RECORDS MANAGEMENT

National Archives and Records Administration's Acquisition of Major System Faces Risks

Why GAO Did This Study

Increasingly, government records involve documents that are electronically created and stored. In support of its mission to manage and archive these records and ensure access to the "essential evidence" that they contain, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is acquiring an advanced Electronic Records Archives (ERA). GAO was asked to determine, among other things, how the ERA program's system acquisition policies, plans, and practices conform to industry standards and how well NARA is meeting the ERA program's cost and schedule.

What GAO Recommends

To reduce the risks associated with NARA's efforts to design and acquire ERA, GAO recommends that the U.S. Archivist direct the NARA Chief Information Officer to take a range of actions, including revising key planning documents and developing a schedule that is based on a comprehensive work breakdown structure (including associated costs and other resources).

In comments on the draft report, the Archivist of the United States accepted our recommendations and provided an update on NARA's efforts to implement them. The Archivist also provided additional information on the ERA acquisition schedule.
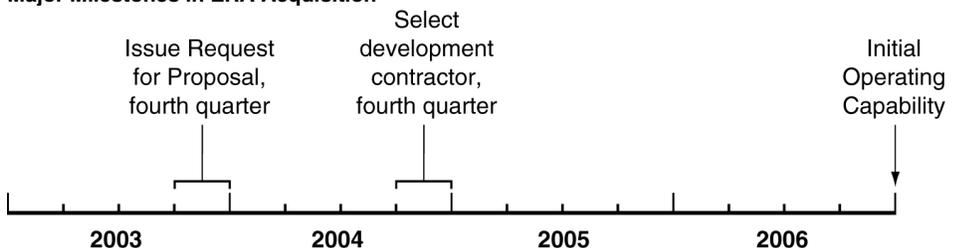
What GAO Found

The ERA program's acquisition policies, plans, and practices do not consistently conform to industry standards. In developing the plans and policies to guide its acquisition of the ERA system, NARA elected to follow recognized industry standards set forth by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE). However, key policy and planning documents are missing elements that are required by the standards. For example, one key document is the concept of operations, which should describe the characteristics of a proposed system from the users' viewpoint. The *ERA Concept of Operations* does not include several key elements required by the IEEE standard, including a complete description of the proposed system. Because these policy and planning documents form the basis of the acquisition, such shortcomings could result in serious long-term risks to the cost, schedule, and performance of the ERA program.

NARA cannot adequately track the cost and schedule of the ERA program. A comprehensive schedule with an appropriate work breakdown structure is a prerequisite to program tracking, as it allows managers to measure how well the program is achieving its cost and schedule goals. To achieve upcoming major milestones (some of which are shown in the figure), the program must successfully complete a complex series of tasks. However, the program schedule omits significant tasks and activities; for example, it does not include the process to reengineer the agency's life cycle business processes, which will be crucial to defining requirements. In addition, the schedule lacks a work breakdown structure, which would allow accurate estimates of the resources and time required for each work activity. If NARA cannot track how well the program is meeting cost and schedule, the risk is increased that funds may not be used efficiently or effectively, quality problems may limit the usefulness of the resulting system, and the system may not be delivered according to established milestones.

Major Milestones in ERA Acquisition

Issue Request for Proposal, fourth quarter

Select development contractor, fourth quarter

Initial Operating Capability

2003   2004   2005   2006

Source: NARA.