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Reaping the benefits: How corporate governance enhances ICT governance in the South African public sector – Insights for developing nations

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Abstract

Corporate governance structures are progressively acknowledged as fundamental facilitators of ICT governance within the public sector. However, within the context of developing nations, the operationalisation of governance principles into tangible ICT outcomes frequently remains an area warranting further scholarly inquiry. This article examines the practical advantages afforded by corporate governance mechanisms as applied within South African governmental ICT settings, drawing upon qualitative data derived from 55 comprehensive interviews conducted with Government Information Technology Officers (GITOs). Through the application of thematic analysis, four interconnected domains of benefit were identified: heightened regulatory adherence, enhanced transparency and accountability, optimised information system efficiency, and improved project accomplishment rates. Whilst established governance frameworks, such as COBIT and King IV, are demonstrably institutionalised, their efficacy is primarily evinced through their capacity to foster ethical stewardship, facilitate systematic strategic planning, and ensure coherence across diverse ICT functions. This investigation contributes to the extant literature by furnishing an empirically substantiated, practitioner-informed exposition of governance enactment within intricate administrative ecosystems. The resultant findings possess considerable practical utility for public sector organisations endeavouring to harness governance as a catalyst for digital transformation, particularly within the resource-constrained environments characteristic of many developing economies.

Keywords: governance frameworks, digital transformation, BRICS

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南非公共部门信息通信技术 (ICT) 领域公司治理的优势：对发展中国家的经验与建议

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简介

在公共部门，人们日益认识到公司治理结构对于有效管理信息通信技术具有关键重要性。然而，对于发展中国家而言，如何通过实施这些管理原则在信息通信技术领域带来具体可衡量的成果，仍是一个亟待通过科学研究来探讨的课题。 本文基于对南非公共部门55名负责信息技术的政府官员进行的深度访谈所获得的定性数据分析，揭示了应用公司治理原则于信息通信技术领域所带来的实际效益。通过主题分析研究发现，在四个相互关联的领域取得了显著优势：提升规范合规性、增强透明度与问责制、优化信息系统运作，以及提高项目完成率。 公认的治理框架（包括COBIT和King IV）虽已成熟，但其有效性主要体现在促进道德治理、系统性战略规划及ICT职能整合方面。本研究基于复杂行政生态系统中获取的实证数据与从业者信息，对治理实施进行了分析。对于资源禀赋有限的发展中国家而言，致力于通过有效治理实现数字化转型的政府机构，本研究结果具有重要的实践价值。

关键词: 治理结构,数字化转型, 金砖国家

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Introduction

Public sector organisations depend heavily on strong Information and Communication Technology (ICT) systems, because digital transformation is required in the present day. The systems provide the foundation for delivering services effectively, while maintaining accountability and transparency [Curtis, 2019]. Public institutions in developing nations face considerable hurdles when it comes to overseeing their ICT systems. These challenges often manifest themselves in the form of unsuccessful project implementations, increased cybersecurity vulnerabilities, and widespread inefficiencies in ICT procurement and service delivery [Pangaribuan, 2019]. Given this, corporate governance is a crucial area of focus within public administration and information systems research,

vital for optimising ICT performance and mitigating risks [Latchu, 2022].

Corporate governance, traditionally understood as the system of rules, practices, and processes through which organisations are directed and controlled, has been progressively embraced by public institutions. This adoption serves as a means to ensure ethical leadership, robust financial oversight, adherence to regulatory frameworks, and strategic alignment of ICT initiatives with broader institutional objectives [Ferguson, 2019; Erasmus, Marnewick, 2020]. Within South Africa's public ICT governance, a range of corporate mechanisms play a vital role. These include dedicated audit and risk committees, strategic steering groups, standardised project methodologies, and rigorous regulatory compliance frameworks. They are routinely guided by pivotal instruments such as the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA), King IV, COBIT, and ISO 38500 [Walt et al., 2014; Ajam, Fourie, 2016; Mathase et al., 2019; Khumalo, Mazenda, 2021].

Despite the growing institutionalisation of corporate governance frameworks within government ICT environments, there is a notable lack of empirical understanding regarding their practical benefits. This is particularly true when viewed from the perspective of those directly responsible for ICT implementation. Current academic discussions often focus on theoretical governance frameworks, often overlooking how these structures actually affect daily operations, impact crotical decisions, or contribute to successful projects [Azmi et al., 2018; Khumalo, Mazenda, 2021].

This article fills that research gap. The research uses qualitative data from 55 in-depth interviews with government information technology officers (GITOs) in South African public institutions to identify and analyse four main advantages of good corporate governance. The four main benefits are: (1) compliance and regulatory alignment; (2) transparency and accountability; (3) information system efficiency; and (4) project success. By directly focusing on the lived experiences of these GITOs, the research offers a dual contribution to both academic theory and practical application. Theoretically, it expands current literature by demonstrating that governance advantages extend beyond simple adherence to rules, actively fostering institutional coordination, ethical leadership, and operational discipline.

1. Literature review

1.1. Corporate governance tools used in ICT operations by government information technology officers

The interview participants emphasised that corporate governance in ICT operations relies on multiple tools and frameworks to achieve compliance and efficiency and maintain accountability [Ako-Nai, 2021]. They specifically identified various corporate governance tools used by government information technology officers (GITOs) in South Africa, which are summarised in Figure 1.

The corporate governance tools studied in this research serve as essential instruments for maintaining compliance and transparency, and achieving efficiency in government ICT operations. These tools include the PFMA and MFMA legislative acts, which regulate financial oversight, as well as best practice frameworks such as COBIT and King IV, which provide structured governance principles. Accountability for ICT governance and its operational alignment is actively enforced through internal mechanisms, specifically through audit and risk committees, as well as dedicated ICT steering and strategy committees. The bar chart in Figure 2 shows the distribution and frequency of governance tools mentioned by participants during interviews, which confirms that South African public sector institutions heavily depend on acts, regulations, compliance & assurance, best practices and internal governance instruments for effective ICT governance.

Governance mechanisms generally fall into two categories: external frameworks (such as legislation and regulations) and internal structures (including committees, policies, and best practices). External instruments, such as the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA) and Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA), primarily manage financial oversight. Internal frameworks, such as ICT Steering Committees, complement these external instruments and are crucial for maintaining operational alignment.

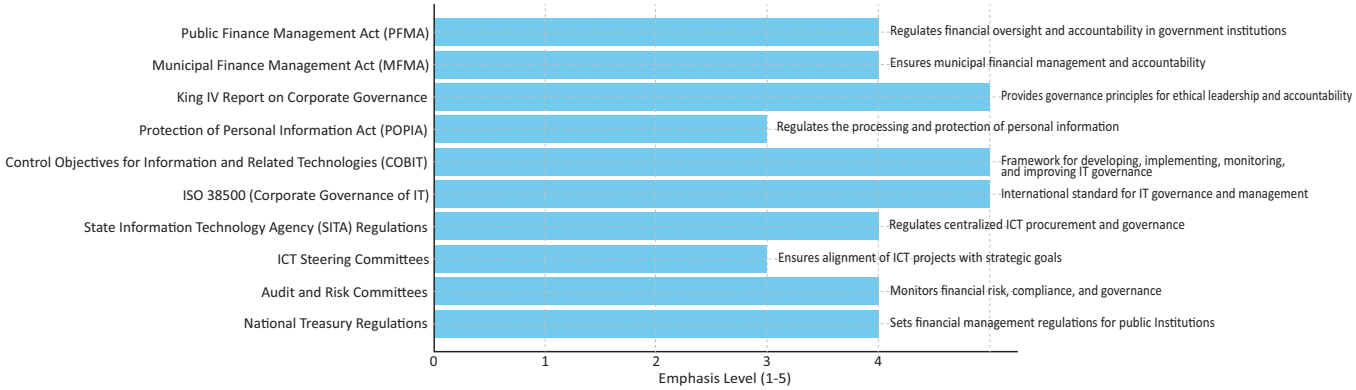
A significant body of academic work suggests that strong ICT governance can effectively reduce cybersecurity risks, safeguard data integrity, and boost overall efficiency. Frameworks rooted in King IV principles and the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA)'s directives primarily foster public trust and policy adherence within the South African public sector by emphasising transparency and accountability. Separately, but equally important, are risk management mechanisms. These include compliance audits and bespoke ICT project governance structures. They are indispensable for mitigating system vulnerabilities and maintaining consistent regulatory compliance [Schillemans, Bovens, 2019]. Additionally, [Folorunso et al., 2024] indicate that deploying established governance models such as COBIT and ISO 27001 have yielded significant improvements in operational efficiency and enhanced cybersecurity resilience.

In essence, these various governance tools form the fundamental operational underpinning for ICT governance across the South African public sector. The actual worth of these governance tools emerges from their implementation, as they influence both organisational practices and final results. The following section examines the advantages that result from the proper implementation of these governance mechanisms according by GITOs operating in various government institutions.

1.2. Translating governance tools into benefits

The following section examines the particular advantages which these tools provide when they are used in ICT operations and in institutional decision-making processes. Corporate governance continues to play an essential role in determining the effectiveness of ICT governance in public sector organisations [Bogus, Baiesu, 2022]. The public sector has rapidly adopted governance frameworks that originated in corporate environments, because governments aim to modernise their operations and boost accountability and service delivery [Latchu, 2022]. This section examines theoretical and empirical research on the four corporate governance advantages, which include compliance and regulation, transparency and accountability, information systems (IS) efficiency, and project success.

Fig. 1. Governance tools and associated themes



Source: author's analysis based on interview data, 2025.

Corporate governance and compliance in the public sector

Compliance is used to denote how well these institutions comply with the law, regulations and policies. The legal framework behind ICT decision-making in the public sector is rooted in corporate governance legislation, which includes the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA), the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) and the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) [Walt et al., 2014; Ajam, Fourie, 2016; Mathase et al., 2019; Khumalo, Mazenda, 2021]. Regulatory instruments are often put into practice through audit and risk management, which oversee both financial and operational risks. [Erasmus, Marnewick, 2020] argue that formal governance structures help reduce ICT-related risks by ensuring careful financial management and adherence to standard operating procedures. Similarly, [Smith, Marx, 2022] assert that governance frameworks steer ethical conduct, reduce exposure to audit findings, and foster a culture of compliance.

However, compliance extends beyond mere regulatory adherence. It also encompasses internal control systems and operational safeguards designed to ensure disciplined and consistent decision-making. [Lankton et al., 2020] underscore how audit mechanisms enhance organisational trust, even in situations where ICT-specific expertise might be limited. These insights suggest that governance-driven compliance significantly contributes to both legal accountability and institutional resilience.

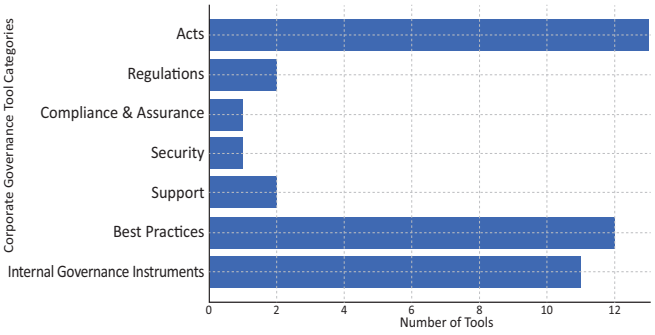
Governance, transparency, and accountability

Transparency and accountability, core tenets of public administration, serve as the foundation for corporate governance simultaneously. Within the ICT domain, these principles are realised through governance structures that facilitate oversight, promote ethical decision-making, and ensure that ICT efforts align with broader organisational objectives. [Schillemans, Bovens, 2019] underscore how governance boards and risk committees strengthen reliable decision-making. [Bhuiyan et al., 2020] explain that external chair-led structures promote impartiality and prevent internal bias. The strategic implementation of governance frameworks creates accountability through standardised processes that establish clear responsibilities. According to [Khumalo, Mazenda, 2021; Santos Castellanos, 2021] ethical ICT governance builds public trust while ensuring departmental goals match ICT strategy. Governance serves as a system for oversight, providing tools for participatory planning and performance tracking, which are essential for the transparent deployment of ICT resources in public service environments.

Information systems efficiency through governance

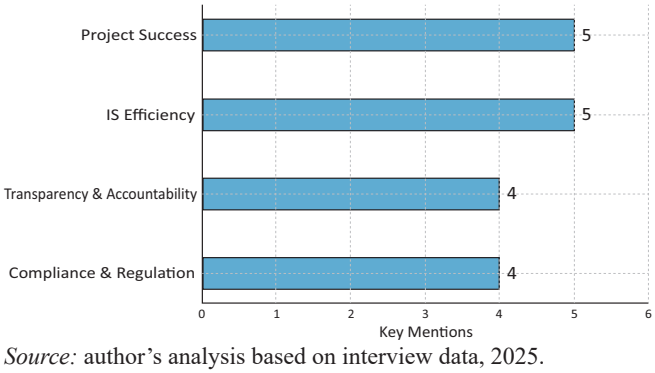
The delivery of ICT services through information systems (IS) requires reliability, security, and actual user needs fulfilment to achieve efficiency. IS efficiency is boosted by the application of best practices such as COBIT, ISO 38500, and King IV, which are facilitated by robust corporate governance frameworks that equip organisations. They offer guidelines to standardise processes, manage IT risks, and critically, ensure system integration and

Fig. 2. Corporate governance and its categories



Source: author's analysis based on interview data, 2025.

Fig. 3. Key benefits of corporate governance for ICT governance



Source: author's analysis based on interview data, 2025.

scalability across the public sector. [Folorunso et al., 2024] point out that ISO-based security standards improve how well public institutions handle cybersecurity. Meanwhile, [Huygh et al., 2022] stress that COBIT's compliance requirements enhance IT service delivery by making governance roles and responsibilities clearer. [Ferguson, 2019] also notes that the King IV principles promote operational resilience by integrating continuity planning directly into ICT operations. Moreover, governance significantly enhances inter-departmental coordination, which is critical for public sector digital projects. As [Halik et al., 2020] explain that administrative effectiveness improves when ICT systems are managed using clearly defined protocols and roles tied to accountability. These observations support the argument that corporate governance enhances institutional performance by incorporating efficiency-focused structures into all ICT operations.

Governance and project success

Project governance involves applying established governance principles throughout the entire lifecycle of a project, frominitial planning stages through to execution and final evaluation. Public sector ICT projects operate in environments with higher risks. The main causes of these risks are complex procurement systems, fragmented stakeholder involvement, and political interference. Corporate governance structures provide essential value in these situations because they establish standardized methods and clear performance metrics and strict financial oversight to reduce risks. [Ako-Nai, 2021] points out that governance plays a critical role in project success by bringing a structured approach to how stakeholders are involved, and how policies align. Research from [Ferrer et al., 2020] indicates a clear benefit: projects underpinned by robust governance frameworks tend to encounter fewer budget issues, and are more likely to complete on schedule. [Gamlath et al., 2024] present findings indicating that project governance boosts both cross-functional teamwork and sustainability. This is because it emphasises integrated learning systems and robust accountability measures. These insights are particular relevant for South Africa, which is actively involved in significant digital initiatives such as ERP system deployment, online registration platform establishment, and cloud migration projects. Public institutions can significantly improve the quality of execution and long-term value realisation by embedding strong governance throughout the project lifecycle.

The key constructs from the literature are synthesised in the following conceptual pathway, as illustrated by Figure 4. Corporate governance mechanisms are influenced by both external and internal factors and contribute to ICT governance outcomes in the public sector.

2. Methodology

The research employed a qualitative exploratory design to study how corporate governance enhances ICT governance in South African public sector organisations as shown in Figure 5. The research used a qualitative method to gain deep insights into how ICT leaders in complex institutional settings understand and experience governance mechanisms.

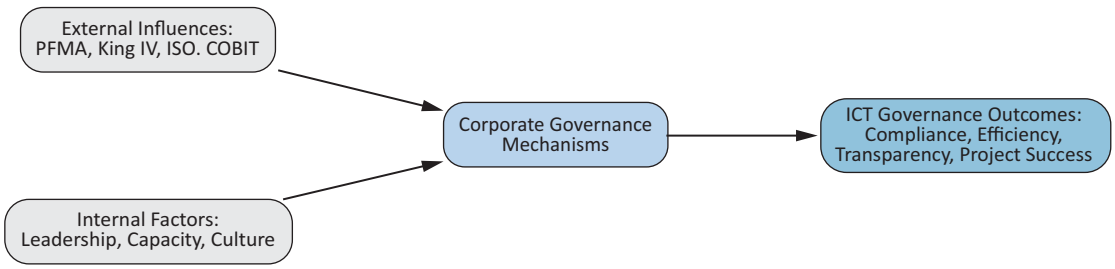
Fig. 5. Methodology flow

Source: author's analysis based on interview data, 2025.

2.1. Research context and participants

This research focused on government information technology officers (GITOs), who hold the most senior ICT positions within national, provincial and local government departments, state-owned entities and public agencies across South Africa. The

Fig. 4. Pathway from governance mechanisms to ICT



Source: author's analysis based on interview data, 2025.

GITOs have demonstrated exceptional capability to assess the practical corporate governance value of public ICT environments, as they actively participate in ICT strategy development, policy implementation, risk management and digital transformation initiatives. The researcher conducted 55 in-depth semi-structured interviews with GITOs across various public institutions. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling and professional networks to ensure a diverse representation of government levels, functional domains, and geographic locations. This sampling approach allowed the researchers to study both institutions with abundant resources as well as those with limited resources, which resulting in a broad spectrum of governance experiences.

2.2. Data collection

Data were collected over a six-month period using a semi-structured interview guide, as illustrated in Figure 6. The guide focused on eliciting participants' experiences with governance tools (e.g. PFMA, King IV, COBIT), the operationalisation of governance structures (e.g. audit committees, steering committees) and the perceived outcomes of governance in areas such as compliance, transparency, IS efficiency and project performance. Interviews were conducted via secure video conferencing platforms. All interviews were audio recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim, with interview durations ranging from 45 to 90 minutes. Prior to data collection ethical clearance was obtained and anonymity maintained throughout the research process.

2.3. Data analysis

The data were analysed using the method described in [Braun, Clarke, 2006]. The analytical method chosen was flexible and produced detailed findings from large qualitative datasets. The analysis proceeded in the following stages:

- Familiarisation: We reviewed transcripts to find patterns of meaning.
- Coding: Initial codes were generated from repeated mentions of governance structures and outcomes associated with them.
- Theme development: These codes were then organised systematically into higher-level themes, specifically chosen to resonate with both established academic literature and discernable patterns within the dataset.
- Theme refinement: A thorough examination followed to verify the internal consistency and empirical strength of these themes of these themes.
- Interpretation: The final themes were interpreted based on the objectives of the study and corporate governance theory.

The analysis revealed four primary themes, which included: (1) compliance and regulation; (2) transparency and accountability; (3) information system efficiency; and (4) project success, as Figure 7 demonstrates. The credibility of the study was supported by direct quotations that we linked to relevant literature, establishing its credibility.

2.4. Trustworthiness and rigor

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, we implemented several strategies:

- Credibility: The credibility of our research was derived from our deep engagement with participants and our analysis of relevant policy documents and existing governance frameworks.
- Transferability: The transferability of the study was improved through detailed descriptions of the specific public sector context under study.
- Dependability and confirmability: Research dependability and confirmability was supported by maintaining an audit trail and conducting regular peer debriefing sessions, which helped to reduce researcher bias.

The strict methodology enabled researchers to conduct a thorough analysis of corporate governance advantages in ICT governance from the perspectives of those who implement it.

The authors used the QuillBot writing enhancement tool during the preparation of the original manuscript to improve the grammar and clarity of the language in the final version. Throughout this process, the research analysis, data interpretation and findings of the article remained unchanged.

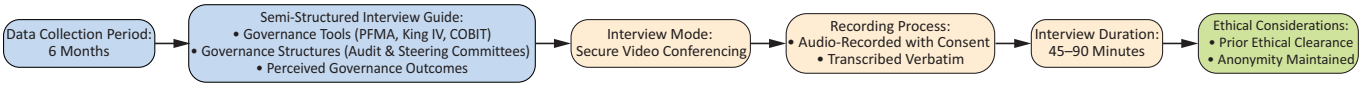
3. Findings and discussion

The thematic analysis of 55 interviews with government information technology officers (GITOs) revealed four interconnected benefits of corporate governance within the public sector ICT environment. These were identified as: (1) compliance and regulation, (2) transparency and accountability, (3) information systems (is) efficiency, and (4) project success. These emergent themes shed light on the practical application of governance frameworks and their influence on both institutional performance and broader ICT outcomes.

3.1. Compliance and regulation

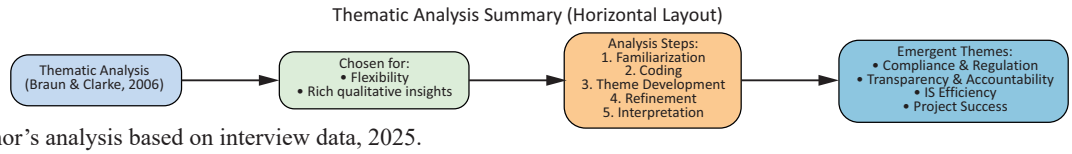
The government IT departments identified corporate governance as their essential driver for success. The participants emphasised that governance serves as an essential element for maintaining regulatory compliance, institutional accountability, and operational discipline. They emphasised the importance of governance structures that include legislative requirements, such as PFMA and MFMA, as essential safeguards. The frameworks function as the main tools to ensure compliance with essential areas, including procurement protocols, data protection requirements, audit benchmarks, and general legal compliance

Fig. 6. Data collection process



Source: author's analysis based on interview data, 2025.

Fig. 7. Data analysis process



Source: author's analysis based on interview data, 2025.

[Bakare, Ajani, 2023; Suresh et al., 2024]. The participants emphasised the importance of proper governance systems, which enable organisations to systematically identify risks and take steps to minimise them. A proactive approach helps departments successfully handle vulnerabilities in the face of an evolving complex regulatory environment [Jonathan et al., 2019; Human, 2023].

As one GITO noted, 'Good ICT governance enables the department to maintain fiduciary diligence. It helps in risk identification and ensures compliance with South African laws and regulations.' Another added, 'It describes the rules and processes for operating, which also minimises audit findings. They also help with the behaviour of staff. They guide the use of IS by the entity. They assist in reducing organisational IS risk.'

The pivotal function of audit committees has undeniably emerged as a cornerstone within this intricate public sector compliance ecosystem. These committees have received widespread recognition for their essential independent oversight, despite their general lack of deep ICT-specific expertise. Their work has reinforced established governance principles and provided essential ICT-related accountability for the public sector.

One participant observed, 'Ensure that the project follows identified project methodology. This will help to ensure project delivery compliance. The project risks are minimised and all stakeholders take responsibility. For example, Charter will be signed outlining roles and responsibilities.'

These discoveries resonate significantly with [Lankton et al., 2020] the characterisation of audit committees as the 'compliance backbone' crucial for sound corporate governance. Moreover, they reinforce [Couchoux, 2023] the argument that robust auditing practices demonstrably improve financial stewardship, strengthen institutional trust, and reduce the probability of governance failures. Beyond compliance, participants consistently emphasise that robust governance frameworks actively improve operational efficiency, cultivate strategic alignment, and build institutional resilience. [Suresh et al., 2024] demonstrates that proper governance structures reduce IS risks through standardised protocols and accountability measures according to [Hartatik et al., 2021] who state that these frameworks establish a culture that supports continuous improvement and responsible innovation.

The essential viewpoints on governance were consistently reinforced by participants through their discussions. Participants explained that governance provides detailed instructions on staff conduct, which leads to reliable service delivery and improved information security, and promotes ethical leadership through integrity, transparency and accountability. The research supports the conclusion of [Erasmus, Marnewick, 2020] about how governance structures help organisations comply with regulations. Furthermore, it aligns with [Smith, Marx, 2022] claim that governance frameworks play an instrumental role in integrating ethical controls into IT systems directly.

In summary, the gathered evidence unequivocally demonstrates that corporate governance serves as more than a compliance instrument. It is, in fact, a strategic lever for adeptly managing risks, strengthening public trust, and promoting enduring sustainability within South Africa's public sector ICT domain. The essential nature of governance structures becomes profoundly vital for enhancing institutional credibility and fostering public confidence because government departments face increased scrutiny regarding transparency and cybersecurity, as well as service delivery.

3.2. Transparency and accountability

The implementation of ICT governance by government departments has consistently demonstrated its ability to enhance transparency and accountability. Participants have highlighted that strong governance frameworks serve several purposes, including improving ethical oversight, clearly laying out roles and responsibilities, and establishing effective reporting mechanisms. Crucially, such a system ensures that every decision-making process unfolds in complete transparency and impartiality, always in strict adherence to the institution's guidelines.

As one interviewee shared, 'As a National Government Department, we follow the Batho Pele principles. One of the important principles is transparency.'

Another interviewee noted, 'The King IV Report promotes principles such as accountability, transparency and ethical leadership which are fundamental to good governance including IT governance. It also emphasises the importance of risk management as an integral part of corporate governance for the IT department, identifying, assessing and mitigating risks associated with IT systems, data security and compliance with technological changes. Following the King IV guidelines helps the IT Department to establish robust risk management processes and ensures alignment with organisational goals.'

[Ernstberger et al., 2024] clearly recognised the significant value of externally chaired committees such as audit and risk boards. These committees enhance legitimacy, reduce internal bias and foster greater public trust. Participants emphasised that external oversight provides impartiality and reduces conflicts of interest, reflecting [Bhuiyan et al., 2020] view that external governance improves accountability and curbs unethical behaviour. [Schillemans, Bovens, 2019] emphasise the importance of credible external oversight. [Couchoux, 2023] further adds that these mechanisms boost financial stewardship and transparent decision-making. The participants in the study also saw a clear strategic benefit in governance frameworks, as these frameworks ensure that ICT initiatives directly support

departmental goals and broader public service mandates.

As one interviewee shared, 'Top Management should take responsibility for the committee's work and implementation. Committies chaired externally are very helpful in keeping governance pure.'

This finding is consistent with what [Chau et al., 2020; Khumalo, Mazenda, 2021] indicate when they emphasise strategic alignment as a key feature of effective IT governance. Moreover, [Santos Castellanos, 2021] emphasizes how governance actively establishes clear roles within digital operations, thus enhancing both execution consistency and overall coherence.

The participants understood governance as a method to enhance transparency and alignment, but they saw it as an essential proactive tool for risk management. They recognised governance as an important proactive instrument for risk management. The consistent application of standard rules to all ICT decisions through governance reduces cyber threats, streamline procurement, and minimises budget issues. [Viana, 2025] supports this concept by demonstrating how ethical ICT governance builds trust among stakeholders and improves organisational resilience.

One participant explained that, when governance frameworks are applied consistently, 'To ensure effective corporate governance and ICT compliance, the university has developed systems for managing ICT risks, auditing, and compliance. This ensures integrity in ICT operations and reduces mismanagement and reputational risk.'

Our research demonstrates that ICT governance functions as a driving force rather than a management tool. Strategic power functions as an ethical leadership framework that establishes discipline in operations and builds institutional trust. When it reaches its full implementation stage, the governance framework becomes deeply embedded in organisational core processes. That's when you get better service delivery and more efficient decision-making. Most importantly, it ensures that every ICT investment truly triggers meaningful, long-lasting digital transformation. In the face of increasing demands for regulatory compliance, public oversight, and careful resource management, corporate governance is essential for reliable and efficient public sector ICT operations.

3.3. Information systems (IS) efficiency

Participants largely credited governance frameworks with boosting the efficiency, reliability, and resilience of public sector information systems. Government IT officers (GITOs), particularly stressed that structured governance facilitates IT operations that are standardised, repeatable, and strategically aligned. The adoption of globally accepted frameworks, such as King IV, COBIT, ISO 38500, and ISO 27001, was regarded as critical to the integration of best practices throughout IT service delivery, cybersecurity, risk management, and resource optimisation [Ranzatti et al., 2019; Valencia, 2023].

As one participant explained, 'The Department has a number of governance systems that include CGICTPF, King IV and compliance policies to ensure effective ICT oversight.' Another added, 'Governance encourages the adoption of best practices such as King IV, COBIT, and ISO standards for IT operations.'

The interviewees also emphasised how governance systems effectively used to drive operations, facilitate performance tracking, and organise compliance. This intersection provides IT departments with greater precision and higher responsibility in their operations. Major digital initiatives, such as the roll-out of the COVID-19 social relief grant, are examples of excellent governance-led implementations.

As one interviewee noted, 'Digital transformation projects, including the rollout of the social relief grant, were only possible thanks to governance-enabled collaboration across units and partners.'

[Ndzendze, 2024] posits that governance frameworks are indispensable for effective decision-making. This is because they ensure clear roles and responsibilities are in place, alongside well-defined approval procedures. Similarly, they align with [Halik et al., 2020], who link a governance-driven approach to administration with improved public service delivery. Beyond just making operations more efficient, participants emphasised the vital contribution of governance to boosting system security and fostering digital resilience. The incorporation of cybersecurity protocols directly into governance structures was considered essential for mitigating emerging risks, lessening organisational vulnerability, and fostering a culture that is mindful of security [Azmi et al., 2018]. Well-governed ICT environments typically feature measures such as multi-layered access controls, continuous monitoring, and robust incident response planning.

[Folorunso et al., 2024] state that security-focused governance enhances an organisation's readiness and [Ferguson, 2019] emphasises King IV's significant role in operational resilience. Participants repeatedly emphasised governance as the key factor in maximising IT resource management. Participants described how well-defined policies and procedures help organisations streamline procurement processes, improve vendor relationships, decrease technical debt, and enable proper IT asset lifecycle planning. They elaborated on the importance of defined policies and procedures rhat directly streamline procurement. This helps to improve how vendors are managed and effectively reduce technical debt. It also robustly supports IT asset lifecycle planning, helping to eliminate duplication and ensuring that technology investments align with long-term institutional goals. This leads to more reliable services and less downtime.

Ultimately, these findings clearly demonstrate that governance frameworks go beyond mere regulatory instruments. Instead, they act as fundamental enablers for information system (IS) efficiency and strategic value creation in the public sector. Through standardisation, seamless collaboration across different functions, robust security practices, and alighnment of IT operations with core business objectives, governance enables public institutions to navigate complex challenges successfully, deliver impactful digital services, and maintain long-term institutional resilience.

3.4. Contribution to project success

The last theme demonstrates how corporate governance acts as a key driver for ICT project success in public sector organisations. The participants emphasised that governance frameworks establish order and discipline, and maintain accountability throughout the entire project lifecycle starting from planning and execution, and ending with monitoring and evaluation. Implementation of structure becomes vital for

achieving efficiency, transparency, and sustainable outcomes in high-risk and resource-constrained environments.

As one GITO noted, 'Projects follow a formal methodology - charters are signed, responsibilities are clear, and audit findings are minimised.' Another added, 'Ensure that projects follow the identified project methodology. This helps to ensure project delivery compliance. Project risks are minimised and ensure that all stakeholders take responsibility. For example, a charter will be signed outlining roles and responsibilities.'

These insights echo broader academic findings. Corporate governance plays a critical role in enforcing structured methodologies, clear performance metrics, and essential compliance checkpoints, significantly lowering the chance of project failure [Bakare et al., 2024]. It also bolsters financial oversight, helps reduce risks like scope creep and budget overruns, and ensures project objectives align with the institution's main priorities [Erasmus, Marnewick, 2020; Ferrer et al., 2020]. [Poniatowicz et al., 2020] additionally stress that governance improves institutional coordination, while [Lankton et al., 2020] highlight how oversight deters wasteful spending and strengthens public trust.

When governance actively steers project oversight, it ensures that teams follow consistent practices and are held accountable for their schedules, resource use, and final outputs. This methodical strategy enables agile risk management, where early identification of issues prompts rapid corrective action. Moreover, it encourages leaders to participate because decisions are made transparently. [Gamlath et al., 2024] affirm that integrating governance across the entire lifespan of a project boosts its staying power, aligning it better with strategy and helping the institution learn for the long haul. Interestingly, interviewees cited numerous large-scale successes - like new ERP rollouts, cloud shifts, and online student registration platforms – which were directly enabled by robust governance structures.

These initiatives require coordinated stakeholder engagement, regulatory compliance, and disciplined oversight, emphasising the importance of governance in facilitating digital transformation on a large scale. As [Ferrer et al., 2020; Ndzendze, 2024] suggest, structured governance forms the basis for consistent service provision and effective collaboration between departments. Beyond just making projects run more smoothly, corporate governance ensures their long-term sutainability. It does this by building ways for them to expand, connect with other systems, and create value down the line. Projects with strong governance inherently reduce technical debt, encourage learning across the organisation, and establish proven methods that future efforts can draw upon. When governance reinforces ethical leadership, standardises how work gets done, and nurtures a culture of constant improvement, it significantly boosts an organisation's overall skill in managing projects.

Beyond simply making projects run better, corporate governance also ensures their long-term viability. This is done by building ways for them to expand, connect with other systems and create value in the future. Projects with strong governance inherently reduce technical debt, encourage learning within the organisation and establish proven methods that can be used in future efforts. When governance supports ethical leadership, standardises work processes and nurtures a culture of constinuos improvement, it significantly enhances an organisation's ability to manage projects.

Table illustrates how insights from our 55 interviewees (P1–P55) align with the four primary advantages of corporate governance uncovered in this research: Compliance and Regulation, Transparency and Accountability, Information Systems Efficiency, and Project Success. An 'X' indicates that a participant offered perspectives, experiences, or concrete examples relevant to a given benefit area. This comprehensive mapping effectively demonstrates a widespread understanding of the benefits throughout public sector entities. It lends strong support to the thematic completeness and empirical rigor of the study. Moreover, this synthesis of participants distinctly highlights the complex, interwoven nature of corporate governance in ICT, revealing how compliance tools, ethical oversight, operational frameworks, and structured project methods combine to shape effective digital governance results.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

This study examined the benefits of corporate governance in strengthening ICT governance within the South African public sector, drawing on in-depth interviews with 55 government information technology officers (GITOs). The findings underscore that corporate governance goes far beyond promoting regulatory compliance - it shapes institutional culture, enhances decision-making, improves system performance, and drives successful ICT outcomes. Based on the lived experiences of 55 senior ICT leaders, these findings provide an authentic and practitioner-informed perspective of governance's role in navigating complex public digital ecosystems.

The insights from our data highlighted four primary areas:

Compliance and regulation. Governance mechanisms, such as the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA) and audit committees, serve as essential legal and operational safeguards. They ensure that all ICT practices strictly adhere to statutory and fiduciary requirements while simultaneously reducing associated risks.

Transparency and accountability. Public trust and operational integrity are fostered collectively through ethical leadership, the inclusion of externally chaired committees, and clearly defined roles.

Information systems efficiency. Adoption of global standards (such as COBIT, ISO and King IV) standardises IT processes, enhance security, and promote coordination between departments, rwsulting in more reliable services.

Table
Participant mapping against corporate governance benefit themes

Participant	Compliance and Regulation	Transparency and Accountability	IS Efficiency	Project Success
P1	X	X	X	X
P2	X		X	
P3	X	X	X	X
P4	X	X	X	X
P5	X	X		
P6	X		X	
P7	X		X	
P8	X		X	X
P9	X	X	X	X
P10	X		X	
P11	X		X	X
P12	X		X	X

Table – ending

Participant	Compliance and Regulation	Transparency and Accountability	IS Efficiency	Project Success
P13				
P14	X	X	X	X
P15	X	X	X	X
P16				
P17	X	X	X	X
P18	X	X	X	
P19	X		X	X
P20	X		X	
P21	X		X	X
P22	X	X	X	
P23				
P24	X		X	X
P25			X	
P26	X		X	X
P27			X	
P28		X	X	X
P29			X	
P30	X	X	X	X
P31				
P32	X	X	X	X
P33		X		
P34	X	X	X	
P35	X		X	X
P36	X		X	X
P37				X
P38	X		X	X
P39			X	
P40	X			
P41	X	X	X	X
P42	X		X	
P43	X	X	X	X
P44			X	
P45	X	X	X	X
P46			X	
P47	X		X	X
P48	X	X		
P49	X	X		X
P50	X	X	X	X
P51	X	X	X	X
P52	X	X	X	X
P53	X		X	X
P54	X		X	X
P55	X	X	X	X

Sources: compiled by the authors.

Project success. Governance plays a crucial role in the successful project execution. This is achieved by enforcing structured methodologies, aligning stakeholders, and maintaining performance accountability throughout the entire project lifecycle.

These findings affirm corporate governance frameworks as being not only essential for ICT oversight, but also being flexible enough to be applied in challenging, resource-limited settings. Nevertheless, the study indicates that the effectiveness of governance hinges on how thoroughly these structures are adopted and tailored to public institutions. Theoretically, this study advances the literature by demonstrating how corporate governance operates not only as a structural compliance mechanism, but also as a dynamic enabler of institutional trust, digital maturity and cross-functional coordination - particularly through the lens of ICT leaders responsible for implementation.

Recommendations

Build an ethical governance culture. Cultivate accountability and ethical leadership by using training, incentives, and decisions based on core values.

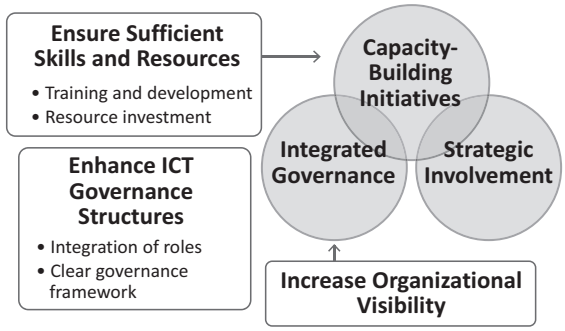
Bolster governance capacity & structures. Invest in audit and steering committees, ensuring that they have strong ICT and project management expertise.

Encourage contextual adaptation of best practices. Tailor established frameworks such as COBIT and ISO to fit local realities and unique circumstances.

Integrate governance into ICT project lifecycles. Apply governance principles at every stage of a project to improve execution and long-term viability.

Boost oversight via external review. Employ independent or external chairs for committees to enhance impartiality and objectivity.

Fig. 8. Recommendations



Source: author's analysis based on interview data, 2025.

Contribution to scholarship and practice

Making a two-fold impact, this article serves both academic inquiry and the practical needs of the public sector in ICT.

Within scholarship, it fundamentally advances our understanding of corporate governance. Our contribution here is solid empirical evidence gathered from arguably the most extensive qualitative dataset ever compiled in the South African public sector. By incorporating insights from 55 senior government ICT leaders (GITOs), this study moves beyond purely theoretical models. It portrays governance not merely as a compliance mechanism, but as a dynamic, continuous practice. Our research provides a detailed understanding of how governance is understood, adapted, and implemented in complex administrative systems, especially in contexts characterised by limited resources and intricate political landscapes. By doing so, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on 'governance-as-practice' and clarifies the impact of institutional thinking, leadership actions, and real-world circumstances on governance outcomes. Additionally, it strengthens existing theories of ICT governance by providing evidence from a developing country where traditional frameworks may lack real-world applicability.

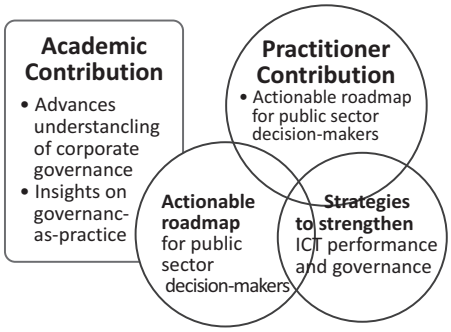
From a practical angle, this study equips public sector decision-makers with a clear, actionable roadmap. The five strategic recommendations it offers - ranging from solidifying ethical leadership to enhancing external oversight – where directly derived from real-world reflections and rigorous thematic analysis. These insights are particularly critical for governments in developing countries, where digital governance often has to contend with issues such as limited capacity, fragmentation, and political interference. The article provides practitioners with evidence-based strategies to improve ICT performance, promote transparency, and provide better services through responsible, inclusive governance. It also highlights the importance of both formal structures, such as legislation and frameworks, and informal elements (leadership and organisational culture), in creating a holistic governance model that can be adapted to different institutional environments.

Figure 9, titled 'Contribution to Scholarship and Practice,' visually demonstrates the twofold impact of our study on public sector ICT governance.

The left portion of the graphic highlights the academic contributions. It emphasises how our research enhances theoretical understanding, drawing on empirical evidence from 55 senior government ICT leaders (GITOs). This section also details the unique contribution of the study to the 'governance-as-practice' literature, particularly in complex, resource-constrained environments.

To the right, the figure illustrates practical contributions using overlapping circles. These circles represent interconnected digital governance strategies and offer actionable recommendations specifically designed for policymakers. For example, institutionalising ethical leadership and enhancing external oversight aim to improve ICT performance and promote transparency, especially in developing countries.

Fig. 9. Contribution to scholarship and practice



Source: author's analysis based on interview data, 2025.

The central alignment of both components in Figure 9 symbolises the effective bridge our study creates between theory and practice. It offers both scholarly depth and practical tools for reform and transformation.

In summary, this research bridges the theory–practice gap by not only deepening theoretical debates on governance in public ICT domains but also offering pragmatic tools for reform and transformation.

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