

GAO Answers the Question: What's in a Name?

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After 83 years, the General Accounting Office has changed its name to the Government Accountability Office. Some might wonder why GAO felt a need to tinker with an institutional identity so strongly associated with government economy, efficiency, and effectiveness. But our old name, as familiar and reassuring as it was, had not kept pace with GAO's evolving role in government. The truth is that "accounting" has never been our chief mission.

Stereotypes, however, can be hard to shake. Some college students we were trying to recruit mistakenly assumed that you needed an accounting degree to work at GAO. New members of Congress, cabinet-level officials, and prominent journalists have, because of our name, thought that GAO's main job was to keep the government's books. In fact, a recent crossword puzzle in *The Washington Post* asked for a three-letter term describing a GAO employee; the answer was "CPA."

In fairness, GAO did primarily scrutinize government vouchers and receipts in its early years. The days of accountants in green eyeshades, however, are long gone. Although GAO does serve as the lead auditor of the U.S. government's consolidated financial statements, financial audits are only about 15 percent of GAO's current workload. Most of the agency's work involves program evaluations, policy analyses, and legal opinions and decisions on a broad range of government programs and activities both at home and abroad.

The scope of GAO's work today includes virtually everything the federal government is doing or thinking about doing anywhere in the world. For example, GAO staff have been in Iraq recently, looking at everything from military logistics to contracting costs to the U.N.'s oil-for-food program. GAO has become a modern, multidisciplinary professional services organization whose 3,200 employees include economists, social scientists, engineers, attorneys, actuaries, and computer experts as well as specialists in areas from health care to homeland security.

Today, most GAO blue-cover reports go beyond the question of whether federal funds are being spent appropriately to ask whether federal programs and policies are meeting their objectives and the needs of society. GAO looks at the results that departments and agencies are getting with the taxpayer dollars they receive. As a strong advocate for truth and transparency in government operations, GAO is committed to ensuring that recent accountability failures, such as Enron and Worldcom, are not repeated in the public sector. To that end, public reporting of our work is vital; virtually every GAO report and congressional testimony is posted on the Internet on the day that it is issued.

The modern GAO believes it is important to provide the public with an accurate, fair, and balanced picture of government today. Beyond simply pointing out what is wrong with

government, GAO also reports on federal programs and policies that are working well and acknowledges progress and improvements. GAO regularly consults with lawmakers and agency heads on ways to make government work better, from adopting best practices to consolidating or eliminating redundant federal programs.

In a city full of interest groups with competing agendas, GAO's strength is its ability to provide Congress with professional, objective, fact-based, nonpartisan, and non-ideological information when it is needed. At GAO, our independence and integrity is crucial. To begin with, our location in the legislative branch gives us some distance from the executive branch agencies we audit and oversee. Moreover, the head of GAO serves a 15-year term, which gives the agency a continuity of leadership that is rare in the federal government. As a result, GAO and its chief, the Comptroller General, can afford to take a long-term view and address a range of complex and sometimes controversial issues. GAO's independence is further safeguarded by the fact that its workforce consists of career civil servants hired on the basis of their knowledge, skill, and ability.

Although much of our work reviews the effectiveness of day-to-day government operations, GAO also alerts policymakers and the public to emerging problems with serious national implications—before they reach crisis proportions. GAO is now keeping a close eye on several long-term challenges whose impact has yet to be fully felt, including the government's worsening financial situation and the mounting challenges from Social Security, health care, and the war on terrorism. GAO takes seriously its responsibility to speak out on these issues.

Today's GAO is committed to leading by example, so holding itself accountable for results is essential. Since 2000, GAO has issued an annual report that explains what the agency has accomplished with its resources and what it expects to achieve in the coming year. For example, our work last year generated \$35.4 billion in measurable financial benefits—a \$78 return on every dollar invested in GAO.

We also reported significant non-financial accomplishments, such as strengthening security at federal buildings and improving the quality of care at the nation's nursing homes. Last year, we made more than 2,000 specific recommendations to improve government operations. In recent years, about four out of five GAO recommendations have been implemented within four years. In our view, this type of straightforward agency performance measurement and cost/benefit reporting needs to become standard throughout government.

A name change is a small step, but it does speak to a larger issue: the need to transform what the federal government does and how it does business to ensure its relevance for the 21st century. At today's GAO, measuring the government's performance and holding it accountable for results is central to who we are and what we do. We continue to believe that the public deserves the facts on all aspects of government operations—from spending to policy making. After all, representative government depends on an informed electorate.

I am not suggesting that agencies need to change their names--but most of them do need to come to grips with the fact that some of their most basic policies, processes, and procedures are years out of date. We at GAO have a proud history, but we are not defined solely by our past. We will still be known as GAO, but our new name will make clear that our first priority is to improve the performance of the federal government and ensure its accountability to Congress and the American people.

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