



Modernizing the Global Pharma IT Operating Model

Balancing Enterprise Standards with Regional Agility



Based on our recent work with clients, we've seen global pharmaceutical organizations face increasing pressure to demonstrate measurable value from their technology investments. Large-scale ERP transformations, digital platforms, and AI initiatives are no longer justified as simply “building the foundation.” Executive leadership expects tangible outcomes, including faster time to market, improved operating performance, better access to scalable data insights, and sustained competitive advantage.

Yet many global pharma companies find themselves at an inflection point. Years of ERP standardization efforts have often resulted in fragmented regional variations. Digital initiatives have been launched with enthusiasm but have struggled to integrate into core business processes. Cross-functional collaboration continues to be stifled and data remains siloed. Governance can swing between over-centralized control and regional workarounds.

The core challenge is clear: ***How can global pharma IT organizations establish enterprise standards and shared platforms while enabling business ownership of outcomes, preserving regional agility, and maintaining compliance?***

This guide explores a practical approach to modernizing the global pharma IT operating model grounded in three pillars: global platforms, value-stream-aligned technology, and controlled regional execution.

Current State Realities

Today's operating model challenges are rarely caused by a lack of technology investment. More often, they emerge when large-scale transformation programs, regional requirements, and business-led [digital initiatives move faster](#) than the governance, data foundations, and decision rights needed to support them.

Several realities are especially common.

Fragmented Global Platforms

Many global pharma organizations are preparing for—or are already in the midst of—[S/4HANA transitions](#). Despite prior standardization efforts, ERP landscapes often remain heavily customized and regionally divergent. This limits enterprise-wide data integration and makes it harder to generate consistent insights across the business. It also increases integration costs and [makes it harder for AI initiatives](#) to scale when underlying data remain inconsistent.

The promise of digital transformation is often constrained by inconsistent platforms and governance fatigue that make enterprise-wide execution more difficult.

Siloed Business Alignment

Over the past decade, IT has worked diligently to align with business stakeholders. Business relationship management and value-stream alignment have improved prioritization and engagement.

However, without strong enterprise guardrails, this alignment can unintentionally lead to siloed technology decisions. Standalone digital initiatives and business-unit-specific solutions may deliver local gains, but they can create new integration challenges. Data becomes optimized for reporting within a function instead of supporting decisions across the enterprise.

Regional Variation and “Standard Drift”

Global pharma organizations must address diverse regulatory, commercial, and market realities across geographies. As global templates are deployed across regions, local requirements frequently introduce customization. Without disciplined guardrails, local variation can gradually erode global standards.

As a result, integration becomes more complex, and successful innovations are harder to scale across markets. It also creates persistent tension between global control and regional autonomy.





The Target Operating Model

With these challenges in mind, organizations need a defined pathway for transitioning to an operating model that balances enterprise standards with regional agility. The following considerations outline how global pharma IT can move beyond structural realignment to an operating model built for long-term value.

1. From Projects to Products

A foundational shift is transitioning from a project-based delivery model to a product-oriented operating model. Projects are bounded by scope, budget, and timeline. Products are managed over their lifecycle and measured by business outcomes.

In a product model, investment aligns with business KPIs such as revenue lift or cycle time reduction. Funding evolves from one-time capital events to continuous value-based investment, and product teams continuously improve shared capabilities instead of delivering a project and moving on.

This shift is particularly critical during S/4HANA and enterprise data platform transformations, where long-term value depends on lifecycle ownership, not program completion.

2. Establishing Global Platforms

Global platforms form the backbone of the enterprise by providing the common capabilities, [data foundations](#), and controls needed to scale safely across markets. They allow global pharma organizations to standardize where consistency matters while giving the business flexibility where it creates value.

Core platforms typically include:

- SAP S/4HANA global template and Center of Excellence (CoE)
- Enterprise data and AI platform
- Integration and API architecture
- Cloud, workplace, identity, and security frameworks

The objective isn't to centralize technology for its own sake, but [to standardize for scale, compliance, and reuse](#). Well-designed global platforms enable [cross-functional collaboration](#) and create a more consistent foundation for enterprise data. That gives leaders better visibility into performance and helps them respond more quickly to changing business needs.

To prevent standardization from becoming either a bottleneck or something teams work around, governance must define how platforms evolve and how exceptions are managed. The goal is to make standards easy to adopt while ensuring exceptions are visible, justified, and aligned with enterprise priorities.

Effective [global platform governance](#) requires dedicated product ownership beyond traditional Centers of Excellence. It also requires clear decision rights that define what is globally standardized by default. Guardrails should make platforms easier to consume rather than create unnecessary approvals.

Strong data governance also remains essential to maintain data quality and integration, and that needs to be reinforced by funding. Centralized investment should support core platform capabilities. Business and regional enhancements should follow transparent funding models that align investment with business priorities, allowing the platform to evolve without fragmenting enterprise standards.

When executed effectively, global platforms reduce complexity and make proven capabilities easier to reuse across the enterprise. They also strengthen enterprise controls without adding unnecessary variation.



3. Empowering Value Streams

Technology must ultimately deliver business outcomes, and a key component of that shift is aligning product teams to the value streams they enable. Value-stream-aligned product teams—such as R&D/Clinical, Commercial, Manufacturing/Supply Chain, or Corporate Functions—should own prioritization and outcome accountability within established enterprise guardrails. In this model, the business determines investment priorities and ROI expectations, and IT partners with the business to shape roadmaps aligned to the enterprise architecture. Here, accountability for value realization sits with the business, not IT alone.

This approach embeds digital, data, and AI capabilities directly into operational workflows. It helps organizations make decisions faster while keeping technology investments aligned with business priorities.

To make the model work, organizations need mature product management capabilities and [clear outcome-based metrics](#). Product teams and platform teams also need defined ways of working. Without these capabilities, organizations risk returning to centralized bottlenecks or fragmented local solutions.

4. Regional Execution with Controlled Variation

Global pharma organizations must reconcile enterprise consistency with regional complexity. Regulatory requirements, market dynamics, and commercial strategies vary significantly across geographies.

In practice, this is often observed when global IT organizations [define common standards](#) for demand management, prioritization, budget allocation, and delivery roles, while regions retain flexibility in how solutions are configured and adopted locally. The challenge is defining where variation is appropriate and where consistency must be maintained.

As such, regions should have authority to execute and configure solutions within defined boundaries. Exceptions should follow transparent escalation pathways supported by clear business justification.

This requires:

- Mandatory use of global platforms
- Explicit definitions of allowable local variation
- Consistent data, identity, and integration standards
- Shared accountability between regional leaders and global product owners

When well-orchestrated, this model enables faster last-mile delivery while preserving the consistency needed to scale successful solutions across the enterprise.

Avoiding Common Pitfalls

Operating model transformation carries several common risks:

Over-centralized platform teams can become bottlenecks

Value streams can create shadow solutions that weaken enterprise standards

Data governance can slow innovation if it's treated only as a control mechanism

Organizations can underinvest in product management or OCM capabilities

Without the right discipline, organizations may redesign structures without changing how work gets done. Demand may be prioritized differently on paper, while funding, decision-making, and accountability remain unchanged.

These risks are rarely technology problems alone. They emerge when decision rights, incentives, and organizational capabilities fail to evolve alongside the platform strategy. Successful organizations treat people, process, and technology as interconnected capabilities. Governance must be explicit, and business ownership must be clear.

Successful organizations [invest as deliberately in people and governance](#) maturity as they do in technology platforms.

A Balanced Path Forward

Global pharmaceutical organizations need an operating model that establishes enterprise standards while giving regions the flexibility to address local business and regulatory requirements. Global platforms provide a consistent foundation for shared capabilities, and value-stream teams help ensure technology investments deliver measurable business outcomes.

Organizations that [realize greater value from S/4HANA](#), enterprise data platforms, and AI initiatives recognize that technology alone is not enough. The operating model must also define clear ownership and support consistent decision-making.

When enterprise standards are clear, regions can adapt solutions to local needs without creating unnecessary complexity. That makes it easier to scale successful capabilities across the organization and realize greater value from technology investments over time.

ABOUT CLARKSTON CONSULTING

Businesses across the life sciences industry partner with Clarkston Consulting to enhance strategic decision-making, improve operational efficiencies, implement new technologies, and promote business growth and market diversification. Leveraging deep functional and industry expertise, our people discover, design, and deliver solutions that fit your business, your goals, and your future. At Clarkston, your purpose is our purpose.

For more information about how we can help your company, [please contact us](#).

