

Strategic ICT Leadership in Constrained Environments: GITO Agency in South Africa's Public Sector – Insights for Developing Nations

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This article examines how Government Information Technology Officers (GITOs) in South Africa's public sector navigate leadership strategically amidst persistent institutional inflexibility, bureaucratic slowdowns, and tight budgets. Despite the good intentions behind formal ICT governance frameworks—like the Corporate Governance of ICT Policy Framework, the Public Finance Management Act, and the SITA Act, all designed for accountability and efficiency—actual real-world data tells a different story. The research involved 55 GITOs who worked at national, provincial and local government levels and found that current organizational structures hinder both agility and innovation in the ICT sector. Our research lays bare how GITOs exhibit remarkable adaptive agency, a truth illuminated by looking through lenses like strategic leadership, street-level bureaucracy, and institutional work. These GITOs are far from just carrying out orders; they're actively working through and around existing regulations. They achieve this through their ability to manipulate situations by forming strategic alliances and negotiating the compliance terms.. This article contributes to ICT governance and public administration literature by foregrounding the lived practices of digital leadership in the Global South and calls for more context-sensitive, flexible governance models that recognise discretion, adaptation, and influence as essential features of public sector ICT leadership.

Keywords: *Strategic ICT leadership, governance, GITOs, South Africa, public sector, street-level bureaucracy, institutional work*

INTRODUCTION:

Public sector organizations worldwide are adopting Information and Communication Technology (ICT) governance frameworks at an increasing rate. Public service delivery becomes more efficient and effective through these strategic tools which also increase transparency and accountability (Saragih & Nasution, 2024). The basic values of these frameworks lie in the broader concepts of good governance and the theory of public value. The principles of these frameworks draw on essential principles of good governance and the theory of public value. The concepts illustrate how, using ICT, it is possible to run operations in the public sector in ways that are capable of generating citizen-oriented outcomes yet they fulfill the regulatory demands. South Africa has created official systems which have propelled the advancement of ICT governance. These instruments include Corporate Governance of ICT Policy Framework (CGICTPF), Public Finance Management Act (PFMA), and State Information Technology Agency (SITA) Act, among others as the leading instruments. The instruments serve as compliance as well as normative instruments that guide the making of ICT decisions in a path that leads to national priorities on development and their reform agendas in the public sector. Furthermore, these frameworks are reinforced by a constellation of oversight institutions such as the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA), the National Treasury, and the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), which collectively ensure coherence, accountability, and strategic alignment across the public administration ecosystem (Mathase et al., 2019; Nxosi & Flowerday, 2021; Latchu & Singh, 2024; Mokhomole, 2023). This multi-tiered governance

structure aims to strike a balance between bureaucratic oversight and driving digital innovation, pushing for an ICT governance model that's both disciplined and flexible. Yet, even with the best intentions for integration and responsiveness, rigid application of these frameworks can spark tension and make implementation difficult. This is especially true where resources are scarce, institutional capacities are disjointed, and technological demands are constantly shifting.

The public sector in South Africa maintains strong ICT governance frameworks yet government ICT projects show high rates of underperformance and complete failure according to Auditor-General South Africa (2022) and Latchu & Singh (2024). Public sector ICT investments continue to fail despite the implementation of codified governance structures and compliance mechanisms and oversight processes that should guarantee effectiveness and transparency and accountability. The existing research on ICT governance provides important knowledge about technical aspects and procedural and policy-oriented elements (Ako-Nai et al., 2019; Mathase et al., 2019) yet it fails to capture the practical experiences and strategic actions of those who operate within these systems. The existing research lacks empirical studies about how Government Information Technology Officers (GITO) who lead ICT initiatives in government departments understand and modify governance systems through their discretionary powers (Latchu, 2022; Latchu & Singh, 2024).

Emerging scholarship in governance theory increasingly moves beyond the idea of governance as a fixed, rule-bound system. Instead, it champions a more dynamic understanding, one that underscores the deep connections between formal institutional structures and the purposeful choices individuals make (Alexandroff & Stein, 2019). This relational perspective fits well with sociological and institutionalist thought. This body of work views governance as a continuously evolving arena, shaped both by established rules and the deliberate actions of agents operating within those very systems. According to this perspective GITO function as strategic actors who use their agency through adaptation and resistance and innovation to shape ICT governance outcomes. The essential understanding of public sector ICT governance requires analysis of the dialectical relationship between structural elements and human agency particularly when institutions are fragmented, and procurement is slow and political-administrative tensions exist.

The research investigates essential gaps in existing literature through its analysis of 55 Government Information Technology Officers (GITO) who work in South African public sector entities at national and provincial and local levels. The study sample in Figure 1 demonstrates a wide range of government institutions and functional sectors including education and healthcare and finance and tourism and performing arts. Because we included such a wide variety of participants in this study, our findings are more broadly applicable. It means we get a truly detailed look at how ICT leadership operates across different organizational settings, with their varying capabilities. This article clearly illustrates how Government Information Technology Officers (GITO) behave much like Lipsky's (1980) "street-level bureaucrats." These leaders are always forced to reconcile the needs of the formal policy prescriptions with the reality and practices of the real-world provision (Evans, 2020).

These people usually exercise their discretion in the South African public sector. It is not about working beyond the limits, in this case, it is rather an essential practice of accommodating exhausting institutional obstacles, encompassing rigid procurement, problematic policy, and continuous financial shortages. It is not enough that they should just follow predetermined IT strategies; they have to be the ones to interpret and re-engineer what was planned to fit within the priorities of their organization and the real-life challenges they undertake.

Ideally, Government Information Technology Officers (GITO) are significant mediators in this sense. They stand between the state's big digital dreams and the bureaucracy meant to make them happen, ultimately shaping outcomes that are both practical from a technical standpoint and influenced by political realities. What's more, many GITO are doing what Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) call "institutional work"—deliberate actions aimed at building, maintaining, or even breaking down institutional structures. Hardly content with merely submitting themselves to diktats of top-down governance, the GITO are frequently tasked with re-inventing the latter to suit real-life requirements of IT project execution. This implies negotiating with over solving structures, redefining the meaning of compliance and trying informal

contacts to evade bureaucratic dead ends. Through these efforts, GITOs don't just help deliver digital projects; they also contribute to the ongoing evolution of the entire institutional environment where public sector IT governance plays out.

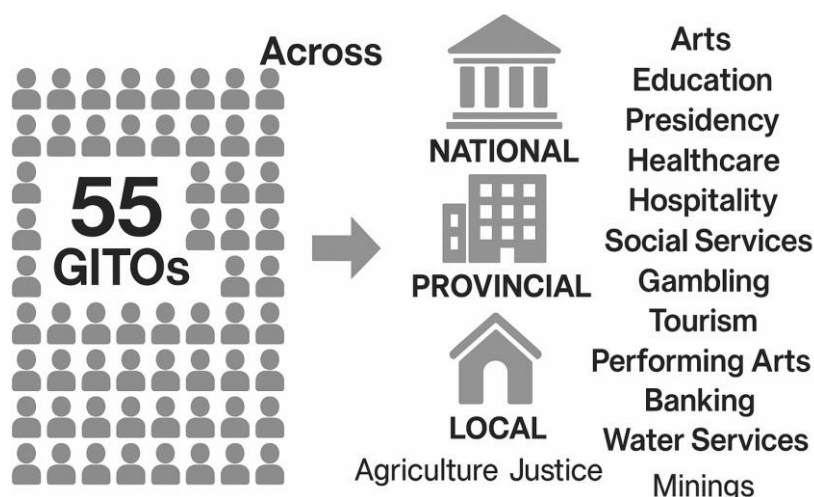


Figure 1 – Illustration of GITO Study

Using a qualitative, interpretive methodology, this article draws on rich empirical data obtained through in-depth interviews with Government Information Technology Officers (GITOs) to explore the contours of strategic ICT leadership within the highly regulated and resource-constrained context of the South African public sector. The findings demonstrate that GITOs' strategic leadership is not primarily anchored in formal authority or hierarchical position. Instead, it emerges through their capacity to exercise agency within complex bureaucratic ecosystems—mobilising influence through informal networks, cultivating stakeholder relationships, and strategically navigating institutional rigidities. This form of leadership is characterised by adaptive sense-making, negotiation, and the ability to sustain momentum for ICT delivery despite fragmented mandates, procedural inertia, and structural limitations inherent in public governance systems. The study thereby reframes strategic ICT leadership as a practice of situated agency, revealing how GITOs act as institutional entrepreneurs who mediate between policy, technology, and organisational realities.

Theoretical Framework:

To analyse this study, we've drawn on three linked theoretical perspectives: **strategic leadership**, **street-level bureaucracy**, and **institutional work**. These "lenses" combine to give us a detailed insight into how **Government Information Technology Officers (GITOs)** actually exercise strategic agency within the public sector, particularly in governance environments that are heavily constrained.

Our core understanding leans heavily on Boal and Hooijberg's (2001) strategic leadership theory. What it really shows is how leaders steer, make those big, crucial calls, and get an entire organization's gears turning together. This is especially vital in settings that are just full of complexity and desperately short on resources. For those in government, the challenge often lies in figuring out how to successfully integrate **emerging ICT initiatives** with established institutional mandates and public expectations. All of this unfolds amidst ongoing struggles with bureaucratic inflexibility and fractured authority structures. As the upper circle of our Venn diagram (Figure 2) shows, this perspective connects with vital competencies such as effective direction-setting, robust decision-making, and achieving organizational alignment under complex circumstances.

The concept of street-level bureaucracy draws its foundation from Lipsky's (1980) research which shows how public officials who implement policies possess substantial discretionary authority. Public officials who work at the frontline of policy implementation face rules that are unclear or contradictory or impossible to follow. Government Information Technology Officers (GITOs) step into this role by bridging the gap

between official ICT policies and the practical demands of real-world implementation. They constantly balance strict compliance with the crucial need for both innovation and adaptability. You'll find this specific aspect highlighted in the bottom-left circle of our Venn diagram (Figure 2), drawing attention to concepts like discretion, on-the-ground implementation, and frontline innovation.

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) describe institutional work as the deliberate steps people take to create, maintain, or change how institutions are set up. GITO's engage in precisely this kind of work. They do it by interpreting, adapting, or reconfiguring existing governance frameworks—think procurement rules or digital infrastructure policies—to make them more effective given real-world context, or to overcome existing dysfunctions in the system. This is reflected in the bottom-right circle of the diagram, where institutional work is illustrated through concepts like maintenance, disruption, adaptation, and interpretation.

At the intersection of these three theoretical domains lies GITO strategic agency, portrayed at the centre of the Venn diagram. This represents the integrated, performative capacity of GITO's to act purposefully and relationally across multiple constraints. As the outer rectangle in Figure 2 denotes, these leadership practices unfold within a constrained environment, characterised by *rigid governance frameworks*, *fragmented mandates*, *procedural inertia*, and *limited resources*. Figure 2 directly visualizes our conceptual model, synthesizing how strategic leadership, street-level discretion, and institutional work all converge. This convergence, we argue, shapes the adaptive governance strategies of ICT leaders who operate within the public sector's often-tight limitations. The accompanying caption elaborates on this synthesis: Government Information Technology Officers (GITO's), it clarifies, lead in ICT not just through their formal authority, but through a crucial mix of relational governance, adaptive practice, and negotiated discretion.

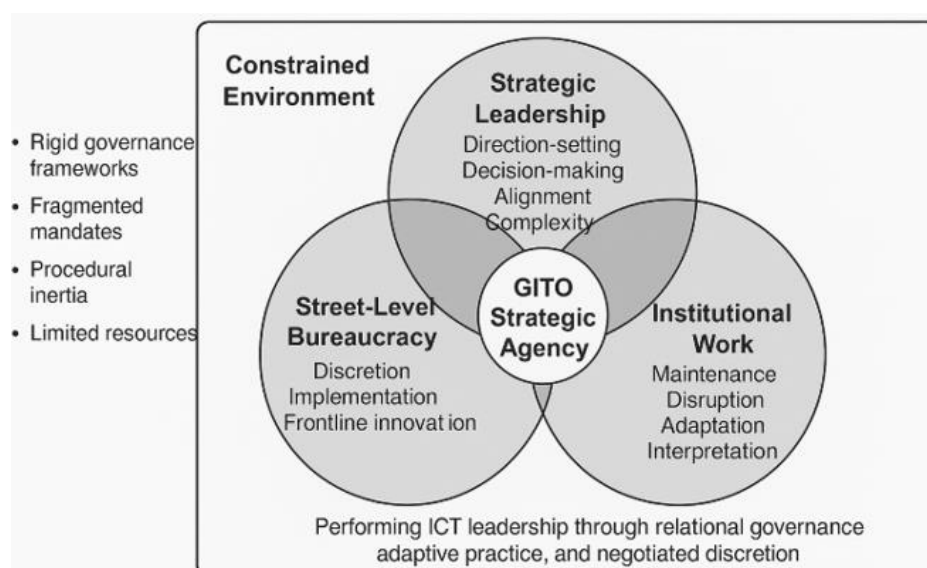


Figure 2 – Conceptual Framework – Authors Sources

Methodology:

We employed a qualitative, interpretive research design for this investigation, a methodological choice that excels at exploring intricate social phenomena within their authentic environments (Walsham, 2006). Our central objective was to generate deep, situated understandings of the strategic practices used by Government Information Technology Officers (GITO's) who operate across the complex, multi-tiered public sector governance landscape of South Africa.

Our data collection process relied on semi-structured interviews, which took place from 2022 to 2023. We engaged with a distinct cohort of 55 GITO's. These participants were meticulously selected to guarantee

comprehensive representation across diverse institutional types and organizational tiers, including national government departments, provincial premier's offices, municipalities, and a range of state-owned entities. This careful selection meant our sample was diverse in terms of where they were located, their governance roles, and their organizational capacities. Ultimately, this boosted how representative our study was and how broadly applicable our findings are (Patton, 2002). The interview questions themselves were built around key themes that came straight from our literature review and the study's theoretical framework.

Core areas of inquiry included the **influence of corporate governance frameworks**—specifically the Corporate Governance of ICT Policy Framework (CGICTPF), the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA), and the State Information Technology Agency (SITA) Act—as well as **procurement procedures, governance committee structures**, and respondents' experiences of **ICT leadership and institutional navigation**. While the interview guide provided structure, the open-ended format allowed for flexibility and depth, enabling participants to elaborate on context-specific challenges and practices. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using **thematic analysis** following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006).

The coding process primarily used an inductive method to extract patterns and themes directly from the unprocessed data. The analysis maintained some level of direction through our study's conceptual framework which draws from strategic leadership and street-level bureaucracy and institutional work theories. This balanced method proved vital, ensuring both the detailed, real-world richness of our findings and their solid theoretical alignment. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. All participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and pseudonyms were used in reporting findings to protect individual and organisational identities. To make our findings more credible and trustworthy, we triangulated our data. This meant cross-referencing interview information with relevant policy documents, audit reports, and other governance records. This methodological triangulation allowed us to confirm what interviewees told us using documentary evidence, leading to a much stronger interpretation of our findings (Denzin, 1978). Ultimately, our chosen method allowed us to examine, in depth, how Government Information Technology Officers (GITO) really exercise their influence even within highly constrained environments. This approach lines up perfectly with the interpretive paradigm's focus on understanding meaning and the nuances of specific contexts. You can find a visual breakdown of our methodology workflow in Figure 3.

Note on Language Editing:

The authors used the QuillBot writing enhancement tool at the stage of the preparation of original manuscript to improve the grammatic and clarity of language in the final part. Throughout this process, the research analysis and data interpretation and findings of the article did not change.

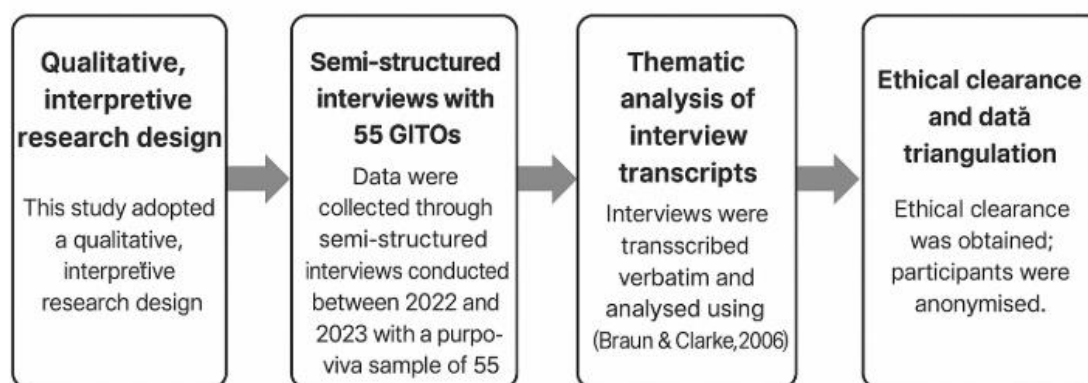


Figure 3 – Methodology workflow – Authors Sources

Findings:

Governance Constraints as Everyday Barriers

The burden of multi-layered governance mechanisms and restrictive procurement regulations emerged as a consistent core barrier to agile ICT delivery, as cited by our respondents. GITOs didn't hold back their frustration regarding compliance-laden frameworks such as the Corporate Governance of ICT Policy Framework (CGICTPF) and the SITA Act. The general consensus among them was that these systems felt old-fashioned and unwieldy, increasingly failing to align with the critical imperatives of digital transformation. While their initial purpose was to ensure accountability and standardization, these frameworks appeared to prioritize strict processes over achieving desired outcomes. This frequently resulted in administrative slowdowns rather than genuinely facilitating strategic ICT implementation. This point strongly echoes Jewer and Van Der Meulen (2022), who suggest that excessively rigid governance and compliance structures can significantly hamper the responsiveness and innovative capacity of public sector ICT, particularly when digital initiatives must rapidly adjust to evolving service delivery contexts.

Participant 6 noted: *"SITA ACT causes service delivery delays especially procurement and service delivery in general."* Participant 53 echoed this: *"It is definitely impacted negatively by the SITA act and if we go through the SITA procurement channel it definitely impacts that our time is always impacted negatively."* This sentiment was echoed across departments, where governance was not experienced as a facilitative tool but rather as a mechanism of constraint. Government Information Technology Officers (GITOs) repeatedly highlighted procurement through centralized systems—especially those managed by SITA—and limited ICT literacy within Supply Chain Management (SCM) units as major points of friction. They described lengthy approval cycles, mismatched procurement categorizations, and frequent delays in specification reviews as common issues within the system.

Another respondent reflected on the failure of projects: *"The project was then delayed, and the specifications had to be reviewed until they met SCM procurement standard"* These misalignments clearly show a structural disconnect between governance policies and the specialized, iterative nature of ICT project lifecycles. Frost and Lal (2018) and Gregory et al. (2018) highlight this, arguing that traditional bureaucratic models often clash with the adaptive and agile methods required in today's digital world. These observations also highlight how systemic rigidity can severely undermine the state's capacity to effectively respond to new technologies and evolving service expectations—a concern similarly voiced by Sleep and Harris (2021) and, more recently, by Alexopoulou (2024). All these insights together strongly affirm the need for governance frameworks that are more attuned to their specific contexts, more flexible, and digitally savvy, just as Sheikh et al. (2022) advocate. Such frameworks are vital for enabling public sector ICT to be both more responsive and innovation driven.

Informal Influence and Strategic Positioning:

When formal authority was absent, Government Information Technology Officers (GITOs) frequently leveraged soft power, informal networks, and their existing relationships to build strategic influence. This pattern reflects an observation by Shiu et al. (2023), who emphasize the growing significance of relational capital in public sector environments where digital resources are limited. Many respondents detailed how they actively cultivated relationships with executive allies, pushed for their involvement in early project planning, or leveraged partnerships with outside groups—like vendors, consultants, or research institutions. They did this to boost the perceived credibility and strategic value of ICT. Such relationship-based tactics frequently compensated for instances where ICT leadership lacked clear positional authority or was structurally sidelined within departments. This reflects a wider pattern of informal influence and boundary-spanning behaviour, consistent with observations from Felix et al. (2024).

"IT is still not represented at EXCO but there is support from EXCO and the board because they always approve the IT requests," participant 18 shared and also echoed by participant 41, *"ICT is not part of the strategic planning process or on EXCO representation..."*, underscoring the importance of trust, visibility, and proximity to decision-makers in environments where formal governance structures do not guarantee ICT representation at executive level—a dynamic also identified by Mirkovski et al. (2019), who focus on

informal influence and relationship-based authority as tools for navigating public sector organizational hierarchies. This flexible leadership approach shows a realistic grasp of how institutions actually work. Here, influence doesn't just come from your official job title; it stems from your knack for navigating organizational power dynamics and aligning ICT goals with the bigger institutional priorities. Muenjohn et al. (2018) back this perspective. This particular approach became especially apparent in departments where ICT functions were embedded within administrative units, for example, Corporate Services or Finance. Such a setup often led to ICT having diminished strategic visibility and influence, a trend also observed by Mertens et al. (2024). Facing such circumstances, GITOs strategically leveraged their networks, informal negotiation skills, and established credibility to underscore their importance. These activities indicate that effective digital leadership in the state administration requires not only professional skills related to the technical sphere, but also a great number of political skills and inter-personal wisdom, which has also been expressed by the works of Bolden et al. (2019) and Ohemeng et al. (2018).

Bending the System to get the Results:

The most notable feature of effective ICT leadership concept based on the research by Vu and Nwachukwu (2020) and Kafetzopoulos et al. (2022) is strategic flexibility since the latter cites adaptability as one of the most important leadership abilities in the framework of a highly complex and a resource-scarce environment. The South African government GITOs reported their deliberate changes in the procedures of governance. The measure focused on pragmatic solutions to complete the project faster despite the prevalence of systemic inefficiencies, not failure to comply with laws. The three strategic approaches that were utilized by the leaders included development of documentation in advance, parallel Supply Chain Management (SCM) procedures and pursuit of specific exemptions under the terms of the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA). With such efforts, the strategic flexibility allows leaders to operate within defined limits, which is vital in continuing advancement of digital efforts.

"Would like it be [PFMA and SCM] like the private sector and more agile, less documentation involved, formalities really delay things – increase of delegation of authority (DOA). DOA is tight as per PFMA rules. Recommend agility and flexibility." said one participant. This methodology reveals the latitude of discretion available to GITOs, empowering them to make pragmatic adjustments to deliver within existing bureaucratic and procedural constraints. The actions align with Singh et al. (2020) who emphasize the crucial role of managerial discretion when dealing with institutional rigidities especially in digital implementation contexts where formal processes are not well-suited to the dynamic requirements of digital implementation.

Navigating Legitimacy and Role Recognition:

The organisational positioning of GITOs varied significantly, influencing their capacity to lead strategically. In some departments, **ICT functions** were tucked away inside finance or corporate services. This setup often restricted their visibility, influence, and ability to participate in strategic decision-making. Several people we spoke with mentioned being excluded from executive committees, which only strengthened the common view of **ICT** as merely a compliance-focused support, rather than a true driver of innovation and transformation.

"We don't sit on the executive committee. That limits our visibility. IT is not yet seen as part of the strategic nucleus," noted participant 53. ***"We're under Finance. So often IT is left out of key initiatives unless someone remembers us."*** Corroborated by participant 24. By contrast, where GITOs were positioned within core decision-making forums, their impact on shaping and driving digital transformation agendas was markedly greater—an observation that resonates with Alam et al. (2020), who argue that structural inclusion at the executive level is critical to enabling ICT leaders to contribute meaningfully to organisational strategy. Figure 4 illustrates the complexities emerging from the findings of this study.

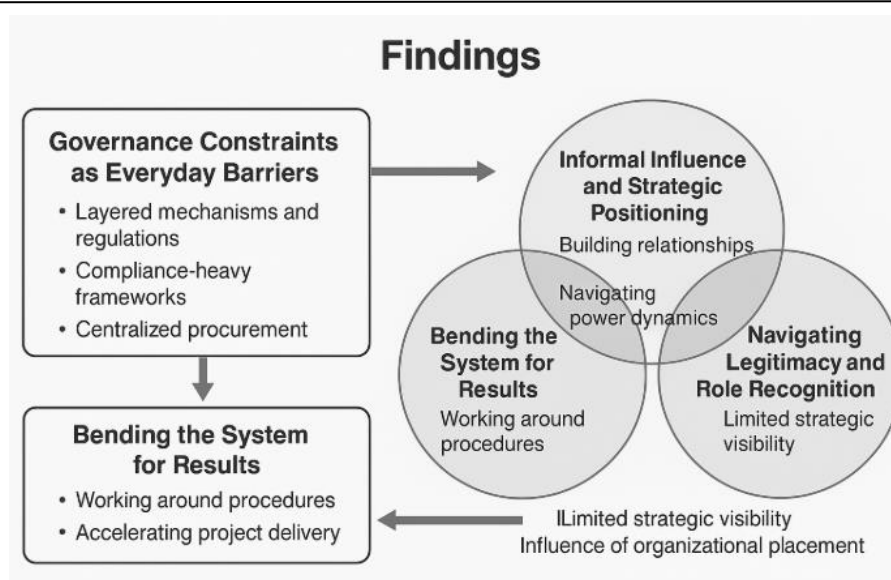


Figure 4 – Findings Illustrated – Author's Sources

Theme	Participant Quote	Participant # / Source
Informal Influence and Strategic Positioning	"ICT is not part of the strategic planning process or on EXCO representation..."	Participant 41
	"IT is still not represented at EXCO but there is support from EXCO and the board..."	Participant 18
Bending the System for Results	"Would like it be like the private sector and more agile, less documentation involved..."	Participant 12
Navigating Legitimacy and Role Recognition	"We don't sit on the executive committee. That limits our visibility..."	Participant 53
	"We're under Finance. So often IT is left out of key initiatives unless someone remembers us."	Participant 24

Table 1: Illustrative Quotes Supporting Key Empirical Themes – Author's Sources

Table 1 below provides illustrative participant quotes aligned to each of the core themes presented in Section 4, demonstrating how these themes were grounded in empirical data.

Discussion:

This study's findings strongly indicate that ICT leadership in the South African public sector is fundamentally a strategic balancing act. This act unfolds under conditions of significant systemic rigidity, limited available resources, and cultural ambiguity. As clearly shown in Figure 4: ICT Leadership in Constrained Public Sector Environments, Government Information Technology Officers (GITO) operate right at the point where three key forces converge: Strategic Leadership, Street-Level Bureaucracy, and Institutional Work. Importantly, all these dynamics are situated within an environment that is both financially stretched and heavily driven by compliance demands.

At the heart of this whole dynamic is a basic tension: innovation versus control. Government Information Technology Officers (GITO) are tasked with driving digital transformation, but at the same time, they have to stick to complex, often outdated compliance rules. This paradoxical position—you can see it right in the diagram's central intersection—means GITO aren't just putting digital policies into action. No, they're strategic players who constantly have to negotiate bureaucratic limits to actually deliver value through ICT.

Applying Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy, the diagram captures how GITOs—though not frontline workers in the traditional sense—perform discretionary roles at the policy–implementation interface. Their decisions often involve navigating ambiguous governance frameworks, mediating organisational politics, and contending with procedural inertia. Yet, unlike typical street-level bureaucrats, GITOs occupy upper-middle tiers of institutional hierarchy, where their discretionary decisions carry strategic and systemic weight, especially in high-visibility digital initiatives.

This discretionary space is further enriched by the concept of Institutional Work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), which the diagram links to adaptive leadership behaviours. GITOs engage in purposeful actions not to subvert governance, but to bend, reinterpret, or simulate governance processes to enable project momentum. This involves proactively addressing bureaucratic delays by drafting compliance documentation ahead of time, forming informal coalitions spanning executive and Supply Chain Management (SCM) units, or negotiating exemptions permitted under frameworks such as the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA). These instances of "institutional work" are depicted in the diagram as the mechanisms through which GITOs sustain momentum amid rigidity, effectively transforming governance from a static impediment into a dynamic arena for negotiated action.

The outer boundary of the "Resource-Constrained Environment" in the diagram reinforces the challenging structural context where this leadership takes place. Limited budgets, fragmented mandates, and a lack of digital literacy in support functions like Supply Chain Management collectively generate operational friction. Yet, despite these hurdles, Government Information Technology Officers (GITOs) don't give up. Instead, Strategic Leadership, shown in the diagram's top segment, doesn't come from their job title. It emerges through relational influence, political sharpness, and tactical adaptability. GITOs rely on trust-based relationships, good timing, and strategic communication to gain traction—skills often left out of formal job descriptions but absolutely vital for navigating the complexities of the public sector.

In the end, ICT leadership within this context proves to be both improvisational and profoundly institutional. Though strongly grounded in the rigidities of hierarchical governance, it concurrently expands those limits through creative, discretionary, and relational means. This inherent duality is clearly captured by the diagram's overlapping fields—a dynamic intersection where established systems encounter human agency, and where leadership unfolds not merely through vision and planning, but vitally through pragmatic navigation, astute negotiation, and precise timing.

This integrated framework truly necessitates a fresh look at ICT leadership within public governance. It moves us away from those traditional, fixed models focused primarily on control and compliance. Instead, it champions an understanding of actual leadership practices that expertly blend technical know-how with crucial political and relational intelligence. Because of this, policy and governance frameworks need to evolve. They must recognize and support the informal, discretionary, and adaptive capabilities that Government Information Technology Officers (GITOs) already demonstrate every day.

Ultimately, Figure 5 isn't just a summary of our findings. It also serves as a conceptual model for reimagining how public sector digital leadership is understood and empowered.

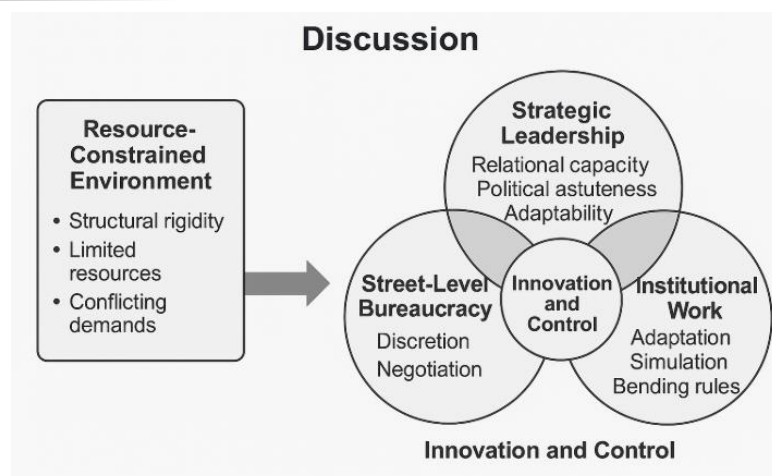


Figure 5 - ICT Leadership in Constrained Public Sector Environments – Authors Sources

Implications:

Policy. Governance mandates should be recalibrated to include principles of proportionality and contextual sensitivity, particularly for departments with limited capacity or scale. The current one-size-fits-all compliance regimes—such as the CGICTPF and SITA Act—exert disproportionate burdens on smaller entities, often undermining their agility and responsiveness. The departments could achieve their fundamental governance requirements through proportionality without obstructing innovation or delaying service delivery. The public administration literature supports this approach by advocating for governance frameworks that adapt to institutional diversity and existing capacity asymmetries (Janssen & Estevez, 2013; Dunleavy et al., 2006).

Practice. Strengthening the formal authority and structural placement of GITOs is crucial for realizing the strategic potential of ICT leadership. This involves making sure CIO roles report straight to the heads of departments and actively participate in top-level decision-making forums. Embedding them this way would significantly increase ICT's visibility and better align digital initiatives with core departmental priorities. Furthermore, it's critical to build foundational ICT governance literacy among key institutional actors—including SCM practitioners, internal audit teams, and senior executives. These individuals often play pivotal gatekeeping roles for ICT projects, and their insufficient technical grasp frequently results in procedural bottlenecks or misinterpretations of ICT requirements (Martin & Gregor, 2006; Gregory et al., 2018).

Theory. For ICT governance research to advance, it must shift beyond rigid models of compliance and control, instead incorporating the dynamic dimensions of agency, discretion, and institutional adaptation. The findings here demonstrate that governance implementation is far from a linear process; rather, it's a negotiated practice, significantly influenced by the strategic improvisations and relational work of ICT leaders. Conceptual frameworks like street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980), institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), and adaptive governance provide excellent ways to theorize this inherent complexity. This is especially true in developing countries, where limitations in capacity, unclear policies, and shifting political landscapes are common. Bringing these perspectives together can lead to a richer, more contextually grounded understanding of how digital transformation in the public sector is both advanced and held back.

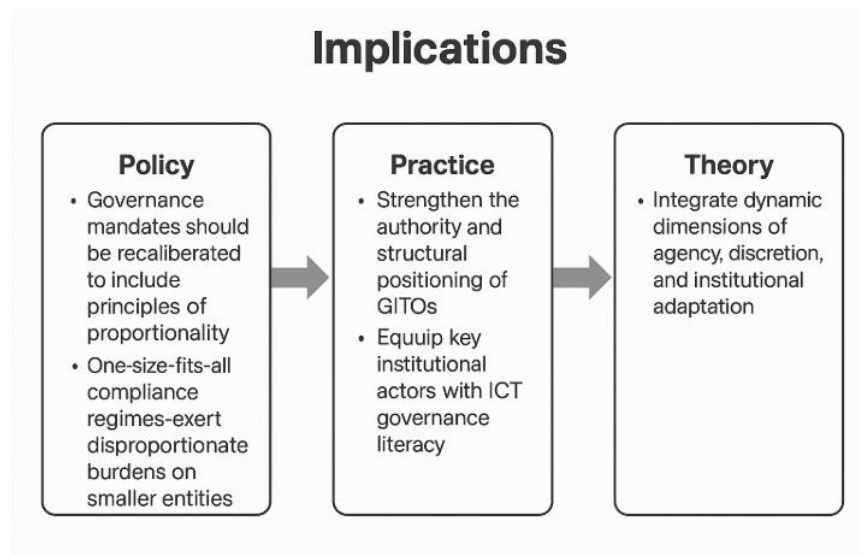


Figure 6 – Implications – Authors Sources

Disclosure of Interest:

The authors declare that there are no competing interests.

Funding:

No funding was received for the preparation of this article.

CONCLUSION:

In South Africa, Government Information Technology Officers (GITOs) play an often invisible, yet absolutely essential, role in keeping ICT services running even under tough conditions. Their work paints a far richer, more complex picture of governance—one that's negotiated, improvised, and deeply human. These GITOs are far from just implementing policies handed down from the top. Instead, they act as institutional entrepreneurs, exercising their discretion, building influence, and strategically adapting governance processes to ensure digital delivery remains continuous and relevant.

This study shows that public sector ICT leadership isn't primarily a technical job. Instead, it's a deeply relational and contextual practice, shaped by tough systemic constraints, unclear mandates, and ingrained bureaucratic cultures. Government Information Technology Officers (GITOs) operate where innovation has to co-exist with strict compliance, and where official authority often just isn't enough for real strategic impact. Their ability to act strategically—using informal influence, adaptive governance, and creative problem-solving—highlights the clear need to rethink how digital leadership is understood, supported, and embedded within government.

Recognising and legitimising this strategic agency is essential for enabling a more resilient, responsive, and citizen-oriented digital state. Policy reforms that elevate the structural role of GITOs, build digital literacy across institutional actors, and recalibrate governance models to accommodate flexibility and proportionality are critical. Similarly, research must transcend purely procedural analyses to genuinely engage with the lived realities of ICT leaders, who consistently navigate the nuanced space between policy intent and actual delivery outcomes.

In an era where digital transformation is an imperative, not an option, the day-to-day leadership practices of GITOs offer vital insights. They demonstrate how governance can simultaneously achieve accountability and agility—particularly within the complex terrain characteristic of developing nations.

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