

Ghost Employees

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What connects 30,000 civil servants in Mozambique, 25,000 in Cameroon, 16,000 in Tanzania and 12,000 in Kenya? Just one thing: they did not exist. Over the last five years, all such groupings were identified as fraudulently sitting on the assorted government payrolls and accounting for millions of dollars in deliberate or mistaken lost revenue. These ‘ghost workers’ caused incalculable damage for the systems



and countries in which they sat – but also point to a wider problem, not restricted to the public sector, of the dangers caused by transparency measures that are inadequate or non-existent.

A ghost worker can be the creation of a genuine civil servant or similar, realising that they can create a fictional persona (or manipulate an existing retired/deceased one) and siphon off the extra wages, or to use as a front for the performance of other corrupt actions to add anonymity or credulity for their own behalf. The more ‘workers’ there are in a department, the greater the budget there tends to be, so this approach is almost guaranteed to bear fruit. Moreover, it is particularly true in the developing nations where this technique holds the greatest sway that the systems are either insufficient to monitor the veracity of every detail put through the computer or are entirely controlled by those in whose best interests it is to allow the army of ghosts to continue, ironically, to exist.

It may seem that we are being unduly harsh on Africa, but it is unfortunately and undeniably true that all the factors are in place across the continent for ghost workers to flourish. Inbuilt corruption and cronyism across all levels of government, inadequate resources to verify the scope and scale of the problem, and weak systemic measures to counter it. Indeed, the finest expression of the practice was seen in the Congo in 2007: Andre Kasongo Ilunga was appointed as Foreign Trade Minister in the country’s first ever democratically elected government, before being found to be the fictional creation of a coalition party leader. Whether this is emblematic of knowing negligence or stunning incompetence is up to the individual reader – but it proves that the practice, and the problems it brings, goes all the way to the top.

The consequences for the private sector – anywhere in the world – are immediate. Awarding a contract or partnership to a local firm based on a significant workforce, only to find out that much of that workforce does not exist, is worsened only by not finding that out. Alternatively, discovering that the relevant Minister or employee with which you are transacting a major deal, is comfortable with committing fraud small or large so long as the money keeps rolling in for his own benefit, would cause you to question the integrity of that party in all respects.

It can also be argued that there is a more perennial type of ghost: one who genuinely does exist and has a role within the company, but to whom the word ‘work’ can apply only in the loosest sense. Consider the case of a local representative who professes to commit his time to you, but either lies about his level of expertise or activity; or someone who gets a job based on a vastly inflated CV (that nobody bothered to check) and then proceeds to disguise this fact through application of what Sir Humphrey Appleby would call ‘*masterly inactivity*’. Each are ghosts, for all the value that they bring to the company compared to the financial outlay, and the reputational/economic damage done by any public or private sector ghost will certainly haunt companies looking to conduct genuine work. Ironically, there is nothing about these ghosts that is transparent.

What chance is there that these particular ghosts can be exorcised? Better systems & record-keeping would be a start, as well as a change in the prevailing attitude that all because you can get away with something, you should. But in truth, no matter how rigorous or clean the system is claimed to be, you will always find the occasional bad actor willing to exploit it, whether that be with one non-existent worker or one thousand. The best solution is, as always, to apply proper due diligence and investigative procedures to catch these ghosts before they can haunt you. After all, given a choice between finding out the truth, or doing nothing... who you gonna call?

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