Governance for Hybrid and Decentralized Teams

WHITE PAPER

Making Decision Rights Explicit When Your Program Team Is Never in the Same Room

Abstract

Most life sciences program teams now run across multiple offices, time zones, CROs, and home offices at once, and the governance models built for a team that sat together were never designed for that reality. The gap shows up first in perception. Owl Labs' 2024 State of Hybrid Work research found that 90% of hybrid employees rate their own productivity as consistent or improved, while only 62% of their managers agree, a twenty-eight point trust gap that governance structures rarely account for. Deloitte's research on organizational decision-making found something sharper underneath that gap: in organizations with clear, well-understood decision rights, 91% of employees know where and how important decisions get made, compared with just 69% in organizations without that clarity, and the performance difference is not cosmetic, with high-clarity organizations posting 45% average earnings growth against an 88% average decline for low-clarity peers. A hybrid or decentralized program team without explicit governance is not simply less convenient to manage. It is running on a structure built for an org chart that no longer describes how the work actually gets done. This white paper applies established program governance best practices to a governance model purpose-built for distributed program teams.

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The Program Team That Is Never in One Room

A clinical operations lead in Boston, a biostatistician working from home in Raleigh, a CRO project manager in Bangalore, and a site coordinator in Madrid are all part of the same trial team, and none of them share a time zone with more than one other person on that list. This is not an edge case anymore. It is the default shape of a life sciences program team, built from a mix of internal staff, CRO partners, and remote specialists who never sit in the same building, and often never overlap on a live call without someone joining at an inconvenient hour.

The governance models most PMOs still run were built for a different team. Steering committees that assume everyone can grab five minutes in the hallway after the meeting. Escalation paths that assume a manager can walk over and ask a quick question. Decision rights that were never written down because everyone already knew who had ultimate authority through years of working in the same office. None of that survives the shift to a team distributed across geographies, companies, and working hours, and most organizations have not rebuilt their governance to match.

The result is a specific kind of drift. Nothing breaks visibly. Status reports still get filed, meetings still happen, and deliverables still ship. But decisions take longer to actually land, get revisited more often because the wrong people weighed in too late, and depend increasingly on whoever happens to be most persistent about getting on someone's calendar rather than whoever actually holds the authority to decide.

The Trust Gap Nobody Is Measuring

Owl Labs' 2024 State of Hybrid Work research surfaced a gap that most PMOs would recognize if they looked for it directly. Ninety percent of hybrid and remote employees describe their own productivity as consistent or improved compared to working in an office. Only 62% of their managers agree, a twenty-eight point gap between how distributed team members see their own contribution and how the people governing their work see it.[i] The same research found that 55% of workers believe managers implicitly trust office-based colleagues more than remote ones, and 57% say colleagues are more likely to seek input from whoever is physically nearby rather than whoever actually has the relevant expertise.[i]

None of this is a workforce morale issue that HR can solve on its own. It is a governance signal. When a program's steering structure informally favors the input of whoever is in the room, and an increasing share of the team is never in the room, the governance model itself is quietly excluding the people it is supposed to be managing. A trial team where the CRO's clinical lead in Bangalore has less practical influence over a scope decision than the sponsor's junior coordinator down the hall in Boston is not being governed by expertise. It is being governed by proximity, and proximity is not a defensible basis for a program decision.

Why Clarity on Decision Rights Changes the Numbers

Deloitte's research on organizational decision-making, drawn from a large multi-industry study of decision rights clarity, quantifies exactly what is at stake. In organizations where decision rights are clearly defined and understood, 91% of employees know where and how important decisions actually get made, against 69% in organizations without that clarity. Clear accountability for decisions runs at 86% versus 40%, and employees who understand they have the authority to act without seeking additional approval sit at 88% versus 64%.[ii]

The business outcomes tied to that clarity are not marginal. Organizations with high decision-making maturity posted average earnings-per-share growth of 45% year over year, compared with an average 88% decline among organizations scoring low on the same measure, and were three times more likely to develop genuinely disruptive products, 1.9 times more likely to achieve high customer satisfaction, and 1.3 times more likely to hit their financial targets.[ii] Governance clarity is not a compliance nicety layered on top of program delivery. It is one of the more direct levers an organization has on whether decisions actually produce the outcomes they were meant to.

A hybrid or decentralized team amplifies whatever clarity or ambiguity already exists in a governance model, because it removes the informal correction mechanism, the hallway conversation, the body language in a room, that co-located teams unconsciously rely on to paper over unclear decision rights. Distributed teams do not create governance ambiguity. They expose it.

Applying Best Practices: Governance for the Distributed Program Team

A foundational best practice in PMO governance identifies Governance and Decision Rights as one of five maturity dimensions, and distributed team structures are exactly where that dimension gets tested hardest. Applying it for a hybrid or decentralized program means building four specific habits that a co-located team could get away with skipping.

1. **Decision Rights Written Down, Not Assumed.** Every recurring decision type, scope change, budget reallocation, timeline adjustment, gets a documented owner and a documented escalation path, so authority does not depend on who happens to be closest to the conversation.
2. **Asynchronous-First Communication for Anything That Needs a Record.** Decisions that matter get documented in a shared, written format that every team member can access on their own schedule, rather than relying on whoever attended a specific live call.
3. **Rotating Meeting Times Across Time Zones.** No single region permanently absorbs the inconvenient hours. Meeting times rotate so the burden of a 6 a.m. or 10 p.m. call is shared rather than consistently falling on the same site or CRO partner.
4. **Explicit Input Rights for Remote and CRO Team Members.** Governance structures name which distributed roles have standing to weigh in on which decisions, closing the gap where proximity substitutes for expertise as the basis for influence.

None of these habits require new technology. They require treating governance design as deliberately as any other program deliverable, rather than assuming the informal structures that worked for a co-located team will simply translate to a distributed one.

What Distributed Governance Buys, and Where It Gets Hard

Advantages

- **Decisions that actually hold:** written decision rights and documented rationale reduce the number of decisions that get quietly reopened because the right stakeholder never weighed in the first time.

- **Access to the best expertise regardless of location:** when input rights are explicit rather than proximity-based, the person with the deepest knowledge of a CRO relationship or a site issue gets heard on that decision, wherever they are sitting.
- **A fairer distribution of the inconvenient hours:** rotating meeting times prevents one region or partner from quietly absorbing every early-morning or late-night call indefinitely.
- **Faster onboarding for new team members:** written-down decision rights and escalation paths give a new CRO partner or remote hire something concrete to reference instead of learning the informal rules by trial and error.

Risks and Barriers

- **Documentation overhead:** writing down decision rights for every decision type can turn into its own bureaucracy if it is not scoped to the decisions that actually cause friction.
- **Cultural resistance from co-located leadership:** managers accustomed to informal hallway influence may resist a structure that makes remote input explicitly equal, even when they would not describe it that way.
- **Time zone rotation fatigue:** spreading inconvenient meeting times fairly still means everyone experiences them sometimes, and that requires buy-in that a rotation is genuinely fair rather than just differently unfair.
- **Written records without follow-through:** documenting a decision rights framework only helps if it gets referenced and enforced when a real ambiguous situation comes up, not filed away after the kickoff meeting.

Case in Point: The Decision That Kept Getting Reopened

A mid-size biotech ran a global Phase III trial with a program team split across a US sponsor office, a European CRO, and site coordinators across six countries. A scope question about adding an additional safety assessment came up mid-trial. The sponsor's Boston-based team decided informally on a call that included the US clinical lead and the US regulatory lead, both physically in the same office that week for an unrelated meeting.

Two weeks later, the CRO's biostatistics lead in a different time zone, who had never been consulted, raised a substantive concern about how the added assessment would affect the statistical analysis plan. The decision got reopened, requiring another round of discussion, a revised protocol amendment, and a two-week delay that traced directly back to a decision made by whoever happened to be in the room rather than whoever actually needed to weigh in. A documented decision rights framework naming the biostatistics lead as a required input on any protocol-affecting scope change would have caught the gap before the first decision was made, not two weeks after.

Recommendations for PMO and Program Leaders

1. **Map decision types to documented owners and required inputs.** before the next distributed program kicks off, not after the first reopened decision exposes the gap.
2. **Default to written records for consequential decisions.** even when a live conversation happens, capture the decision and its rationale somewhere every team member can access asynchronously.

3. **Rotate meeting times on a published schedule.** so no single site or partner organization silently absorbs every inconvenient hour indefinitely.
4. **Name required input roles explicitly for high-impact decision types.** particularly scope, budget, and protocol-affecting changes, so expertise rather than proximity determines who gets consulted.
5. **Audit reopened decisions quarterly.** track how often a decision gets revisited after the fact, and treat a rising trend as a governance signal worth investigating.
6. **Review the framework with distributed team members directly.** the people most affected by proximity bias are best positioned to identify where a governance structure is still informally favoring whoever is easiest to reach.

Measuring Success: KPIs for Distributed Team Governance

- **Decision reversal rate:** the percentage of documented program decisions that get materially revised within thirty days, tracked toward a declining trend.
- **Time-zone burden distribution:** the spread of early or late meeting slots across sites and partner organizations, tracked toward an even distribution rather than concentration on one group.
- **Decision rights documentation coverage:** the percentage of recurring decision types with a documented owner and escalation path on file.
- **Distributed team confidence in being heard:** a periodic pulse measure of whether remote and CRO team members feel their input reaches decisions on time, tracked as a direct check on the proximity bias this framework is built to close.

Conclusion

A program team spread across time zones and organizations is not a smaller version of a co-located team that happens to work remotely. It is a fundamentally different structure that exposes every piece of governance ambiguity a co-located team could quietly absorb through hallway conversations and shared body language. Deloitte's research makes the stakes concrete: organizations with clear decision rights outperform those without them by a wide enough margin that the difference shows up in earnings, not just in employee sentiment surveys.

Applying disciplined best practices to a governance model built for distributed teams means writing down what used to be assumed, distributing the burden of inconvenient hours fairly, and giving remote and CRO team members explicit standing in the decisions that affect their work. Programs that build this discipline stop losing weeks to reopened decisions and proximity bias, and start running with the same clarity a co-located team never had to think about twice.

About OmniTek & Contact Information

OmniTek Consulting is a trusted partner for organizations seeking to enhance governance, operational agility, and decision-making. We specialize in modernizing business processes with a blend of human-centered design, technology expertise, and hands-on change management.

For PMO and program leaders running teams spread across sites, CROs, and time zones, OmniTek applies proven best practices to build a distributed governance model: documented decision rights, asynchronous-first records, and explicit input roles that close the gap proximity bias leaves open. Whether you are standing up governance for a new global program or auditing why decisions on an existing one keep getting reopened, OmniTek can help you build a structure that works for the team you actually have.

Contact us today to explore how OmniTek can support your transformation journey and drive lasting results.

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Click here to book a 15-minute call to see how OmniTek can help your team put these insights into practice.

Endnotes

[i] Owl Labs, "State of Hybrid Work 2024", available at https://owllabs.com/state-of-hybrid-work/2024

[ii] McDowell, Tiffany and David Mallon, "Getting Decision Rights Right: How Effective Organizational Decision-Making Can Help Boost Performance," Deloitte Insights, 2020, available at https://www.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/articles/2024/6360_getting-decision-rights-right/di-getting-decision-rights-right.pdf