



United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Information Management and
Technology Division

B-252263

February 26, 1993

Mr. Reed Phillips, Jr.
Director for Information
Resources Management
Department of Commerce



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Dear Mr. Phillips:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that we are terminating our review of information resources management (IRM) at the Department of Commerce. Our recently completed work concentrated on the operations of the central Office of Information Resources Management (OIRM). Because much of the IRM function is delegated to the various bureaus within Commerce, we believe a thorough IRM evaluation should include a review of IRM activities at each bureau. Such a review would require more resources than we can commit at this time.

During our work we interviewed program managers, system users, and IRM staff at Commerce headquarters and at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; the Bureaus of Census, Economic Analysis, and Export Administration; and the International Trade Administration. Staff at each level believe that your office has helped improve the acquisition of information resources. We identified three areas, however, that need improvement. A discussion of these areas follows.

First, while OIRM devotes a great deal of attention to information technology planning and acquisition, it does not oversee systems after their implementation, nor does it play a proactive role in promoting a centralized approach to meeting information systems requirements. Because of the lack of oversight, the headquarters office does not keep track of problems that occur after a system is implemented--the first step toward preventing repetition of those problems in the future. Also, OIRM has not taken a proactive role in improving information technology. While your office reacts to information technology proposals submitted by the bureaus, it does not actively promote improvements. Because Commerce is composed of bureaus with distinctly different missions, the headquarters OIRM is in a unique position to

GAO/IMTEC-93-21R, COMMERCE: Information Management

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B-252263

encourage centralized approaches to meeting common information technology requirements, such as the purchase of personal computers or local area networks.

Second, OIRM does not have a tracking system to monitor the progress and impact of information technology plans, requirements initiatives, and acquisitions. Your office has tried to implement a tracking system, but has not been successful. Currently, OIRM relies on paper files and individual memories for tracking these efforts and the recommended changes to them. The absence of a tracking system places an extra burden on the staff in assembling data and statistics for internal management use. OIRM cannot readily determine such things as the number of cases handled, or the status, impact, and effectiveness of the reviews it performs of information technology plans and requirements initiatives.

Third, while a process exists to link information technology planning with budget decisions, this process is informal. Commerce has a long-standing mechanism for comparing budget requests with information technology plans. However, the information technology plans submitted for fiscal year 1993 have not been approved, even though the associated budget was approved and implemented. In the past few years, approval of the information technology plans has occurred months after the fiscal year began. An OIRM official said that oral comments on the information technology plans are given before the budget is officially submitted, but no formal records are kept of this informal process. In order for the information technology plans to help Commerce make decisions, they must be approved before the budget is approved. Otherwise, the budget drives the information technology plan.

We hope these comments will be useful in your continuing efforts to improve IRM at Commerce. If you have any questions, please contact me or Nancy Simmons, Assistant Director, at (202) 512-6406.

Sincerely yours,



Jack L. Brock, Jr.
Director, Government Information
and Financial Management

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