

Government IT Officer's (GITO) Professional Identity and Legitimacy in South Africa's Public Administration: An Institutional and Identity-Based Perspective on ICT Governance

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ABSTRACT

The public sector now views Information and Communication Technology (ICT) governance as a critical strategic element because of digital transformation yet Government Information Technology Officers (GITOs) lack official power to make decisions within their bureaucratic organizational structure. The research investigates how GITOs build their professional identity and gain legitimacy to maintain their power base in South Africa's public-sector ICT governance system. The research uses an actor-centered analytical approach to show that professional identity and legitimacy serve as the main factors which GITOs use to overcome structural barriers instead of examining leadership approaches or organizational governance structures. The research uses 55 semi-structured interviews with GITOs who work in national and provincial and local government institutions to conduct an interpretive qualitative study based on professional identity theory and institutional work. The research shows that GITOs continuously work on their identity through their words and their relationships and their unofficial organizational systems to gain acceptance while using their limited power to shape decisions. The research adds theoretical value to ICT governance studies through its expansion of identity and institutional work theories while demonstrating the need for public sector digital leaders to develop legitimacy-building abilities in restricted organizational environments. The research provides public administration scholars and policymakers with fresh knowledge about digital transformation success through its performance-based and negotiation-focused approach to ICT governance.

1. Introduction

Digital transformation affects the entire global public sector therefore Government Information Technology Officers (GITOs) remain essential for achieving this digital transformation success. GITOs from the South African government act as digital enablement and compliance custodians that operate throughout the public sector (Gabara 2023). However, these roles are frequently exercised under conditions of limited formal authority, requiring GITOs to rely on professional credibility and legitimacy rather than positional power. Most critical strategic assignments affect GITOs who need to exceed their formal authority within organizational structures. The Corporate Governance of ICT Policy Framework (CGICTPF) plus supporting regulations establishes an efficient framework for ICT governance yet successful implementation heavily relies on officials who have authority and power (DPSA 2012). GITO practitioners faced difficulties when implementing audit guidelines to connect reporting systems and manage digital

procurement according to Latchu & Singh (2024) and Mathase et al. (2019).)

Few studies in the extensive field of governance architecture explore how Government Information Technology Officers build authority through professional identity and legitimacy-based practices. Researchers studied the methods Government Information Technology Officers build institutional influence to create strategic partnerships and prove their governance output; however, these accounts often privilege formal structures over the identity-driven work through which influence is enacted in practice. ICT governance therefore goes beyond compliance systems to include sociopolitical activities producing and executing leadership legitimacy in low-authority environments.

The research includes 55 semi-structured interviews with GITOs operating across national, provincial, and local government levels to demonstrate institutional agency through identity construction methods. GITOs utilize discourse [mechanically] discursively, with

relationships combined with reputational signaling, to sustain influence even while functioning within structurally marginalized systems. The analysis strengthens research on ICT governance and digital leadership while developing public administration discourse about identity work and legitimacy (Ashforth et al. 2008; Lawrence & Suddaby 2006)). The paper consists of five key elements: Section 2 provides the theoretical foundation while Section 3 explains the research approach and Section 4 presents essential outcomes. Section 5 connects theoretical implications to practical aspects of ICT governance then Section 6 proposes policy recommendations and outlines possible future research directions. The study thereby foregrounds identity and legitimacy as primary explanatory mechanisms shaping ICT governance practice.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study combines professional identity theory and institutional work perspectives to evaluate how GITO's develop and execute legitimacy within the South African information and communication technology governance framework. The chosen perspectives enable researchers to focus on public sector leadership through an agentive and performance-based examination of relational dynamics instead of following traditional analysis of systems and policies. Under this framework GITO's become strategic leaders who move through institutional confusion by actively molding their reputation and trustworthiness while securing authorization.

2.1. Professional Identity and Identity Work

The way people understand their place in a domain regarding their role alongside status along with value constitutes their professional identity (Ibarra 1999; Ashforth et al. 2008). The complex identity challenges GITO's in public sector ICT management because they need to fulfill three distinct roles that frequently produce conflicting organizational expectations (Adie et al. 2024). Public professionals perform identity work by actively shaping their identity and defending it against institutional requirements while handling uncertainty (Brown 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003). Public servants deploy rhetorical, relational, and symbolic strategies as part of their identity work. The workforce of GITO's requires substantial identity construction efforts because ICT remains considered a support infrastructure instead of strategic asset by certain executive leaders (Alam et al. 2020). GITO's navigate conflicting institutional logics in way that matches the phenomenon of hybrid professionalism according to Dam and Waardenburg (2020). GITO's employ their professional identities as critical tools to establish decision-making position and build legitimacy while becoming visible in their work environment.

2.2. Institutional Work and Legitimacy

Institutional work refers to purposive actions aimed at constructing, sustaining, or altering institutional arrangements (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Workers

extend their institutional influence by manipulating both official reforms alongside day-to-day operational activities and ceremonial gestures which modify norms (Lawrence and Phillips 2019). The working environment of constrained public bureaucracies leads institutional workers to practice navigation at the microscale instead of attempting direct reforms (Opara et al. 2021). Managerial staff at GITO's accomplish institutional work by serving on governance committees while linking ICT projects to organization priorities as well as reinterpreting rules to enhance flexibility. The practices build legitimacy through channels that respect existing rules with their focus on obtaining acceptance and trust alongside influencing decisions made by weakly authorized bodies (Bäckstrand and Söderbaum 2018; Kinder et al. 2020). When institutional formal authority lies deficient, actors must build legitimacy by developing formal partnerships and signaling performance achievements and embracing organizational priorities (Suchman 1995). Academics and practitioners in various domains establish their credibility through informal methods as demonstrated in Ayres (2020) and Cheah et al. (2020). The investigation examines identity work as institutional work since GITO's determine their professional orientations between being technical experts and strategic advisors and public value contributors leading to ICT norm development. When authority remains unclear throughout a setting this analytic approach becomes useful to study how individuals perform their roles with credibility (Creed et al. 2010).

2.3 The Integrated Perspective

Professional identity theory together with institutional work create an in-depth analytical method for studying ICT governance through a human-centered approach. The analytical structure enables researchers to understand how GITO's develop and execute their professional legitimacy by operating within established constraints. Their strategic identity work enables agency through actions that demonstrate their importance while connecting with other stakeholders to establish ICT as a primary tool for governance administration and service delivery. The authors advance knowledge by understanding governance as a practical performance-based process that emerges through negotiation (Alvesson and Spicer 2011; Kornberger et al. 2019). The study delivers fresh perspectives about how public-sector digital transformation happens via formal instruments as well as through typical activities performed by actors including GITO's in managing leadership and avoidance and institutional changes.

3. Research Method

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative approach to explore how Government Information Technology Officers (GITO's) in South Africa's public sector construct professional identities and build legitimacy within bureaucratic governance environments. Recognizing that identity and legitimacy are context-dependent and socially constructed, this methodology seeks to uncover the meanings that GITO's

attach to their roles, practices, and institutional positioning (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015; O'Toole 2018). The methodological strategy prioritizes depth, narrative richness, and subjective insight, allowing for an examination not only of what GITOs do, but how they make sense of, talk about, and perform their roles in contested institutional spaces.

3.1 Research Design and Rationale

A qualitative design was selected to explore the lived experiences and sense-making practices of GITOs within their organizational contexts. Given the study's focus on identity performance, legitimacy-building, and institutional dynamics, it was essential to access the language, stories, and situated reflections through which GITOs construct and communicate their professional selves (Gioia, et al. 2013). While the study is interpretive in nature, the interview guide was grounded in eight overarching research questions developed as part of the broader doctoral project. These questions covered issues ranging from governance frameworks and ICT performance to decision-making dynamics and role navigation:

- RQ1: What corporate governance systems are in place that influence information systems?
- RQ2: How do corporate governance systems shape ICT governance practices?
- RQ3: What are the barriers and bottlenecks that hinder the implementation of ICT projects in the public sector?
- RQ4: What is the perceived effectiveness of corporate governance policies and frameworks on ICT performance?
- RQ5: How do GITOs navigate governance dynamics when they lack decision-making authority?
- RQ6: How is the CGICTPF implemented across entities, and what variations exist?
- RQ7: How do GITOs engage with institutional actors and frameworks in navigating delivery challenges?
- RQ8: What strategies can improve ICT governance effectiveness in South African public institutions?

For the purposes of this article, which focuses specifically on professional identity and legitimacy within ICT governance, the following analytical research questions were derived from the above:

1. How do GITOs define and perform their professional identity within public ICT governance contexts? (Based on RQ2, RQ5, RQ7)
2. What discursive, relational, and structural strategies do GITOs employ to gain legitimacy and influence? (Based on RQ5, RQ7)
3. How do formal governance frameworks (e.g., CGICTPF, PFMA) enable or constrain the strategic role of GITOs? (Based on RQ1, RQ2, RQ6)
4. What institutional and political dynamics contribute to role ambiguity, delivery barriers, or governance bottlenecks? (Based on RQ3, RQ4, RQ7)

These questions maintain fidelity to the original research design while focusing interpretive attention on the themes most relevant to understanding ICT leadership

as an identity and legitimacy challenge. This strategy reflects a commitment to methodological transparency while allowing for focused theorization.



Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of Research Questions – Authors' Sources

Figure 1 illustrates the research design guiding this study. Using an interpretive paradigm, the methodology focuses on meaning, context, and subjective experience (Gioia et al. 2013; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015). Semi-structured interviews with GITOs in South Africa's public sector explored topics like governance frameworks, ICT barriers, and decision-making dynamics. For this article, four analytical questions focused on GITOs' identity, legitimacy, governance constraints, and institutional ambiguity. This approach provides insights into how ICT leadership is shaped within bureaucratic contexts. The diagram shows the study's alignment between epistemology, method, and focus.

3.2 Sample and Participant Profile

The study draws on 55 semi-structured interviews with GITOs working across South Africa's public sector. Participants were purposively sampled to ensure variation in organizational type (national departments, provincial governments, local municipalities, and public entities), functional domain (e.g., health, education, infrastructure), and geographic location. This diversity allowed for comparative insights across differing institutional cultures and capacities. All participants occupied ICT leadership roles with responsibility for governance implementation, strategic advice, or digital enablement. Titles included Chief Information Officer (CIO), Director of ICT, GITO, and other equivalents. Most participants had over ten years of experience in government ICT and had engaged with governance instruments such as the CGICTPF, PFMA, DPSA guidelines, and the SITA Act.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected between July 2022 and October 2023 through semi-structured interviews conducted either in person or via secure virtual platforms. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were recorded with participant consent. The interview included core prompts

derived from the dissertation's eight research questions and associated sub-problems. Examples include:

- "Can you describe which corporate governance systems are in place at your entity that influence IS?"
- "How does the CGICT framework work in practice? Is it effective?"
- "Can you describe your role as a GITO in strategic decision-making?"
- "What factors contribute to governance bottlenecks or delivery delays in your entity?"
- "How does the procurement process (via SCM or National Treasury guidelines) support or hinder IT delivery?"

The guide also included reflective prompts about legitimacy, executive support, project performance, committee roles, and reform recommendations. Probing questions were used to explore identity tensions, informal influence, and sense-making patterns (Roberts, 2020).

3.4 Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The process unfolded in three cycles:

1. Initial (open) coding captured key terms, practices, and narratives related to identity, legitimacy, governance frameworks, and delivery challenges.
2. Axial coding grouped these into conceptual categories, including identity work, legitimacy-building, structural constraint, institutional work, and political navigation.
3. Interpretive synthesis linked empirical codes to the study's theoretical framework, connecting themes to concepts like hybrid identity (Brown 2015), institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006), and legitimacy performance (Suchman 1995).

The goal was not to count responses but to surface the deeper ways in which GITOs construct meaning around their roles and navigate organizational systems. Coding memos captured emotional tones, justifications, metaphors, and structural references that shed light on identity performance.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee. All participants received the study's purpose, confidentiality protocols, and their right to withdraw at any time. Interviews were anonymized, and identifiers were removed during transcription. Given the seniority of participants and the potential reputational risk to entities, special care was taken to frame the research as developmental rather than evaluative. Participants were assured that the study sought to understand challenges and successes from their point of view.

3.6 Ensuring Trustworthiness

To ensure the credibility and integrity of the findings, the following strategies were implemented:

- Triangulation: Interpretive insights were cross-checked with relevant governance frameworks, institutional documents (e.g., role descriptions, CGICTPF policies), and AGSA reports.
- Member checking: A subset of participants was invited to review emerging findings for accuracy and resonance.
- Audit trail: A record of coding decisions, memos, and theme development was maintained to support transparency.
- Reflexivity: The researcher maintained a positionality memo to track personal assumptions and influence during data interpretation.

This interpretive approach prioritizes depth and contextual insight over generalizability, in line with qualitative traditions in public administration and interpretive IS research (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015).

4. Results

The lived experiences of GITOs in South Africa's public sector indicate a governance landscape in which informal negotiation frequently accompanies formal structures. While policy frameworks prescribe their strategic relevance, GITOs are frequently required to build legitimacy, craft influence, and navigate institutional constraints with limited authority. Four key themes emerged: (1) identity tensions and role ambiguity; (2) legitimacy-building through discursive framing; (3) relational influence and reputational capital; and (4) sociopolitical navigation and informal institutional work.

4.1 Identity Tensions and Role Ambiguity

Across interviews, GITOs expressed difficulty reconciling their formal job descriptions with the strategic leadership expectations placed upon them. Although tasked with driving digital transformation, many were structurally positioned within operational units such as corporate services, limiting their access to executive committees and strategic planning forums. This disconnect produced what several participants described as a fragmented role identity—expected to lead, yet institutionally positioned to follow.

One participant illustrated this misalignment, noting: *"ICT does its best to assist the mandate of the entity but there seems to be some grey areas in the mandate. ICT is not part of the strategic planning process or on EXCO representation... meaning ICT aligning to the mandate delivery doesn't align."*

This misalignment between strategic expectation and organizational authority contributed to a perception of marginalization, where ICT was seen as a peripheral support function rather than a strategic partner. Similar patterns have been documented in other public sector

contexts, where digital leadership roles struggle to secure recognition within traditional bureaucratic hierarchies (Godefroid et al. 2024). GITO's described themselves as 'invisible' in executive settings, despite holding responsibility for governance, compliance, and risk management.

One participant remarked that *"IT is confined to a support function, often lacking support at executive and board levels and unable to adequately address strategic and transversal issues, considering the mandate of the organization."*

. GITO's often navigated a hybrid identity as both compliance stewards and transformation leaders, requiring ongoing identity work to reconcile these conflicting demands (Ibarra 1999). In response, some participants sought to assert ICT's strategic relevance by referencing the formal authority of governance structures such as EXCO or the Accounting Officer. These were often invoked as discursive tools to legitimize ICT's alignment with departmental strategy, even when the GITO's institutional status lacked corresponding executive authority.

As one interviewee explained, *"Executive Committee (EXCO) is a governance structure that provide an oversight role for ICT in ensuring alignment of the ICT strategy and plans, in support of the Department's strategic goals."*

Another added that *"Accounting Officer is an oversight function that provides an oversight role for ICT in ensuring that the CGICT achieves the strategic mandate of the Department."*

However, such role definitions often carried more symbolic than practical weight, reinforcing the persistent gap between formal governance frameworks and the lived realities of ICT leadership. As expectations for digital transformation increased without corresponding structural empowerment, GITO's were compelled to engage in identity work—continually asserting their strategic relevance within systems that inconsistently acknowledged or supported their evolving roles.

4.2 Legitimacy-Building Through Discursive Framing

GITO's frequently engaged in discursive strategies to reposition ICT from a technical support function to a driver of compliance, accountability, and strategic value. This rhetorical reframing was central to their efforts to build legitimacy in environments where ICT was not consistently viewed as core to the institutional mission (Pelizza and Hoppe 2015). Participants often described governance practices using terminology that emphasized audit preparedness, risk mitigation, and regulatory alignment.

As one interviewee noted, *"It [governance] describes the rules, process to operate, following this also minimises Audit findings... They guide the use of IS by the entity. They also assist in reducing the organisational IS risk."*

Another GITO reinforced this framing, stating that *"Good ICT governance enables the Department to keep fiduciary diligence... and ensures that the Department is*

compliant with South African laws and government regulations."

Beyond compliance, GITO's also translated technical work into institutional outcomes, particularly in education and research sectors. Their narratives often highlighted improved efficiency, service delivery, and academic enhancement as indicators of strategic alignment.

For example, one participant reflected, *"Corporate governance has had a positive impact on IT projects implementation. All major IT investments are preceded by an approved business case and an approved project plan. Thus, the benefits of any major investments are defined upfront."*

Another added, *"The above frameworks collectively assist the University to strengthen its Corporate Governance posture, specific to the alignment of ICT to the Academic Programme."*

As Gidley and Palmer (2021) observe, rhetorical alignment is a powerful means of enacting influence in bureaucratic settings, where authority is often negotiated as much through narrative as through formal mandate.

4.3 Relational Influence and Reputational Capital

GITO's often rely on personal relationships and demonstrated credibility to gain influence in environments where formal structures exclude them. Many described how trust from leadership, delivery track records, and governance literacy functioned as informal sources of authority. Similar dynamics are observed in other public sector contexts, where informal legitimacy is built through interpersonal trust and reputational capital in the absence of formalized power (Ayres 2020).

As one participant put it, *"Users can trust ICT members. The department should consider changing the resource model of resourcing the ICT unit."*

This comment highlights both the trust earned by ICT staff and the recognition that current institutional structures may be misaligned with the unit's growing role. Influence, according to several GITO's, was "earned" over time—through consistent delivery of critical systems, internal credibility, and the strategic deployment of governance frameworks. These practices align with Koskinen (2019) and Grunwald-Delitz et al. (2019)'s concept of symbolic governance, wherein influence is mediated through soft power and symbolic acts of competence, rather than formal role-based authority.

One GITO noted that *"Good ICT governance ensures that the reputation and brand stature is maintained,"* while another emphasized the disciplined planning underpinning ICT investments: *"All major IT investments are preceded by an approved business case and an approved project plan. Thus, the benefits of any major investments are defined upfront."*

In higher education settings, these frameworks were also presented as mechanisms to align ICT with core institutional objectives, as reflected in the comment: *"The above frameworks collectively assist the University to strengthen its Corporate Governance posture, specific to the alignment of ICT to the Academic Programme."*

These narratives underscore how reputational capital and relational positioning function as informal governance mechanisms—particularly in environments where formal reporting lines and executive structures do not inherently confer strategic influence. While Dolci et al. (2018) and Zaghmout (2024) examine other sectors, their findings similarly highlight how professional credibility and embedded relationships enable actors to navigate structural limitations and exercise agency in institutional contexts that marginalize their formal authority.

4.4 Sociopolitical Navigation and Informal Institutional Work

A recurring theme was the need for GITOs to navigate bureaucratic bottlenecks, procurement delays, and interdepartmental silos through informal workarounds and adaptive strategies. These practices, while often invisible in policy documents, formed a central part of how ICT governance was enacted (Di Giulio and Vecchi, 2021). As one GITO explained, *“SCM in particular derails things. Takes long and also it has to follow a certain process and even when you know you want, for example, Cisco, IBM etc – but the system doesn’t allow you to mention what you want... You eventually have to find ways to work with the system to get what you want.”* Another highlighted how disconnected processes between units created further delays: *“Silo mentality as SCM does not understand how their delays affect ICT delivery. Processes need to be understood between departments.”*

Such institutional work from the margins involved tactical actions by those embedded in governance systems but not centrally empowered. GITOs frequently balanced policy adherence with service delivery pressures, initiating pilots, cultivating cross-silo collaborations, or leveraging timing and diplomacy to advance initiatives (Broccardo et al. 2019; Parthiban et al. 2020; Lawrence and Phillips 2019). These informal efforts often emerged in response to operational constraints and organizational disconnects.

One participant warned of the risk of disengaged outcomes: *“You could end up with something below expectations and doesn’t fill what you initially wanted.”* Others stressed the need for collective understanding and collaboration: *“Workshops need to be done. Silo mentality... Processes need to be understood between departments.”*

Such informal institutional work reflects not a breakdown of governance, but a reality of leading under constraint. GITOs adapt governance to context, embodying both compliance and agility. As Henry (2022) contends, actors in constrained bureaucracies frequently engage in adaptive governance, interpreting formal processes flexibly to meet emergent demands. Similarly, Struminska-Kutra and Askeland (2020) describe how institutional actors practice pragmatic normativity—navigating tensions between rules and values through situated judgment. In this way, GITOs do not undermine governance but reconstitute it through informal yet accountable practices that are deeply attuned to their institutional realities.

Key Theme	Description	Observed Strategies/Behaviours
1. Identity Tensions and Role Ambiguity	GITOs face difficulty reconciling formal job descriptions with strategic leadership expectations.	- Adopting hybrid roles: compliance steward and transformation leader. - Engaging in identity work to reconcile conflicting demands.
2. Legitimacy-Building Through Discursive Framing	GITOs frame work in terms of compliance, management, and strategic value to gain legitimacy.	- Using governance language to align ICT with institutional risk priorities (e.g., risk reduction, audit compliance). - Reframing ICT as a core element of service delivery.
3. Relational Influence and Reputational Capital	GITOs build influence through trust, delivery track records, and governance literacy.	- Cultivating relationships with senior leadership to gain informal authority. - Using past performance and credibility as a source of influence.
4. Sociopolitical Navigation and Informal Institutional Work	GITOs engage in informal workarounds to navigate bureaucratic bottlenecks and procurement delays.	- Initiating pilots and collaborations across silos to overcome delays. - Adapting governance structures through tactical actions like negotiating procurement processes.

Table 1. Key themes articulating how GITOs construct legitimacy through identity performance, institutional work, and informal influence – Authors’ Sources

5. Discussion

This study explored the lived professional experiences of Government Information Technology Officers (GITOs) in South Africa’s public sector, focusing on how they construct identity and build legitimacy within ICT governance systems that often limit their authority and visibility. By applying professional identity theory (Ibarra 1999; Brown 2015) and institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006), the analysis revealed how GITOs engage in continuous identity negotiation and performative legitimacy-building—especially when formal structures fail to support their strategic roles.

5.1 Role Ambiguity and Identity Strain in ICT Leadership

The study found that GITOs occupy a structurally ambiguous space—expected to lead digital initiatives while reporting into administrative units and being excluded from strategic decision-making. Such accounts reflect what Brown (2015) and Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) conceptualize as identity strain—the psychological tension that arises when professional expectations are misaligned with institutional positioning. This institutional disconnect has also been observed in other public sector domains, where official mandates fail to translate into operational influence (Buyannemekh & Cook, 2023).. Jewer and Van der Meulen (2023) argue that as technology becomes central to operations, governance must evolve beyond traditional IT structures to support strategic alignment. Without such evolution, IT leaders remain sidelined despite growing expectations, exacerbating role conflict and limiting influence. This reinforces that GITOs’ struggles are tied

to institutional misalignments in governance. As Ibarra (1999) notes, professionals often experiment with identity when formal structures don't align with their roles. GITOs in this study enacted hybrid roles as compliance enforcers and transformation leaders, managing inconsistent expectations through rhetorical framing, symbolic performance, and boundary-spanning practices. This finding contributes to public administration theory by showing that ICT leadership is as much about identity negotiation as it is about technical capacity. Giacomelli (2021) supports this view, arguing that professionals in managerial roles must navigate organizational and professional boundaries, coping with role conflicts through identity construction and strategic positioning.

5.2 Legitimacy as a Performed and Constructed Practice

The findings confirm that GITOs do not inherit legitimacy through title or position—they must construct it through discursive alignment with institutional values. Participants framed ICT in terms of audit readiness, risk mitigation, academic outcomes, or delivery enhancement. The language used in this context demonstrates the findings Suchman (1995) and Prado-Román et al. They define pragmatic legitimacy through two elements which organizations achieve by showing they follow institutional rules and by delivering specific advantages which help organizations decrease risks and meet regulatory requirements. The framework enables GITOs to transform ICT from its traditional role as technical assistance into a system which supports accountability and institutional performance and fiduciary responsibility. These discursive efforts reflect a form of institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006), in which legitimacy is performed through language that aligns with dominant logics of audit, delivery, and compliance. These practices align with pragmatic and moral legitimacy as described by Suchman (1995), where actors are accepted when their work is seen as useful, appropriate, or aligned with shared values. Bourgoin et al. (2020) similarly show that internal change units must engage in 'legitimacy work' to secure their place in complex, hierarchical environments. Their study highlights that language, framing, and symbolic performance are essential tools for influencing power structures—findings echoed in this study of GITOs. Legitimacy here is not merely reputational; it is a form of institutional agency. GITOs use storytelling, compliance language, and performance framing to embed ICT into governance logics that senior leaders recognize. This extends institutional work theory by showing that language, framing, and identity performance are critical tools of influence in constrained bureaucratic settings.

5.3 Informal Structures of Power: Trust, Reputation, and Relationships

Another key insight is the reliance on relational influence and reputational capital. Without formal inclusion in executive structures, GITOs earned trust through delivery success, professional conduct, and alignment with governance frameworks (e.g., King IV, COBIT). This soft power helped them build credibility with senior leaders, gain informal access to decision-making, and influence resource allocation. This aligns with Blom-Hansen and Finke (2019) and Bertelli and Busuioc (2020), who argue that professional influence in bureaucracies flows through reputation and relationships rather than hierarchy. It also reflects research on internal change agents in the UK and Australia, who gained influence through credibility and trust despite lacking formal power (Caldwell and Howard 2020). Legitimacy-building in hybrid organizations, as O'Flynn et al. (2021) describe, is an iterative process where actors navigate uncertainty through normative alignment and performance framing. GITOs' use of governance fluency as a reputational signal reflects a strategic form of identity performance that underpins their legitimacy as public technology leaders.

5.4 Navigating Governance Through Institutional Work at the Margins

Finally, the study shows that GITOs perform institutional work from the margins—not by breaking rules, but by adapting them. Participants described initiating pilots without approval, negotiating procurement systems, or building interdepartmental coalitions to overcome siloed processes. These actions highlight how public sector innovation often occurs through informal adaptation when formal systems are slow or rigid. Similar "productive resistance" has been observed in other public innovation contexts, where actors adapt rules to push change within institutional limits (Rønning and Aars 2022). Pilot projects and improvisational efforts in Danish innovation labs demonstrate how rule-bending and relationship-building drive experimentation under bureaucratic constraints (Fuglsang and Hansen 2023). These findings align with studies showing that micro-political agency and informal governance practices are essential for public sector innovation, especially when navigating procedural rigidity (Cinar et al. 2022). This insight extends Lawrence et al.'s (2013) work by emphasizing the micro-political and improvisational dimensions of institutional work. GITOs are not passive implementers of governance frameworks, but active agents shaping governance practices through everyday navigation of organizational dynamics, tensions, and barriers.

5.5 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three key theoretical contributions:

1. It deepens professional identity theory by showing how hybrid roles in digital governance demand identity work, particularly in environments with structural ambiguity.
2. It extends institutional work theory by illustrating how language, relationship-building, and symbolic framing are used by ICT professionals to shape their institutional influence.
3. It contributes to the literature on public sector digital transformation by highlighting the sociopolitical work required to enact leadership from structurally weak positions.

These contributions situate the GITO not simply as a governance actor, but as a professional engaged in constant sensemaking, adaptation, and legitimization within contested institutional terrain.

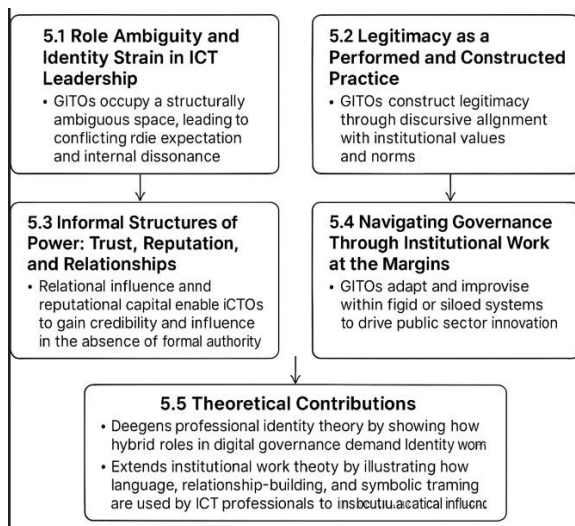


Figure 2. Discussion — Illustrating how the theoretical contributions are derived – Authors' Sources

Figure 2 synthesizes the discussion, showing how the four themes—role ambiguity and identity strain (5.1), legitimacy (5.2), informal power structures (5.3), and institutional work at the margins (5.4)—contribute to the study's theoretical framework. It illustrates how GITOs navigate constrained environments through identity work, discursive strategies, relational influence, and adaptive practices. These findings emphasize the role of agency, context, and meaning making in ICT governance, positioning the GITO as a key, though often invisible, actor.

6. Implications

The findings of this study carry significant implications for how ICT governance is conceptualized, supported, and executed in the public sector. Beyond improving technical systems or compliance frameworks, digital

transformation efforts must account for the lived realities of ICT leadership—particularly the social, relational, and institutional dynamics that shape the legitimacy and influence of Government Information Technology Officers (GITOs).

6.1 Policy Implications: Institutionalizing Strategic ICT Leadership

At the policy level, there is a need to elevate the GITO role beyond its current marginal status in many public sector organizations. While frameworks like the Corporate Governance of ICT Policy Framework (CGICTPF) outline the strategic importance of ICT, implementation often falls short due to weak structural positioning and exclusion from decision-making forums. Policymakers should consider the following:

- Mandating direct reporting lines from GITOs to Accounting Officers or Heads of Departments.
- Ensuring mandatory representation of GITOs on executive management structures (e.g., EXCO).
- Linking ICT governance compliance assessments with functional authority metrics—not just audit outcomes.

By embedding ICT leadership structurally, institutions can better align strategy, compliance, and innovation in digital government settings.

6.2 Practice Implications: Developing Identity-Conscious ICT Leadership

From a practice perspective, the findings highlight the importance of supporting GITOs in their identity and legitimacy work. Public sector CIOs and ICT leaders operate in environments that often require them to perform multiple, conflicting roles with limited recognition or clarity. Supporting these leaders means going beyond technical training and offering development opportunities that address:

- Influence without authority: Skills in stakeholder management, framing, and political navigation.
- Executive communication: Techniques to translate technical value into strategic language.
- Peer-based learning: National or provincial GITO forums where identity, practice, and legitimacy strategies can be shared and co-developed.
- Professional development must reflect the relational and discursive nature of ICT governance in practice—not just its procedural or technical elements.

6.3 Theoretical Implications: Rethinking ICT Governance as Performative Practice

Theoretically, this study suggests that ICT governance should not be viewed solely through the lens of compliance or alignment frameworks. Rather, it must be understood as a performative and negotiated practice, shaped by the identity work and institutional agency of its actors. This perspective invites further research in three areas:

- Exploring identity construction among other digitally oriented roles in the state (e.g., Chief Data Officers, innovation leads).
- Studying institutional work at the margins, especially how actors without formal power shape organizational change.
- Investigating the emotional and political labor of public technology leaders navigating ambiguous systems.

By shifting the unit of analysis from systems to actors, and from frameworks to identities, scholars can better account for the complexity and sociopolitical character of digital government reform.

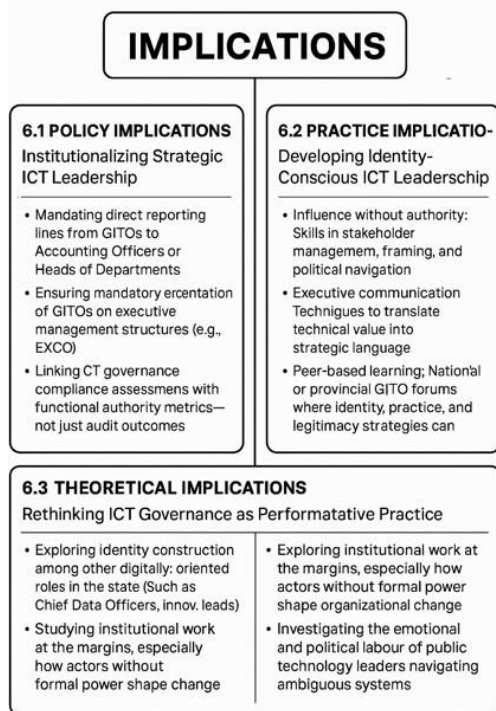


Figure 3. Implications illustrated - Authors' Sources

Figure 3 underscores the need for a holistic approach to ICT governance in the public sector, one that integrates policy, practice, and theory to foster stronger, more strategic leadership in digital government initiatives.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined how Government Information Technology Officers (GITOs) in South Africa's public sector construct professional identity and legitimacy within ICT governance environments often characterized by constrained authority, structural ambiguity, and complex institutional expectations. Drawing on 55 in-depth interviews and grounded in professional identity theory and institutional work, the analysis revealed that GITOs must continuously negotiate their roles, frame their contributions in strategic terms, and build influence through trust, reputation, and

adaptive action. Rather than treating ICT governance as a static system of rules and structures, this study highlights its human and performative dimensions. GITOs do not merely implement policy—they enact governance through discursive positioning, relational credibility, and informal institutional work. Their success depends not only on technical skill or compliance alignment, but on their ability to assert identity, build legitimacy, and navigate the sociopolitical terrain of the public sector. The findings suggest that digital transformation in government cannot be achieved without understanding and supporting the people who lead it. GITOs represent a form of leadership under constraint—professionals who must shape systems they do not fully control. Recognizing their work as legitimate, strategic, and foundational to governance is not just a matter of role clarity; it is a necessary condition for achieving the ambitions of digital government reform.

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