SYSTEMIC CORRUPTION IN SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS: GHOST EMPLOYEES – WHERE THEY COME FROM AND WHERE THEY ARE GOING

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Abstract

Corruption is a prevalent global issue that manifests in distinct ways across countries, significantly impacting economic growth and governance. In South Africa, the phenomenon of ghost employees, non-existent or fictitious individuals listed on payrolls, has emerged as a critical concern, costing the government millions and exacerbating unemployment. Scholars argue that ghost employees reflect systemic corruption. This study employed qualitative research methodology and a desktop design to explore the phenomenon of systemic corruption, drawing from materials such as government reports, audit findings, and scholarly literature. The findings reveal that ghost employees exist across all three spheres of government, highlighting systemic corruption rather than mere administrative errors, according to the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA). These fraudulent practices divert taxpayer money into private hands, depriving skilled individuals of employment opportunities, particularly in a country grappling with a staggering unemployment rate of 32.9% as of Q1 2025. Young people aged 15–34 are disproportionately affected, facing an alarming unemployment rate of 46.1%. Instances of ghost workers have been uncovered in departmental audits, such as the R6.5 million in salaries paid by the Mpumalanga Department of Education and the discovery of 230 ghost employees in the Gauteng Department of Health. In conclusion, the study recommends addressing this issue, as it could create significant employment opportunities without imposing additional costs on the government. A multifaceted approach is necessary, combining traditional methods like physical audits and employee verifications with contemporary solutions such as artificial intelligence and technology. Tackling the ghost employee dilemma presents a critical pathway to reducing corruption and increasing job opportunities within South Africa's public service sector.

Keywords: Fraud, Ghost Employees, Systemic Corruption, Unemployment, Payroll, Political-Administrative Interference

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, corruption refers to the abuse of entrusted power for personal gain. In South Africa, it is a significant issue, with the public sector perceived as moderately corrupt, scoring 41 out of 100 on the Corruption Perceptions Index and ranking 82nd out of 180 countries according to Transparency International (2025). Ardigó & Chêne (2017) and Horton (2016) concur that corruption is a global concern with varying impacts among different countries. Thus, Mathiba (2021) stated that corruption remains one of the most persistent and damaging challenges in post-apartheid South Africa. While legislative and institutional frameworks aimed at combating corruption have been established, it continues to pervade government departments at local, provincial, and national levels (Mathiba, 2021). Furthermore, Minnaar (2025) explains that "ghost workers" refers to fictitious names on payrolls, but real individuals are receiving these fraudulent payments, diverting taxpayer money into private pockets. Essentially, ghost workers are non-existent people listed on payroll records, enabling someone to fraudulently collect wages or benefits. A key issue is the unknown extent of the problem. Lessig (2014) defined ghost employees as individuals who are illegitimately listed on a payroll system and receive regular payments from the state. These may include:

- Completely fictitious individuals invented for siphoning funds.
- Deceased employees who remain on the payroll due to administrative negligence or fraud.

- Former employees who have resigned, retired, or been dismissed but are not removed from records.
- Duplicate entries for real individuals drawing multiple salaries.

These manifestations fall within the broader theoretical framework of institutional corruption, where systemic dysfunctions permit and even incentivise illegal or unethical behaviour (Lessig, 2014). Minnaar (2025) states that corruption in any form has consequences that have far-reaching implications, hinder national economic growth and undermine the principles of good governance. Many government departments across South Africa are rife with ghost employees, costing the country millions and keeping skilled people out of the workforce while corrupt officials line their pockets. The Department of Public Service and Administration (2025) has also confirmed the serious issue of ghost employees affecting all three spheres of government, including their departments, agencies, and state-owned entities. The issue of ghost employees in the public service is not a matter of administrative oversight or mistake; it is an intentional medium for systemic corruption. Ryan (2025) reports that some audits have revealed the existence of ghost workers. For instance, the Department of Education in Mpumalanga was found to have paid R6.5 million in salaries to these ghost employees. Similarly, the Department of Health in Gauteng uncovered 230 ghost workers. Based on this evidence, Ryan suggests that thousands of ghost workers may exist across various public services and government departments. This issue not only contributes to the unemployment crisis but also deprives skilled and eager job seekers of opportunities within the government sector. As of Q1 2025, the country's unemployment rate stands at 32.9%, which is particularly alarming for young people. Those aged 15 to 34 face an unemployment rate of 46.1%. A contributing factor to this problem is the current decentralised staffing process in government departments (Minnaar, 2025; DPSA, 2025). This study argues that corruption, particularly in the form of ghost employees, poses a critical challenge to South Africa's public sector, undermining good governance and economic development. These issues are persistent and have severe implications for the country, contributing to rising unemployment and the misallocation of resources. This study will include the study's purpose, research methodology, literature review, conclusion, and recommendations.

1.1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
This study is underpinned by the following objectives:

- To examine the prevalence of systemic corruption in South African government departments, with a specific focus on the phenomenon of ghost employees' fraud.
- To identify the origins and root causes of this form of payroll fraud and its socio-economic impacts.
- To propose possible mitigation strategies to eradicate systemic corruption in South African departments.

2. RESEARCH METHODS AND MATERIALS
This study employed a qualitative research methodology through desktop analysis. It utilised secondary materials, including journals, conference proceedings, technical reports, and online resources. Various databases, including Google and Google Scholar, were consulted to gather relevant literature. The data collected were analysed using a thematic content analysis approach. Since this research is purely desktop-based and does not involve human or animal subjects, ethical clearance was not necessary. Nonetheless, the study upholds ethical standards by ensuring that the content is original and properly cited, acknowledging all sources referenced throughout the research.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
The concept map on systemic corruption in South Africa is vital for several reasons. It provides a visual representation that helps in understanding the complex relationships between various stakeholders involved in corruption. By identifying root causes such as poor governance and socio-economic disparities, it aids policymakers in developing targeted reforms. Furthermore, the map raises public awareness, fostering a more informed citizenry that can advocate for accountability. It highlights the interconnected nature of different forms of corruption, emphasising the need for a holistic approach in tackling these issues. Overall, the concept map serves as a foundational tool for analysis and action against corruption in the country.

Figure 1: Concept Mapping

Concept Map: Ghost Employees as Systemic Corruption in South Africa
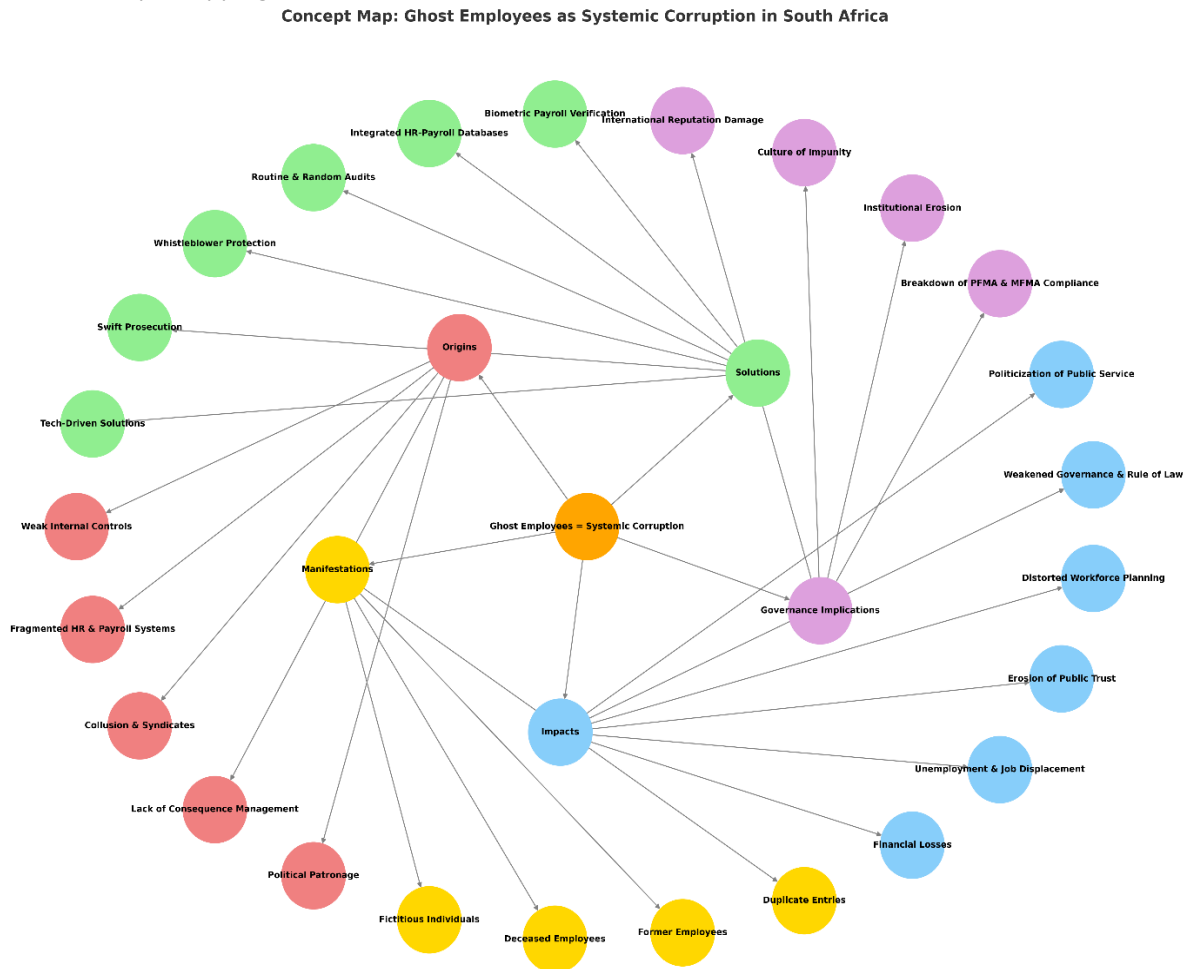
Source: Compiled by the Author (2025)

The concept map illustrates how ghost employees in South Africa are not isolated payroll errors but rather a manifestation of systemic corruption deeply embedded in governance structures. At the core lies the central problem of ghost employees, branching into five major themes: their origins (driven by weak internal controls, fragmented payroll systems, collusion, poor consequence management, and political patronage), their manifestations (from fictitious individuals to deceased or duplicate employees), their impacts (including massive financial losses, unemployment displacement, public distrust, distorted workforce planning, weakened rule of law, and politicization of the public service), and their broader governance implications (institutional erosion, breakdown of financial management acts, impunity, and reputational damage). The map also highlights solutions, including biometric payroll verification, integrated HR-payroll systems, random audits, whistleblower protection, swift prosecution, and adoption of advanced technologies. Together, the framework emphasises that ghost employee fraud is not only an economic crime but also a governance crisis that undermines accountability, service delivery, and sustainable development in South Africa.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
4.1. PREVALENCE OF GHOST EMPLOYEES IN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS

Mbuh, Nchang, NdiIsoh & Adenuga (2020) indicate that the notion of ghost employees, or fictitious workers who receive compensation without actually performing duties, is not a recent phenomenon. The roots of ghost employees can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution, which saw the emergence of large organisations implementing centralised payroll systems. Despite numerous efforts aimed at eradicating this issue, ghost employees persist and continue to proliferate. Both large and small organisations face the threat of fraud (Olumuyiwa, 2018). A well-known saying in the business world suggests, "If your business has a door, you can be sure something is being out". This highlights the reality that employee fraud is prevalent across all business sectors

(Al Riyami, Al Hammadi, Al Marzouqi, Al Neyadi, Jamil, Al Mansoori & Hodgson, 2015; Olumuyiwa, 2018; Mbuh et al., 2020), encompassing minor infractions such as the unauthorised appropriation of office supplies to significantly larger embezzlement schemes that can lead to the loss of millions in corporate funds. Akeem, Momoh & Danlami (2016) and Moyo, Litshani, Mashau, Sebopetsa & Mohale (2021) indicated that the existence of ghost employees is undeniable, with evidence demonstrating that such practices have been present for an extensive period within both governmental and private entities, as well as in profit-making and non-profit organisations.

Equally, Mbuh et al. (2020) indicated that ghost employees are predominantly found in larger enterprises, particularly those utilising centralised payroll systems. This observation suggests that the creation of ghost workers is often linked to upper management. For a scheme involving ghost employees to be effective, the participation, whether direct or indirect, of senior management is typically required. Instances of ghost employee schemes that succeed without such involvement are rare and are generally attributable to deficiencies in internal control systems or the inadequacy of top management to fulfil their responsibilities effectively (Mbuh et al., 2020; Tefurukwa & Bwaki, 2022). Mamokhere & Meyer (2023) observed that South African residents have voiced numerous complaints and expressed concerns in media reports regarding the widespread nature and effects of corruption on service delivery. The ongoing existence of corruption within South African municipalities and governmental departments remains a significant concern, obstructing effective governance and sustainable service provision. Nationwide, as reported by Corruption Watch (2021), the organisation received an unprecedented total of 857 reports from whistleblowers in 2020 concerning poor governance and corruption at the local government level. For instance, Ryan (2025) noted that in 2024, the Auditor-General (AG) revealed that R6.4 million was being paid in salaries to phantom employees at the Mpumalanga Department of Education. Back in 2002, the AG highlighted payroll control problems in over 60 municipalities, indicating that the issue of ghost employees affects all levels of government. In 2021, Msunduzi Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal discovered 120 ghost workers after 180 staff members did not show up for verification. Similarly, in 2023, the City of Tshwane found that nearly 500 individuals in its Expanded Public Works Programme were unverifiable. By removing these individuals from the payroll, the municipality was able to save R2 million each month. Table 1 below presents case studies of different occurrences of ghost employees in South Africa.

Table 1: Case Studies on Ghost Employees' Fraud in South African Government Departments.

Province	Department/Entity	Year(s)	Description of Incident	Estimated Financial Loss	Action Taken
Limpopo	Dept. of Education	2013	Payroll audit exposed 10,000+ ghost employees.	Not disclosed	Temporary cleanup; limited long-term reform.
Limpopo	Polokwane Municipality	2014–2022	44 staff with fake IDs; R128M in fake overtime.	R200 million+	Forensic audit; criminal and disciplinary actions underway.
Northwest	Provincial Government	2022	A biometric audit revealed widespread payroll fraud.	R15 million	Employees flagged; audit findings referred to action.
Gauteng	Health Department	2021	PPE and payroll corruption scandals are linked.	Not disclosed	Investigations and internal clean-up.
Gauteng	Health Department (Ziveze Campaign)	Feb 2025	60–66 ghost employees identified and pay frozen.	Ongoing	Staff verification and disciplinary action.
Eastern Cape	UIF/TERS (COVID-19)	May 2024	Fraudulent TERS claims for non-existent	R216,905	SIU investigation; criminal referrals.

			staff at Khayathi.		
Free State	UIF/TERS & Health Department	2020–2024	TERS claims and ghost medical interns were discovered.	R1.4 million + R101,555	SIU & Hawks investigations; 4 officials suspended.

Source: Compiled by the author (2025)

The findings in Table 1 demonstrate the widespread occurrence of ghost employees across various South African government departments, as evidenced by multiple high-profile cases in provinces such as Limpopo, Gauteng, Mpumalanga, and the Free State. These cases reveal deep-rooted systemic corruption with serious implications for governance, unemployment, and national development. These fraudulent practices, where salaries are paid to non-existent individuals, highlight significant weaknesses in internal control systems, payroll verification, and accountability mechanisms. The diversion of public funds, often amounting to hundreds of millions of rands, undermines service delivery in critical sectors like education and health, erodes public trust in state institutions, and inflates employment statistics, masking the true scale of joblessness (Auditor-General South Africa, 2014; AGSA, 2024; Manyerere & Mpambije, 2022). This corruption not only blocks legitimate job opportunities for unemployed citizens, especially youth, but also artificially distorts workforce planning and budget allocation, reducing the government's capacity to invest in genuine development. Furthermore, the persistence of such fraud despite audits and investigations suggests a culture of impunity and the ineffectiveness of current anti-corruption measures. Addressing this crisis requires systemic reforms, including the implementation of a nationwide biometric payroll system, regular forensic audits, and strict enforcement of disciplinary and criminal actions to restore integrity, promote equitable employment, and redirect resources towards genuine socio-economic development (Ryan, 2025; Minnaar, 2025).

4.2. THE ORIGINS, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF GHOST EMPLOYEES' FRAUD IN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS
This section explores the origins, causes and impacts of ghost employees in government departments in South Africa.

4.2.1. Origins and causes: Where Do Ghost Employees Come From?
Weak Internal Controls
The World Health Organisation (2020) highlights that the issue of ghost workers in the healthcare sector remains relatively unexplored. However, this form of payroll fraud severely impacts public health and financial resources in various countries, undermining both public health initiatives and global health objectives. Several factors contribute to the rise of ghost workers, including inadequate institutional capacity to effectively recruit Human Resources for Health (HRH) for open positions. This situation is compounded by a lack of personnel to oversee the recruitment process. Additionally, poor management of records and insufficient oversight within HRH systems create further opportunities for the emergence of ghost workers. These weak internal controls facilitate the proliferation of this issue, emphasising the need for stronger mechanisms to prevent fraud (World Health Organisation, 2020). Stanciu (2012) argues that fraud opportunities may arise from weak institutional controls, poor managerial oversight, inadequate external monitoring, and the absence of a formal policy addressing conflicts of interest. The conviction of perpetrators often stems from the identified deficiencies in internal controls, poor oversight from management, and inadequate external audits and supervision conducted by regulatory bodies.

Furthermore, failures in implementing effective fraud mitigation processes, a lack of formal conflict of interest policies, insufficient prosecution of offenders, and a deficient ethical culture within the institution contribute to these vulnerabilities (Stanciu, 2012). Zibi (2025) indicated that many South African public institutions struggle with payroll and personnel management due to a lack of technical and managerial capacity, rendering them vulnerable to fraud and errors. This is primarily a result of a failure to implement proper internal controls, such as payroll reconciliations and staff audits, leading to outdated or inaccurate records and potential manipulation. Poor oversight and understaffed audit units further exacerbate these issues (Stanciu, 2012; Zibi, 2025). According to Ardigó & Chêne (2017:6), "the combination of composite structures and bureaucracies, along with competition for resources, makes service delivery monitoring processes and accountability mechanisms challenging and costly to create and implement. This lack of adequate oversight can lead to high levels of discretionary power, which

may produce arbitrary outcomes and significantly increase the risks of corruption in the supply chain and human resources payroll".

Fragmented Human Resource and Payroll Systems

According to a report by Daily Maverick (2023), ghost employee fraud is a form of white-collar crime where a corrupt employee adds a fictitious person to the company's payroll. The report highlighted that inadequate Information Technology (IT) and payroll systems, along with errors in data entry, are the main contributors to this issue. A global fraud study conducted by the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners in 2022 identified ghost employees as one of the most common forms of occupational fraud. Payroll fraud comprised 8% of reported cases, leading to significant financial losses. The World Health Organisation (2020) explains that the fraud triangle theory identifies opportunity as a key factor in fraud. When payroll processes lack strong governance and accountability, it creates chances for fraud to happen. In these situations, someone might believe that the benefits of committing fraud are greater than the risks of getting caught or punished. This implies that potential fraudsters think it's unlikely they will be caught and that the consequences won't be severe. Nyaledzigbor (2015) stated that poor record-keeping can also cause mismatches between the number of government employees listed on payroll and the actual number of people working (Nyaledzigbor, 2015). Fraud opportunities can occur when there are delays in updating payroll information. If a public institution does not regularly and promptly update employee records, individuals may continue to receive salaries even if they are no longer employed there (Nyaledzigbor, 2015). It's important to understand that these gaps in records can happen either intentionally (to enable fraud) or simply because of inefficiencies within the institution. For instance, the Department of Public Service and Administration (2025) indicates that government departments often face challenges due to separate, incompatible HR and financial systems, leading to inaccurate staff records, ghost employees, and hindered oversight. This lack of integration prevents real-time verification of employment status and makes it difficult for external bodies to access and analyse data.

Collusion and Internal Fraud Syndicates

Legotlo & Mutezo (2018) stated that collusion and internal fraud syndicates involve groups of individuals working together to commit fraud, often exploiting internal controls and systems for personal gain. These syndicates can be particularly damaging as they can be difficult to detect and prevent due to the coordinated nature of the fraudulent activities. Daily Maverick (2023) stated that ghost employee schemes are seldom the result of a single rogue staff member; rather, they typically involve coordinated collusion among multiple individuals within a department. Human resources officials, payroll administrators, and IT personnel often collaborate to fabricate employee records, manipulate databases, and authorise fraudulent payments. This level of coordination suggests the existence of entrenched fraud syndicates operating systematically within the state apparatus. These groups frequently exploit insider knowledge of system vulnerabilities and may safeguard themselves by forming alliances with supervisors or senior officials who turn a blind eye in exchange for a share of the illicit proceeds (Daily Maverick, 2023; Ryan, 2025).

Lack of Consequence Management

Thusi Matyana & Jili (2023) highlight that a lack of consequence management refers to the absence of accountability and repercussions for individuals who fail to fulfil their responsibilities or violate rules and regulations. The lack of consequence management in South Africa is a significant issue, characterised by corruption, mismanagement, and inadequate service delivery. This lack of accountability leads to a culture where officials or employees are not held accountable for their actions. The South African government is an example of this, with corruption, biased rule of law, limited public accountability, cadre deployment, political power struggles, and poor service delivery. The governance system operates under the shadow of insufficient consequences for officials found guilty of unethical conduct, allowing those who misuse or embezzle state funds to escape prosecution or accountability. This issue severely impacts local government, particularly municipalities, as it undermines the provisions of the Constitution and financial acts, such as the Municipal Finance Management Act and the Public Finance Management Act. Citizens become the primary victims of financial losses as they await effective service delivery.

The lack of consequence management leads to mismanagement of state funds and rampant corruption, with billions of rands lost each financial year due to irregular expenditure and corruption by those in authority positions (Thusi et al., 2023). Moyo et al. (2021) indicated that ghost employees and learners in South African schools are attributed to corruption among principals and incoherent policies. Poor record-keeping, particularly regarding admissions and attendance registers, is the root cause of malpractice. This lack of checks and balances by officials

and ethical behaviour among school principals raises concern within the Department of Basic Education. Ryan (2025) indicates that one of the most critical enablers of ghost employee fraud is the lack of effective consequence management. Disciplinary procedures are often slow, inconsistently applied, or absent. Very few cases result in prosecutions, and even fewer lead to asset recovery or dismissal of guilty officials. This failure to impose consequences sends a clear message that corrupt activities will go unpunished, thereby encouraging repeat offences and emboldening others to engage in similar schemes. Without a functioning enforcement and disciplinary system, anti-corruption policies become symbolic rather than preventive (Thusi et al., 2023).

Political-Administrative Interference

Matebese (2024) stated that "politics can significantly impact corporations in various ways, including through political patronage, instability, interference, and power dynamics. In Africa, political patronage, often disguised as a matter of trust, frequently leads to corruption as politicians appoint candidates for personal gain. Consequently, political patronage serves as a conduit for both political corruption and interference within organisations. This political interference can result in organisational corruption and a breakdown in corporate governance due to inadequate leadership. In Africa, numerous challenges and social issues persist, as many marginalised individuals are exploited and overlooked by politicians who actively engage in organisational operations for their benefit". Ngcamu & Mantzaris (2023) imply that political-administrative interference significantly contributes to ghost employee fraud in South Africa's public sector by creating an environment conducive to corruption and undermining accountability. This interference, often involving collusion between officials and external actors, allows fraudulent payroll entries to persist, diverting public funds. Political interference in state affairs negatively impacted government institutions, as corrupt undertakings by remorseless politicians increased. For example, in some cases, ghost employees are not created solely for financial gain, but also for political advantage. Employment records may be manipulated to generate illicit income streams used to fund political activities or to reward party loyalists with unearned salaries. This reflects the influence of political patronage networks embedded within state institutions. This phenomenon is described by former Public Protector Thuli Madonsela (2016) as "state capture from within." These networks undermine meritocracy and transparency by using public payrolls as tools of political control, further weakening administrative integrity and institutional autonomy (Madonsela, 2016; Matebese, 2024).

4.3. Impacts of Ghost Employees' Fraud on the Economy: Where Are They Going?

This section explores the impact of ghost employees' fraud in South African government departments. Mbuh et al. (2020:4) indicated that "irrespective of the negative impacts of ghost employees on the economy, the ghost employee has positive benefits on the economic welfare of the perpetrator. So, perpetrators of ghost employee schemes are killing the economy for their personal gain". The impacts of ghost employees' fraud are outlined below:

It causes financial loss through fraudulent payments;
It erodes public trust and confidence;
It hinders economic development;
It increases the rate of unemployment, especially for graduate youth;
It exacerbates poverty;
It damages the global reputation and trustworthiness for investment.
It shows a persistent lack of accountability and oversight;
Public administration becomes politicised;

And it hinders the provision of service delivery to the citizen (Akeem, 2016; Mbuh et al., 2020; Mamokhere & Meyer, 2023; Ryan, 2025; Minnaar, 2025)

AGSA (2014) stated that ghost employees have significant detrimental effects on the economy, primarily by draining valuable financial resources from government budgets. The discovery of thousands of these fictitious workers, such as the over 10,000 identified in the Limpopo Department of Education, reveals a rampant issue that costs millions annually. Minnaar (2025) further stated that this deviation of funds not only reduces the fiscal capacity for essential services like health, education, and policing but also diminishes public trust in governmental institutions. Over time, the normalisation of such fraud can lead to institutional erosion, as it hampers efforts at reform and breeds a culture of corruption, ultimately stifling economic growth and development (Akeem, 2016). Ardigó & Chêne (2017) imply that ghost employee fraud is bad for the financial resources that could be allocated for hiring skilled personnel, acquiring equipment, or maintaining infrastructure are instead misappropriated for fraudulent payments. This deviation hinders the state's ability to achieve development goals and provide essential services, particularly in underserved communities.

Furthermore, Ardigó & Chêne (2017) indicated that the detrimental impact of corruption on the quantity and quality of public services has significant implications for human development outcomes, as well as the well-being and quality of life of citizens. Studies indicate that corruption in service delivery negatively affects poverty rates, with the world's poor being disproportionately impacted by its consequences. Studies demonstrate that low-income households are more likely to pay bribes to access basic services compared to wealthier households. Consequently, corruption in service delivery exacerbates poverty and can undermine the effectiveness of development policies.

4.4. POSSIBLE MITIGATION STRATEGIES TO ERADICATE SYSTEMIC CORRUPTION IN SOUTH AFRICAN DEPARTMENTS

In eradicating systemic corruption in the form of ghost employee' fraud, this study proposes the following strategies:

- As indicated by the World Health Organisation (2020), the solution to the problem of ghost workers in the government department is to ensure that a combination of traditional methods and modern technology is used. This includes conducting physical audits and having employees report to work to verify their existence, as well as utilising artificial intelligence and other technological tools. Moreover, the World Health Organisation (2020) states that to enhance the detection and prevention of ghost workers, it is crucial to improve transparency and accountability in payroll processes. This can be achieved through better record-keeping practices, robust record management systems, and ongoing monitoring of human resources for health (HRH). Ryan (2025) and Minnaar (2025) indicate that addressing the issue of ghost employees could also create job opportunities for South Africans with minimal or no additional cost to the government.

- The study recommends that there is a need for the implementation of biometric payroll systems utilising data such as fingerprints and facial recognition to ensure that only physically verified individuals receive payments, enhancing security and accountability (Minnaar, 2025; Ekezue, 2025).

- The study proposes conducting routine and unannounced staff audits across departments serves as both a deterrent and a detection mechanism for potential issues.

- Ryan (2025) stated that a centralised government employee database, integrated with the National Treasury and the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), would further improve transparency in personnel management.

- There is a need to empower citizens in exposing fraud by strengthening legal protections for whistleblowers, and providing anonymous reporting mechanisms is crucial (Mamokhere & Meyer, 2023).

- Lastly, the study recommends that reinforcing accountability mechanisms through swift prosecution and effective consequence management is essential for restoring public confidence and reducing corruption.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the issue of ghost employees represents a critical challenge that undermines both the financial integrity and operational effectiveness of organisations, particularly within the South African public sector. To combat this problem, a multifaceted approach is essential, one that includes stringent internal controls, regular audits, and a cultural shift toward accountability. By fostering a commitment to transparency and ethical practices, organisations can not only safeguard their financial resources but also play a pivotal role in restoring public trust in governance. Ultimately, addressing the prevalence of ghost employees is vital for ensuring the long-term stability and integrity of organisational systems. The contribution of this qualitative study lies in its comprehensive examination of ghost employees as a manifestation of systemic corruption in South African government departments, highlighting the significant economic consequences and the urgent need for reform. The study's limitations include its reliance on existing literature and official reports, which may not capture the full scope of the issue or the nuances of local contexts. Future research should encompass quantitative analyses to assess the prevalence of ghost employees more accurately, as well as case studies that explore successful interventions and best practices in combating this form of corruption, thereby providing actionable insights for policymakers.

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