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GOVERNANCE

AI Governance Operating Model Guide

Understand how governance roles, committees, decision rights, escalation routes and operational processes can work together in practice.

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2026 Edition

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AI Governance Operating Model Guide

Understand how governance roles, committees, decision rights, escalation routes and operational processes can work together in practice.

> A governance framework describes what an organisation intends to do; an operating model describes how it actually happens, day to day. This guide focuses specifically on the operating model — the roles, committees, decision rights, escalation routes and operational processes that turn governance principles into consistent, working practice.

CHAPTER 1 · PURPOSE

What an Operating Model Actually Does

Many organisations have a reasonably well-articulated set of AI governance principles, and still struggle with consistent application. The gap is usually not the principles themselves, but the absence of a clear operating model translating those principles into who does what, when, and with what authority.

> *Principles describe intent. An operating model describes what actually happens on a Tuesday morning when a new use case arrives.*

A good operating model should let any employee answer a practical question quickly: who approves this, what evidence is needed, and how long should it take? Where these answers are unclear or inconsistent, governance tends to be applied unevenly across the organisation, regardless of how well the underlying principles are written.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- An operating model translates governance principles into practical, consistent day-to-day application.
- The absence of a clear operating model, not weak principles, is the more common source of inconsistency.
- A good model lets any employee quickly answer who approves what, and with what evidence.

CHAPTER 2 · ROLES

Roles & Committees

Most organisations need a smaller set of clearly defined roles and committees than they initially assume. Over-engineering the structure, with numerous overlapping committees, tends to slow decisions without meaningfully improving them.

ROLE / BODY	CORE FUNCTION
Executive Sponsor	Owns AI governance overall; secures resourcing and authority
AI Governance Committee	Approves higher-risk use cases; owns policy and standards
System Owners	Accountable for individual systems throughout their lifecycle
Specialist Advisors	Legal, data protection and security input into committee decisions

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Most organisations need fewer, more clearly defined roles than initially assumed.
- Over-engineered structures with overlapping committees can slow decisions without improving them.
- Specialist advisory input should feed into committee decisions, not sit as a separate approval layer.

CHAPTER 3 · DECISION RIGHTS

Decision Rights

Decision rights should be explicit about what can be approved at what level, tied directly to risk tier rather than applied uniformly. A minimal-risk internal tool and a high-risk, customer-facing system should not travel through the same approval process.

A Practical Structure

Lower-risk use cases can typically be approved by a system owner or line manager, following a lightweight screening process. Higher-risk use cases should require AI Governance Committee approval, with board-level involvement reserved for genuinely material decisions, such as significant investment or novel, high-consequence use cases.

1. Is it clear, for any given use case, exactly who has authority to approve it?
2. Does approval authority scale with risk, rather than being applied identically to every use case?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Decision rights should scale explicitly with risk tier, not apply uniformly across all use cases.
- Lower-risk decisions can sit with system owners; higher-risk decisions require committee-level approval.
- Board involvement should be reserved for genuinely material decisions, not routine approvals.

CHAPTER 4 · ESCALATION

Escalation Routes

A well-designed operating model includes clear escalation routes for two distinct situations: routine decisions that exceed a given approval authority, and urgent issues, such as an emerging incident, that cannot wait for a scheduled governance meeting.

SITUATION	ESCALATION ROUTE
Use case exceeds local approval authority	Escalate to AI Governance Committee at next scheduled review
Urgent, time-sensitive decision needed	Defined fast-track route to Committee Chair or Executive Sponsor
Material incident in progress	Immediate escalation per incident response process

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Escalation routes should distinguish between routine authority limits and urgent, time-sensitive situations.
- A fast-track route for urgent decisions prevents unnecessary delay waiting for scheduled meetings.
- Incident escalation should be immediate and distinct from routine governance escalation.

CHAPTER 5 · CADENCE

Operational Processes & Cadence

An operating model needs a defined rhythm to function consistently: regular committee meetings, a scheduled cadence for reviewing the risk register and system inventory, and periodic reporting to executive leadership or the board.

ACTIVITY	SUGGESTED CADENCE
AI Governance Committee meeting	Monthly, with fast-track provision for urgent matters
Risk register review	Monthly, or immediately following a material change
System inventory verification	Quarterly
Board / executive reporting	Quarterly, or immediately for material incidents

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A defined operational rhythm is what keeps a governance operating model functioning consistently.
- Cadence should be realistic for organisational size, rather than copied uniformly from larger organisations.
- Reporting to executive leadership should happen on a fixed schedule, supplemented by immediate escalation when needed.

CHAPTER 6 · IN PRACTICE

Making the Model Work in Practice

An operating model only works if it is actually used consistently, which requires more than documentation — it requires the people within it understanding their role, having genuine authority to exercise it, and seeing the model applied consistently rather than selectively.

> *An operating model followed inconsistently is, in practice, not an operating model at all — it is a suggestion.*

WHERE TO GO NEXT

INTAI's AI Governance Committee Charter Template and AI Governance Framework Template provide the practical documents to establish the structure this guide describes.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- An operating model requires genuine, consistent use, not only clear documentation.
- People within the model need real authority and understanding of their role to make it function.
- Inconsistent application undermines an operating model as thoroughly as having no model at all.

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Want support applying this guide?

INTAI works with organisations across Europe — from SMEs to public sector bodies and larger enterprises — to turn AI governance guidance into a practical, proportionate programme. If you would like support applying the ideas in this guide to your own organisation, our team is glad to help.

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