastructure must perform reliably under load, without increasing complexity.



Issuer priorities in a scale-driven category

For issuers engaging in leisure and OTA travel payments, priorities should reflect the realities of scale:

- Support high-volume virtual card issuance without degrading control or data quality
- Ensure settlement processes align with platform and supplier requirements
- Reduce reconciliation friction through consistent, structured remittance data
- Manage risk and operational cost as transaction volumes increase.

Here, sustained performance, not initial adoption, determines long-term success.

What issuers should demand from partners

Supporting leisure and OTA travel at scale requires partners with infrastructure designed for sustained volume, including:

- Integration into platform booking and settlement workflows
- Controls and issuance logic that hold at high volume
- Reconciliation and remittance data that reduces exceptions.

This category shows how virtual cards behave under scale pressure.

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Application 3: Supplier payments

PROVEN | ADJACENT | STRATEGIC

Expand

Why this category matters to issuers now

Supplier payments represent the largest growth opportunity in commercial payments, spanning industries, geographies and spend categories. Momentum continues to build as issuers, schemes, acquirers and infrastructure providers invest in supplier enablement, embedded workflows and richer remittance data. While supplier payments involve fragmented supplier communities and complex ERP environments, demand continues to grow and suppliers increasingly report benefits such as improved buyer satisfaction, faster payments and greater operational efficiency. The opportunity is substantial but unlocking it requires coordinated ecosystem execution rather than buyer adoption alone.

Where execution breaks down today

The primary challenge is converting demand into repeatable execution. Buyers need access to suppliers through payment methods those suppliers can accept, while suppliers need confidence that payment, remittance and reconciliation data will arrive in a format they can consume efficiently. The issue is therefore less about whether virtual cards are available and more about reducing the cost to serve, improving data quality and giving all parties confidence to move beyond pilots into sustained usage.

Issuer perspective

One issuer found that successful expansion into new supplier-payment verticals relied on strong ecosystem connectivity, coupled with careful prioritisation of use cases with clear pain points, executable workflows and strong acceptance potential. Growth came through focused execution, with scale following when the right conditions were in place.

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A recurring issue is misalignment between how virtual cards are designed and how supplier payments operate in practice. Virtual cards work best when tailored to specific workflows and payment dynamics, not applied as a one-size-fits-all solution.

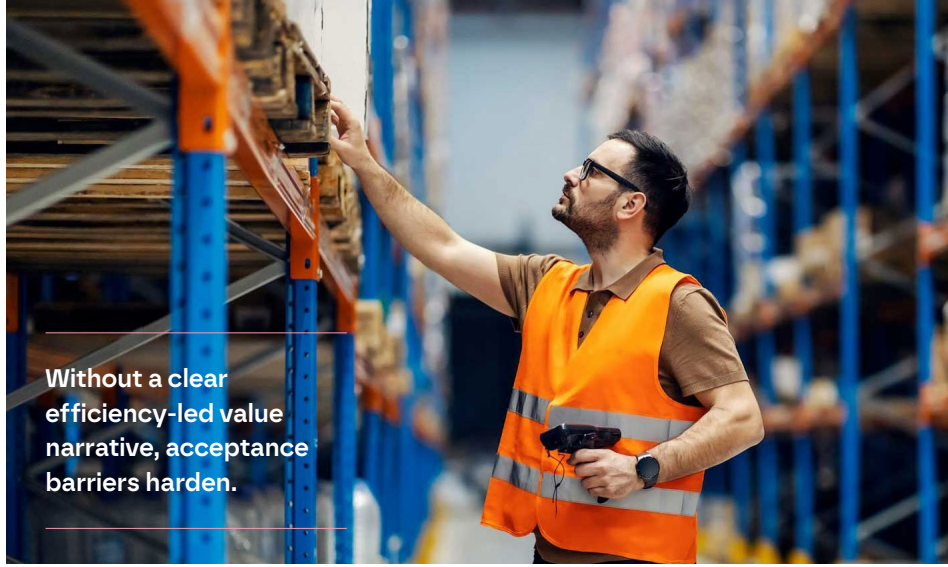
Where this alignment is missing, adoption stalls and execution becomes fragile. Fee resistance intensifies, particularly when suppliers underestimate the true cost of accounts receivable work. Without a clear efficiency-led value narrative, acceptance barriers harden.

Scaling ahead of these foundations increases exceptions, manual intervention and working capital friction for all parties.

As in other high-volume virtual card categories, issuer credit appetite can also shape the pace of growth. However, in supplier payments this constraint sits alongside a broader set of ecosystem requirements: supplier acceptance, workflow integration, remittance quality and the ability to manage exceptions at scale.

Other key factors include:

- Acceptance variability across suppliers and markets due to cost or other factors
- Decoupled initiation, approval and settlement workflows requiring manual effort



- Incomplete or misaligned remittance data slowing reconciliation due to processing inefficiencies.

While enterprise ERP platforms are well established globally, each creates its own ecosystem of buyers, suppliers and payment providers. Scaling within these environments requires investment from multiple participants, creating barriers to entry that can slow adoption. In North America, favourable economics and cheque displacement have generally supported faster investment in supplier enablement and embedded payments. In Europe, progress has been more uneven, reflecting more fragmented market structures and varying levels of ecosystem participation. As a result, scaling depends less on the technology itself and more on the willingness of participants to invest, connect and collaborate.

What good looks like

In more mature programmes, issuers treat embedded supplier payments as a prioritisation problem as much as a technology one. They focus on workflows where payment is critical to completion, partners that can actively drive adoption and use cases where virtual cards solve a clear operational pain point.

Examples are emerging across insurance, healthcare, construction and broader B2B procurement environments. Success depends on aligning finance, procurement, treasury and operational stakeholders around a shared value proposition, while embedding controls, data and settlement into the payment flow from the outset.

Vertical-specific opportunities show how far the model extends. Insurance disbursements, construction and healthcare each share the same underlying logic as travel: a payer, a fragmented supplier base and a controlled payout, and each is an industry as large and complex as travel in its own right. Virtual cards can perform the payout function across all of them, bringing the same control, data and reconciliation benefits to new categories of spend. Insurance disbursements stand out as the highest-conviction near-term case: demand is already established, and the remaining constraint, mobile wallet provisioning, is narrower and more solvable than in most categories. Construction and healthcare follow the same logic with different enablement paths, giving issuers a sequenced pipeline of vertical growth rather than a single bet.

This direction is increasingly supported by wider industry analysis, which highlights integration into procurement and business systems as a key factor in long-term B2B card adoption.[4]

Issuers also increasingly recognise that scaling embedded payments does not require building every capability internally. Instead, they work with specialist ecosystem partners that can accelerate supplier enablement, workflow integration, scheme connectivity and reconciliation. Several issuers highlighted the value of infrastructure partners that provide a scheme-agnostic integration layer, enabling them to expand into new payment ecosystems more quickly and efficiently than would be possible through standalone development.

The scale of that advantage is easy to underestimate. One issuer's ERP partnership initially identified around 500 addressable corporates on a single platform. Once configuration compatibility was assessed client by client, only a handful could be onboarded immediately. The lesson is not that the opportunity is small; it is that

4 Juniper Research, How B2B payment cards are streamlining corporate expenses, March 2026

realising it depends on knowing where execution is ready. Partners that have already done the integration work, and can qualify readiness upfront, allow issuers to direct investment towards the segments that will convert first, and to reach the rest of the market as readiness matures.

Issuer priorities in the expansion phase

Given the growth potential of supplier payments, issuer priorities should focus on building the conditions for confident expansion. Key areas of focus include:

- Improving supplier acceptance and onboarding across card schemes, issuers and acquirers
- Aligning virtual card payments with industry-specific, suitable ERP and AP workflows
- Ensuring remittance data quality supports straight-through reconciliation
- Supporting predictable settlement to reinforce working capital outcomes.



Issuer perspective

Insurance came up as a strong area of interest in the issuer interviews. One use case is claims payments to approved providers, such as healthcare providers or vehicle repair networks. Although there is already demand, the challenge is making the payment work within the claims process, including capabilities such as mobile wallet provisioning.



Observed in practice

An issuer struggling to scale supplier adoption found that resistance to virtual cards was driven less by pricing than by poorly articulated value. By working with clients to quantify the full cost of accounts receivable, including manual reconciliation, exception handling and payment delays, conversations shifted from interchange fees to operational efficiency and cashflow impact. Simple business cases that quantified operational efficiency, reconciliation effort and cash flow impact helped issuers communicate value more effectively and support supplier acceptance conversations.

What issuers should demand from partners

Even when execution challenges are well understood, programmes can stall without shared, credible evidence that supports change across the ecosystem. Issuers, partners and suppliers alike benefit from clearer, more consistent ways of articulating value – particularly around operational efficiency, cash flow impact and cost to serve – so that investment decisions are aligned and adoption momentum can build.

Expanding into supplier payments requires partners with deep infrastructure capability, including:

- Proven acceptance enablement across fragmented suppliers
- Tight integration into ERP and payables platforms
- Lifecycle controls
- Consistent reconciliation and settlement data.

This category reinforces why virtual cards must be treated as infrastructure.

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The future of commercial payments



Virtual cards are moving beyond their origins as a niche commercial card product and becoming an increasingly important layer within modern payment infrastructure. As issuers expand beyond traditional travel payments into supplier payments, procurement platforms, insurance disbursements and broader B2B workflows, the opportunity extends well beyond issuing more virtual cards. It is about creating a unified payment experience that combines security, control, data, reconciliation, acceptance and workflow integration within the systems businesses already use.

Over the next five years, supplier acceptance is expected to continue expanding while payment workflows become increasingly embedded within ERP platforms, procurement systems, travel technology and broader business software. Straight-through processing, automated reconciliation and invoice matching will increasingly become expected capabilities rather than premium differentiators. Advances in orchestration, automation and AI-driven decisioning will further improve how payments are routed, controlled and optimised across complex ecosystems.

For issuers, the portfolio playbook is clear: optimise corporate travel, scale OTA and platform opportunities and build the foundations for supplier payments through acceptance, integration and data quality. Virtual cards are no longer an optional product extension but a strategic growth rail, and issuers that combine supplier enablement, embedded workflows, ecosystem partnerships and execution excellence will be best placed to capture the next phase of growth.

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About Conferma

Headquartered in Manchester, UK, Conferma is the global leader in virtual payments, connecting businesses, issuers and suppliers to streamline and secure transactions. Our technology underpins virtual card issuance for banks, travel management companies and enterprises worldwide.

Talk to us about virtual payments.

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sales@conferma.com

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