

GAO

Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee  
on Oversight of Government  
Management, the Federal Workforce, and  
the District of Columbia, Committee on  
Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

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January 2004

# HUMAN CAPITAL

## Selected Agencies' Experiences and Lessons Learned in Designing Training and Development Programs



G A O

Accountability \* Integrity \* Reliability

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Highlights of [GAO-04-291](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

Effective training and development programs are an integral part of a learning environment, helping improve federal workforce performance in achieving agency results. Therefore, in this report GAO was asked to identify examples of selected federal agencies' experiences and some of the key lessons they have learned in designing their training and development programs. This work focused on ways that these agencies (1) assessed agency skills gaps and identified training needs, (2) developed strategies and solutions for these training and development needs, and (3) determined methods to evaluate the effectiveness of training and development programs.

GAO worked with five agencies to identify their experiences and lessons learned: the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Department of Defense; Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Department of the Interior (Interior); Internal Revenue Service (IRS), Department of the Treasury; the Office of Personnel Management (OPM); and Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Agency officials provided information during interviews and furnished supporting documentation for analysis and review.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-291](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-291).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact George Stalcup at (202) 512-6806 or [stalcupg@gao.gov](mailto:stalcupg@gao.gov).

## HUMAN CAPITAL

# Selected Agencies' Experiences and Lessons Learned in Designing Training and Development Programs

## What GAO Found

GAO identified important lessons learned from five federal agencies' experiences in designing training and development programs for their employees that could be useful to other agencies facing similar challenges. These lessons learned are related to the following three areas.

### Assessing Agency Skill Requirements and Identifying Training Needs

The agencies used a variety of approaches to assess current and future skill requirements, such as implementing workforce planning models and conducting knowledge and skills inventories. Generally, the agencies are transitioning to more comprehensive approaches. One of the lessons learned was to involve stakeholders and benchmark with others to identify critical skills and competencies and related training needs. For example, IRS officials believed they needed a leadership competency model directly based on the work of their agency's business units. To develop a comprehensive model, they interviewed top IRS leaders and benchmarked with leading practices in the public and private sector.

### Developing Strategies and Solutions for Training Needs

The agencies considered a mixture of delivery mechanisms, as well as potential sources for training and development opportunities. However, projecting costs and benefits of proposed training and development programs presented challenges for them. The agencies usually developed broad information on anticipated benefits and expected costs of potential investments, although often without tying benefits to specific performance improvements or considering all costs. One of the lessons learned was to establish mechanisms to avoid duplication or inconsistencies. Education Service Representatives in each regional VHA network, for example, coordinate training and development programs with headquarters—sharing information about successful practices and identifying areas where coordination is needed.

### Determining Methods for Evaluating Training Programs

Overall, the agencies relied primarily on participants' end-of-course evaluations, but they are beginning to use more comprehensive evaluation approaches, including limited use of return-on-investment analysis techniques. One of the lessons learned is to plan for the use of multiple data types and sources in order to attain a balanced assessment once the course is implemented. For example, USACE's training center incorporated pre- and post-tests on over 90 percent of its courses, as well as approaches to collect participants' and course managers' feedback, as part of the design.

Four of the five agencies provided comments on a draft of this report. Interior and VA said that they generally agreed with the report's findings regarding their respective agencies. IRS and OPM said that they appreciated the opportunity to be included in the report and to share information on training activities. USACE provided no comments on the draft report.

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

January 30, 2004

The Honorable George V. Voinovich  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,  
the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia  
Committee on Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

To effectively address the nation's most urgent priorities and take advantage of emerging opportunities, federal agencies need to continue to build their fundamental capabilities to carry out their work in an environment that is increasingly complex and rapidly changing. To build their capacity, agencies should invest resources wisely to ensure that their employees have the information, skills, and competencies they need to succeed. As you are well aware, these investments must include training and development efforts to continuously enhance the skills and competencies of the federal workforce and improve the quality of agencies' results.

As agreed with your office, this report provides information on selected federal agencies' experiences and lessons learned in key aspects of designing training and development programs for their employees. Specifically, we focused on the agencies' experiences and lessons learned related to

- assessing current and future agency skill and competency requirements and identifying related training and development needs,
- developing strategies and solutions for training and development needs, and
- determining methods to evaluate the effectiveness of training and development programs.

For this review, lessons learned were defined as knowledge that could be applied in the future that the agencies gained through either positive or negative experiences. The experiences and lessons learned from the five agencies we reviewed may well provide some valuable ideas and useful approaches that could be adopted by other federal agencies as they attempt

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to address ongoing training and development challenges—particularly those related to the elements within the training process that relate to design and development.

To address these issues and as agreed with your office, we focused our review on five federal agencies: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Department of Defense; Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Department of the Interior (Interior); Internal Revenue Service (IRS), Department of the Treasury; Office of Personnel Management (OPM); and Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). At the headquarters of the five agencies—and in some field locations—we collected and reviewed documents on the agencies’ training and development efforts and interviewed officials from the agencies’ human capital and training organizations, as well as assorted program offices. We selected the five agencies for various reasons, including your office’s interests, the diversity of employee occupations within the agency, and reported innovative approaches for training and developing their employees. This agency selection process was not designed to identify examples that could be considered representative of all training and development efforts at the five agencies or the federal government as a whole. Furthermore, in citing examples that relate to the lessons learned on the design of training, we did not assess the effectiveness of these training programs and practices. Rather, we attempted to highlight some of the experiences and lessons that the agencies found helped them move forward in improving their training and development programs. Federal agencies’ training and development strategies, and how they are designed to operate in conjunction with other strategies to improve individual and organizational performance, continue to change and evolve.

We conducted our review from August 2002 through November 2003 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. See appendix I for additional information on our objective, scope, and methodology.

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## Results in Brief

Officials from the five agencies in our review recognized the importance of assessing current and future agency skill and competency requirements to identify related workforce training needs. The agencies used several approaches to design training and development programs that focused on the skills and competencies their assessments indicated needed enhanced attention. The officials emphasized that agencies are transitioning to more formal and comprehensive planning approaches to assess skill and

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competency requirements and identify related training and development needs—primarily as part of broader efforts to incorporate workforce planning into ongoing strategic planning and budgeting processes focused on achieving results. The following are lessons learned identified during this review related to assessing skill and competency requirements and identifying training needs.

- Involve key stakeholders and benchmark with other organizations when identifying skills and competencies to help ensure that training and development programs are aligned with current and emerging needs and business practices.
- Analyze existing agency data on employees' skills and competencies and information from performance appraisals to help identify skills and competencies that need to be addressed throughout the agency as well as on an individual basis.
- Link the agency's workforce planning efforts with training needs assessments to ensure consistency and enhance strategic alignment.
- Consider the training needs of staff from other organizations that will likely use the agency's training programs or facilities to effectively leverage training investments and meet diverse needs.

These agencies developed a wide range of strategies and solutions to improve performance through designing training and development programs for their employees. Officials told us they considered a mixture of both on-the-job and other developmental programs and contemplated an assortment of mechanisms for delivering the training as well as potential sources for the learning need. Agency officials have found projecting costs and benefits of proposed training and development programs to be very challenging. Although they sometimes developed broad information on anticipated benefits and expected costs, this often did not involve tying anticipated benefits to specific performance improvements or considering all related costs. Our review identified the following lessons learned in developing strategies and solutions when designing agency training and development programs.

- Incorporate information on employees' various competency levels and job needs into the design of training and development programs to increase their relevancy and timeliness.

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- Assess options for using other organizations' course content, staff, services, or facilities when designing a new training and development program in order to develop efficient and cost-effective strategies.
  - Establish mechanisms and controls to avoid unnecessary duplication or inconsistency within and across agencies' training efforts.
  - Develop and use criteria for determining the optimal mix of delivery mechanisms to use in order to select the most effective approaches given each learning situation.
  - Ensure that employees have the needed equipment and technologies so that they can take maximum advantage of learning opportunities.
  - Plan early when developing integrated solutions that complement other planned and ongoing strategies to improve performance so that when implemented the strategies work effectively and are aligned to help achieve agency goals.
  - Plan for the direct participation of senior agency leaders and experienced staff in the delivery of training and development programs to increase buy-in and build support for organizational change.

Evaluating training programs is key to ensuring that training and development programs are effective. Overall, the five agencies relied primarily on standard end-of-course evaluations to obtain the participants' reaction to, and satisfaction with, a specific training course or learning opportunity. However, officials said that they have begun or are planning to use more comprehensive and sophisticated techniques for assessing the extent to which training and development programs increased employees' knowledge and skills and enhanced individual and organizational performance. These techniques included pre- and post-testing, tracking changes in individual and program performance, and some limited use of return-on-investment (ROI) analyses. The lessons agencies learned in designing methods to evaluate training and development programs included the following.

- Incorporate appropriate aspects of the evaluation approach when designing training and development programs by specifying what results are expected to better ensure the availability and use of quality performance data.



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- Consider new approaches for collecting and analyzing performance data with the aim of increasing the quality and quantity of training evaluation feedback.
  - Plan for the use of multiple data types and sources to provide a balanced approach in assessing the effectiveness of training and development programs.
  - Take into account all relevant factors for determining the costs of a training and development program to better ascertain whether it is cost-effective in relation to benefits achieved.

Four of the five selected agencies provided comments on a draft of this report. Interior and VA said that they generally agreed with the report's findings relating to their respective agencies. IRS said that it was honored to share some of its lessons learned with us for governmentwide dissemination. OPM said that it appreciated the opportunity to be included in the report and to share information on its training and development activities and programs. USACE informed us that it had no comments on our draft report.

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## Background

We recently issued an exposure draft of an assessment guide that introduces a framework for evaluating a federal agency's training and development efforts.<sup>1</sup> This assessment guide consists of a set of principles and key questions that federal agencies can use to ensure that their training and development investments are targeted strategically and are not wasted on efforts that are irrelevant, duplicative, or ineffective. As detailed in our assessment guide, the training and development process can loosely be segmented into four broad, interrelated components: (1) planning/front-end analysis, (2) design/development, (3) implementation, and (4) evaluation. Figure 1 depicts an overview of this process along with the general relationships between the four components that help to produce a strategic approach to federal agencies' training and development efforts. Although these components can be discussed separately, they are not mutually exclusive and encompass subcomponents that may blend with one another. For instance, evaluation is an integral part of the

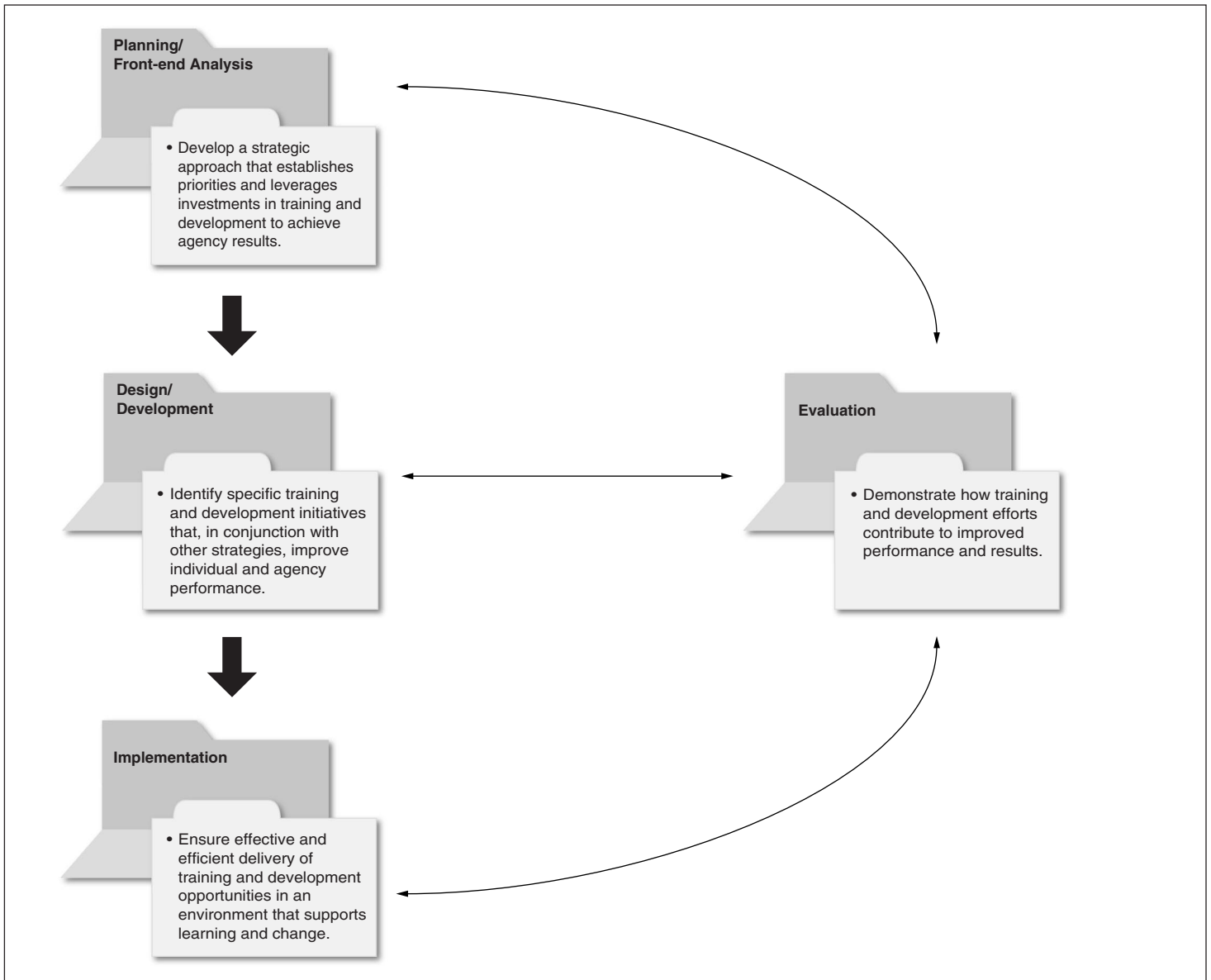
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<sup>1</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Human Capital: A Guide for Assessing Strategic Training and Development Efforts in the Federal Government - Exposure Draft*, GAO-03-893G (Washington, D.C.: July 2003).

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planning/front-end analysis as agencies strive to reach agreement up front on how the success of various strategies to improve performance, including training and development efforts, will be assessed. As noted in the assessment guide, agencies can build on lessons learned and performance data and feedback from previous experiences. This report can provide a starting point for agencies to use to build on the experiences and lessons learned by the five agencies we reviewed as part of their efforts to design and develop training and development programs. (See app. II for a description of the five agencies included in this study.)

**Figure 1: Four Components of a Strategic Training and Development Process**



Source: GAO.

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Our assessment guide also summarizes our observations on the core characteristics that make a training and development process effective and strategically focused on achieving results. These eight core characteristics are described in more detail in appendix III, and include

- strategic alignment,
- leadership commitment and communication,
- stakeholder involvement,
- accountability and recognition,
- effective resource allocation,
- partnerships and learning from others,
- data quality assurance, and
- continuous performance improvement.

A concerted effort to integrate these core characteristics can further an agency's efforts to continually improve its training and development process.

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## Agencies Used Varied Approaches in Assessing Skills and Competencies and Identifying Related Training Needs

Federal agencies face diverse challenges in their efforts to identify and measure the skills and competencies that their employees must possess to support missions and goals. Officials from the five agencies in our review recognized the importance of assessing the need for specific skills and competencies now and in the future in order to identify related workforce training needs. These agencies generally focused on the desired performance of the agency and its employees, determined the difference between the desired and actual skill levels, and attempted to identify the key factors contributing to performance, including the need for enhanced workforce competencies. Officials used a variety of approaches and tools to assist in determining the human capital skills and competencies that are critical to achieving their long-term goals.

An agency's ultimate goal in undertaking training and development efforts is, of course, to optimize employee and organizational performance. To help ensure that each training program is linked to improving individual

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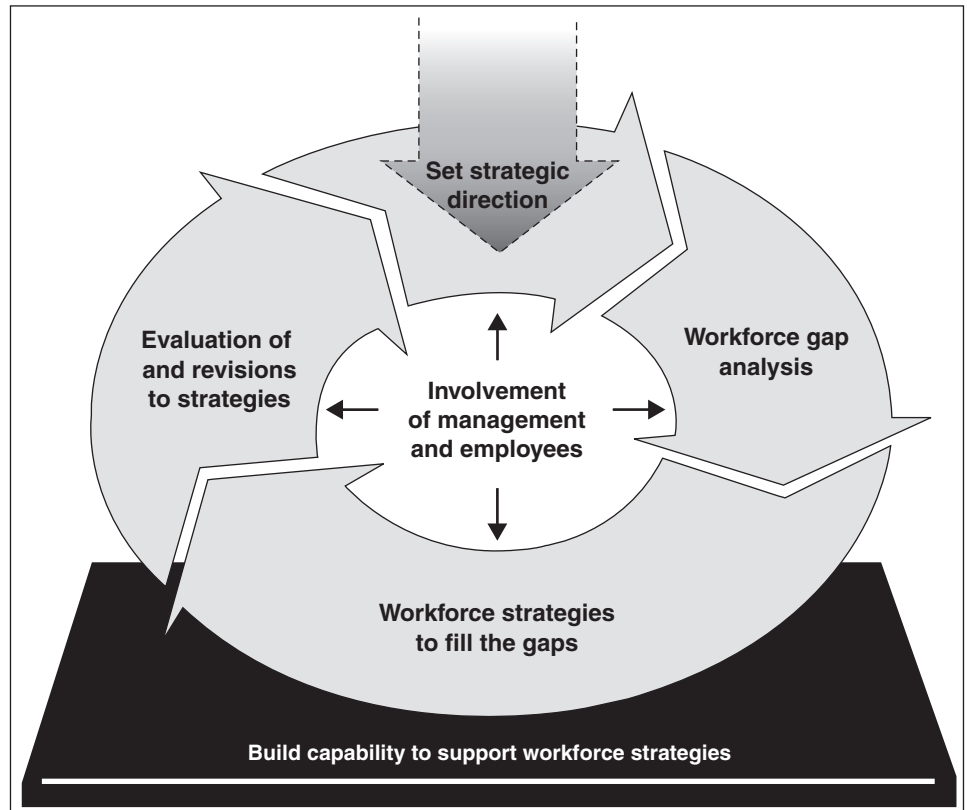
and agency performance, agencies first need to analyze their strategic and performance goals so that they can determine where training and development can most effectively enhance goal achievement.

Organizations can evaluate the extent to which human capital approaches support their accomplishment of current, emerging, and future strategic goals through the use of workforce planning. Workforce planning focuses on determining the skills and competencies needed now and in the future to meet the agency's goals; identifying the current and projected level of the skills and competencies of the workforce; and crafting strategies for acquiring, developing, and retaining people to address any identified needs. These needs include the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for the agency to pursue its current and future mission as well as the size of the workforce and its deployment across the organization. After identifying the skills and competencies that employees need now or in the future, agencies must tackle the challenge of determining what combination of strategies to use, such as hiring new employees with needed skills and competencies, relying on outsourcing, and/or enhancing employees' skills and competencies through training and development. While agencies' approaches to workforce planning will vary, we have identified the need for a strategic workforce planning process to ensure that each agency's human capital program capitalizes on its workforce's strengths and addresses related challenges in a manner that is clearly linked to achieving the agency's missions and goals.<sup>2</sup> Figure 2 presents a model of this strategic workforce planning process.

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, [GAO-04-039](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

**Figure 2: Strategic Workforce Planning Process**



Source: GAO.

The focus in this report is on the workforce strategies that involve the design of training and development programs.

## Agencies' Experiences in Assessing Skill and Competency Requirements and Identifying Training Needs

The five agencies used several approaches to design training and development programs that focused on skills and competencies their assessments indicated needed enhanced attention. One common approach that officials used to help identify training needs was interviewing or surveying managers, supervisors, and employees. Agencies also established councils and held conferences, made comparisons with leading organizations through benchmarking, and analyzed workforce data and trends.

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OPM's 2001 skills assessment, for example, relied on a survey of agency managers and supervisors.<sup>3</sup> Officials used the survey results to identify the most important occupational competencies needed to achieve OPM's mission, the level at which employees possessed those competencies, and the level at which they would be needed in the future. Their analysis identified minor gaps in the level of competencies needed for both current and future work in mission critical occupations. In addition, the analysis pointed out more serious developmental needs for OPM's retirement and insurance benefits specialists. These needs were related to the changing role of these specialists, who increasingly need to work more closely with clients in responding to complex issues.

Also in 2001, IRS established a workforce planning council consisting of senior management representatives from each of the agency's operating divisions. IRS officials told us that this council has become the primary vehicle for communicating workforce planning information among IRS's four operating divisions. At FWS, the human resources office hosted a 3-day workforce planning conference in 2002 to draw on the experience and expertise of agency personnel in identifying critical workforce issues for the agency for the next 3 to 5 years. Managers and program experts representing all eight major FWS program offices, seven field regions, and headquarters offices participated.

Agencies also compared their performance and needed skills and competencies with leading organizations through benchmarking. In August 2000, VHA commissioned an internal task force charged with developing a well-defined, comprehensive succession plan for the agency. The ideas garnered from benchmarking led to VHA establishing an expectation for agency leaders to help identify and train their successors. The task force's December 2001 report presented a comprehensive succession plan for VHA, and implementing a comprehensive leadership development program was one of the six major components of this plan.

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<sup>3</sup> In providing technical comments on a draft of this report, OPM noted that it conducted another skills assessment in late fiscal year 2003 to reflect its recent restructuring and new strategic priorities.

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Agency officials also analyzed workforce data to assess skills and help identify training needs. Generally, they collected information on employee demographics and retirement eligibility and used these data to project attrition and retirement rates. OPM officials, for example, collected and analyzed attrition and turnover data on the agency's senior executives along with the distribution of current executives by unit and projected retirements through 2010.<sup>4</sup> They also collected and analyzed data on hires, separations, and workforce diversity across the agency. As part of this analysis, officials assessed the agency's use of contractors and considered how sourcing alternatives could affect OPM's plans for hiring, training, and development.

Officials from the five agencies told us that they used a wide range of resources and tools to assess skills and competencies as part of identifying and designing needed training and development programs. They used workforce planning models; assessed the workforce in view of organizational, occupational, and unit-based competency standards; conducted knowledge and skills inventories; and evaluated job performance appraisals and information from individual development plans (IDP).<sup>5</sup> To identify needed executive competencies, for example, OPM used a five-step workforce planning model that it had developed in its role of providing human capital tools for use by other federal agencies (see fig. 3). The resulting analysis called for enhancing leadership development within OPM.

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<sup>4</sup> In previous work, we identified practices used by agencies in other countries to manage the succession of senior executives and other employees with critical skills. See *Human Capital: Insights for U.S. Agencies from Other Countries' Succession Planning and Management Initiatives*, GAO-03-914 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 15, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> An IDP is a written plan, cooperatively prepared by the employee and his or her supervisor, that outlines the steps the employee will take to develop knowledge, skills, and abilities in building on strengths and addressing weaknesses as he or she seeks to improve job performance and pursue career goals. These individual development plans are also known as personal development plans, personal training plans, and individual training plans.



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**Figure 3: OPM's Five-step Workforce Planning Process**

1. Set strategic direction to drive agency operations and define how the agency will know when and if it has succeeded.
2. Analyze the workforce, identify skill gaps, and conduct workforce analysis.
3. Develop a workforce action plan that lays out specific tasks and actions the agency needs to take in order to achieve the agency's human resources goals and objectives.
4. Implement the workforce action plan by executing the schedule that includes measurable workforce goals and milestones.
5. Monitor progress, evaluate success, and revise plan as needed.

Source: OPM.

Officials said that their agencies have transitioned, or are in the process of transitioning, to more comprehensive, consistent planning approaches. This transition is coming about as agencies attempt to institutionalize their workforce planning efforts as part of their ongoing strategic planning and budgeting processes. In 2002, FWS conducted its first formal, agencywide workforce planning process. Although FWS initially employed a contractor to help develop a permanent workforce planning process, it plans to continue to manage it in-house. This workforce planning process is to be implemented on a 2-year cycle that is integrated with the agency's strategic planning and budgeting processes.

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## Agencies' Lessons Learned in Assessing Skill and Competency Requirements and Identifying Training Needs

By considering the viewpoints of a range of stakeholders and candidly and openly assessing progress toward meeting their goals, agencies can help ensure that their strategic and annual performance planning processes adequately reflect current ideas, policies, and practices in the field. Agencies continue to integrate workforce planning into these other planning processes. It is important to note that a wide variety of strategies other than training and development are also available to agency leaders as they attempt to transform their cultures and operations.<sup>6</sup> Training and

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on key practices and implementation steps that can help agencies transform their cultures, see U.S. General Accounting Office, *Results-Oriented Cultures: Implementation Steps to Assist Mergers and Organizational Transformations*, GAO-03-669 (Washington, D.C.: July 2, 2003).

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development is not always the best solution—reengineering processes or other actions may be needed to build an environment that effectively supports performance. In addition, training and development strategies frequently need to be implemented in conjunction with other initiatives, given that the day-to-day environment and organizational culture may also need to change to enable employees to successfully use new skills or competencies on the job.

Our review identified four lessons learned by the agencies related to assessing skills and competencies to identify, focus, and prioritize training needs.

**Lesson learned: Involve key stakeholders and benchmark with other organizations when identifying skills and competencies to help ensure that training and development programs are aligned with current and emerging needs and business practices.**

Organizations in the private and public sectors have increasingly turned to developing competency models that outline behaviorally defined skills and competencies employees should possess and that can be tied directly to training and development plans and programs. We have found that an effective performance management system uses competencies to provide a fuller assessment of performance.<sup>7</sup>

*IRS involved key stakeholders and benchmarked with other organizations in developing its leadership competency model*

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Results-Oriented Cultures: Creating a Clear Linkage between Individual Performance and Organizational Success*, [GAO-03-488](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 14, 2003).

In working to build its leadership development program in the wake of the IRS Restructuring and Reform Act of 1998, IRS officials believed they needed a leadership competency model that was based directly on the work of IRS's business units. To identify the essential characteristics that enable IRS employees to function as effective leaders in the newly modernized agency, human capital specialists at IRS conducted behavioral interviews with 35 top IRS leaders in 1999, asking them to identify major successes and challenges during their careers. Using information gathered from these interviews, officials identified core management responsibilities and corresponding competencies required for leaders in IRS. With the assistance of a contractor, IRS validated the leadership competency model by comparing it against leading practices in the public and private sector and linking it to the mission and goals of the agency.<sup>8</sup> The resulting competency model now forms the basis for IRS's leadership development efforts, as well as how IRS selects, evaluates, and recognizes its leaders. Figure 4 shows a listing of IRS's five core management responsibilities and the 21 corresponding leadership competencies.

**Figure 4: IRS's Core Management Responsibilities and Leadership Competencies**

Leadership	Employee satisfaction	Customer satisfaction	Business results	Equal employment opportunity (EEO) and diversity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adaptability</li> <li>• <i>Communication</i></li> <li>• Decisiveness</li> <li>• <i>Integrity/honesty</i></li> <li>• Service motivation</li> <li>• Strategic thinking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continual learning</li> <li>• <i>Developing others</i></li> <li>• <i>Diversity awareness</i></li> <li>• <i>Group leadership</i></li> <li>• Teamwork</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer focus</li> <li>• Entrepreneurship</li> <li>• External awareness</li> <li>• <i>Influencing/ negotiating</i></li> <li>• <i>Partnering</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achievement orientation</li> <li>• Business acumen</li> <li>• Political savvy</li> <li>• <i>Problem solving</i></li> <li>• Technical credibility</li> </ul>	Supporting competencies <sup>a</sup>

Source: IRS.

<sup>a</sup>Italicized competencies support the "EEO and diversity" responsibility.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on performance management of senior executives at IRS, see U.S. General Accounting Office, *Results-Oriented Cultures: Using Balanced Expectations to Manage Senior Executive Performance*, GAO-02-966 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2002).

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*VHA benchmarked with other organizations and used a pilot test in developing its high performance development model*

VHA conducted an extensive literature search and benchmarked with several leading private sector firms (including Bell South, Coca-Cola, and Motorola) to provide a foundation for its effort to create a new competency model for VHA employees. VHA used this information in developing its high performance development model, which was implemented throughout the department in 2002. This model consists of eight core competencies and related performance tools that represent the major skills and competencies that employees need to fulfill VHA's mission. The model was designed to serve as a framework for identifying and developing future leaders, as well as to enhance development of VHA's entire workforce. VHA said that using this model helped more effectively align training and development programs with agency priorities. According to VHA, the fact that the core competencies apply to all levels and functions within the agency helps ensure alignment within and between organizational units and is a key component in motivating sustained and improved performance. VHA also uses the model on an individual employee basis as a process for identifying specific developmental needs. Figure 5 lists the eight core competencies in VHA's high performance development model.

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**Figure 5: Competencies in VHA's High Performance Development Model**

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|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Personal mastery</li><li>• Interpersonal effectiveness</li><li>• Flexibility and adaptability</li><li>• Systems thinking</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Technical skills</li><li>• Customer service</li><li>• Creative thinking</li><li>• Organizational stewardship</li></ul> |
|--|--|

Source: VHA.

**Lesson learned: Analyze existing agency data on individual employee's skills and competencies and information from performance appraisals to help identify skills and competencies that need to be addressed throughout the agency as well as on an individual basis.**

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To obtain a unit- or agencywide perspective of skills and competencies, some agencies such as USACE and IRS have explored new ways of aggregating data from tools that are primarily focused on individual employees, such as IDPs, performance assessments, and 360-degree feedback instruments.<sup>9</sup> Officials from these agencies told us that this information helped them discern a clearer picture of the overall strengths and weaknesses of their employees and offered direction in planning and designing training and development programs to help focus efforts to enhance skills and competencies throughout the agency.

*USACE's automated training management program provides a Web-enabled integrated database*

According to USACE officials, using an automated training management program has allowed managers to identify divisionwide gaps in workforce skills and competencies. Using this system (currently in four of USACE's eight divisions) employees prepare an IDP assessing their knowledge, skills, and abilities in relation to a series of mission essential tasks. With supervisory guidance, each task is identified as critical, important, or beneficial and employees indicate whether they have received adequate, partial, or no training in that area. With this assessment as a guide, the supervisor and employee can consult the system's built-in course catalog to select internal or external training to enhance the employee's development. In addition, the system also has the capability of aggregating data. USACE officials said that this capability provides a simple method for division managers to obtain a picture of the level of skills and competencies in their workforce. This information informs decisions on training priorities and helps managers determine the most efficient use of available resources.

*IRS aggregated data from 360-degree feedback instruments to help identify training needs*

To assess the progress and developmental needs of leaders within IRS, the agency's leadership development office recently aggregated and analyzed multiyear data from the 360-degree performance assessments of IRS managers. This analysis helped to show areas of strength and weakness in

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<sup>9</sup> The 360-degree feedback process is designed to provide a manager direct input from various sources—supervisor, peers, customers, and subordinates—and to compare those results to a self-evaluation. With this feedback, managers can identify action items and incorporate them into their individual performance plans.

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skills and competencies across the agency's managerial ranks. The director of leadership and organizational effectiveness at IRS said that, in the past, the agency did not sufficiently assist managers in effectively using 360-degree feedback they received. However, he said that IRS now emphasizes the importance of using 360-degree feedback data, both on an organizational and individual basis, to focus on strengths in developing key leadership competencies. IRS's Extraordinary Leader Program involves designing unique developmental approaches to help managers become more effective leaders. Using results of the manager's 360-degree assessment, IRS creates a customized leadership development program focusing first on correcting any "fatal flaw" weaknesses and then building on the manager's demonstrated strengths in areas that IRS has identified as key to providing effective leadership within its organizational culture and operating environment.

**Lesson learned: Link the agency's workforce planning efforts with training needs assessments to ensure consistency and enhance strategic alignment.**

The agencies' training and development organizations had a range of responsibilities, including designing training and development programs based on strategic initiatives, soliciting input from stakeholders, and prioritizing and scheduling training based on strategic initiatives and stakeholder input. Generally, the training organization and agency stakeholders can work together more effectively when they better understand how each office or function within the agency contributes to achieving business goals. In some cases, this included efforts to link training needs assessments with the agency's overall workforce planning efforts. Officials told us that this linkage helped ensure that workforce plans developed by the agency's human capital office were consistent with training needs assessments done by the agency's training and development organization.

*FWS involved key internal stakeholders in its planning processes*

When assessing workforce skills and competencies, FWS officials worked to ensure that the agency's workforce plan was linked with a training needs assessment done by its training center. The workforce planning effort identified broad competencies needed across the agency's workforce while the training needs assessment identified the types of training courses to develop skills and competencies within agency units and occupations. Officials said that they viewed the training needs assessment as a tool that

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was useful in refining the agency's workforce plan and in prioritizing and budgeting for the development and delivery of training. Both efforts involved key stakeholders from the human capital and training offices as well as other FWS units. In the future, officials said they will rely on the results of the agency's workforce planning efforts to directly serve as the agency's training needs assessment.

*USACE relies on its Learning Advisory Board and automated training management program to effectively link planning efforts*

USACE relies chiefly on the coordination activities of its Learning Advisory Board to ensure its workforce planning efforts and training needs assessments are effectively linked. USACE in 2001 formed the Learning Advisory Board, comprised of senior managers from across the agency, to review the adequacy of USACE's training and development and ensure that training is properly aligned with the agency's missions, goals, and plans. In addition, the four divisions that use the automated training management program can also rely on data from that system to assess training needs. This system allows managers to compare information on individuals' skills and competencies with workforce planning results from within the division and across the agency. According to USACE officials, this systematic comparison more closely links workforce planning and training needs assessments to the essential mission-related operations.

**Lesson learned: Consider the training needs of staff from other organizations that will likely use the agency's training programs or facilities to effectively leverage training investments and meet diverse needs.**

When planning and designing training programs for its employees, FWS and USACE officials told us that they gained insight into the assessment of potential training solutions by considering the possible involvement of trainees from other organizations. In some instances, for example, it would not have been cost-effective to design, develop, and deliver a training effort for a small number of employees or occupations. However, officials' determinations that other agencies or organizations also needed similar training provided the critical mass needed to move forward. Officials said they found that partnering with other organizations helped make training efforts more cost effective to design, develop, and deliver.

*FWS's training center assessed training needs of possible participants from other Interior components*

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Officials from FWS's training center said that although they focus primarily on meeting the needs of FWS employees when planning and designing training, they also look at the training needs of other organizations, particularly other agencies within Interior. To aid in communication and coordination, agencies within the department designate employees to serve as liaisons between each of the Interior agencies and FWS's training center. These liaisons facilitate efforts to incorporate their agency's needs into the training center's plans and the design and delivery of training and development programs. According to agency officials, these liaisons help ensure that the center's courses remain current because they facilitate a dialogue between the various agencies. For example, a recent FWS course on wetland plant identification involved participants from FWS; U.S. Geological Survey, which is another Interior component; Natural Resources Conservation Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture; USACE; and three private sector firms.

*USACE's training center considers training needs of staff from other federal and state organizations*

Officials from USACE's training center told us that during the agency's annual training needs assessment, they assess the possible training demand from other organizations' employees in addition to identifying workforce development needs of units and offices within USACE. According to USACE, approximately 2,500 people each year—about 25 percent of the participants in the agency's training center programs—are from other federal and state organizations. Officials noted that the training center offers courses needed to obtain certifications for certain professional requirements. It offers courses accredited by several professional associations, including the National Society for Professional Engineers, the American Institute of Architects, and the International Association for Continuing Education and Training. USACE officials said that they would like to offer training to a greater number of employees from private sector firms; however, current law requires receipts for services provided to private individuals and organizations to be deposited into the general treasury as miscellaneous receipts.<sup>10</sup> USACE officials said that this requirement hampers the ability of USACE's training center to keep funds it could generate to further invest in its training programs. However, when agencies are required to return receipts for services to the Treasury, the

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<sup>10</sup> 31 U.S.C. 3302.



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Congress is preserving its oversight and control over the programs generating the fees.

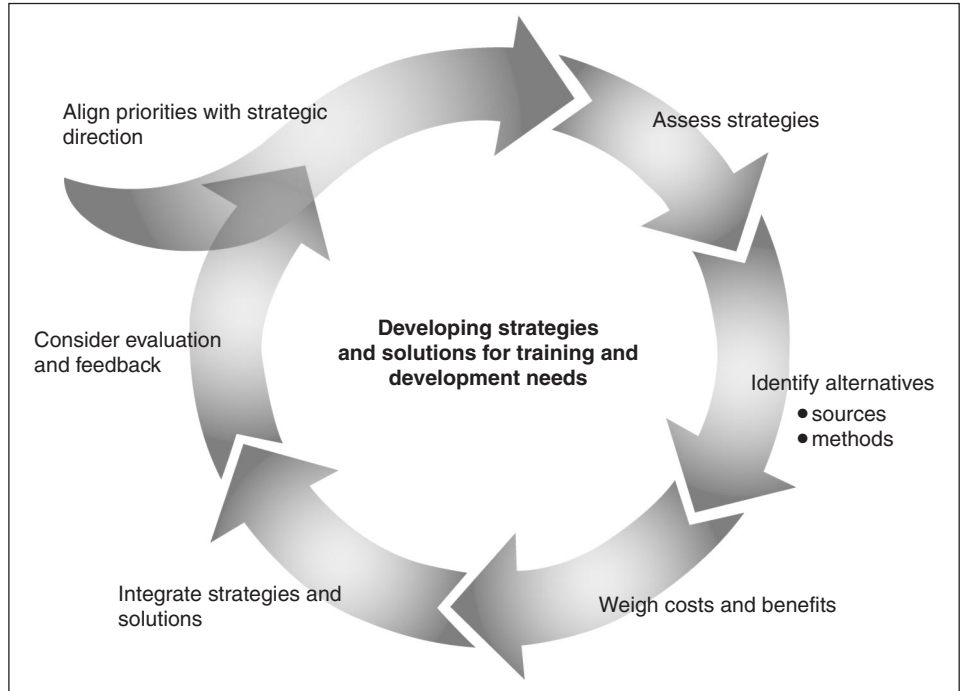
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## Agencies Developed Strategies and Solutions for Their Training Needs

Agencies carry out their training and development efforts on the basis of estimated needs, priorities, and available resources and recognize that adequate planning allows them to establish priorities and determine the best ways to leverage investments to improve performance. The five agencies we reviewed set priorities for training and development on the basis of various factors, such as the results from skill and competency assessments, the availability of resources, and the interests of agency leaders. They usually relied on training officials, agency managers, and subject matter experts to assist in developing strategies and approaches for addressing training needs. Although the agencies designed and delivered training using both centralized and decentralized approaches, we found that leadership development programs were more highly centralized and managed at headquarters. Agency officials acknowledged that they found projecting costs and benefits of proposed training and development programs to be very challenging. Although they sometimes developed broad information on anticipated benefits and expected costs, this often did not involve tying anticipated benefits to specific performance improvements or considering all related costs.

As outlined in figure 6, agencies can plan and establish priorities by developing an annual training plan to target developmental areas of greatest need and outline the most cost-effective training approaches to address those areas. Considerations involved in assessing investment opportunities for the training plan include balancing the competing demands confronting the agency and the amount of resources available in order to determine how those demands can best be met with available resources. It is also important to consider how to effectively integrate all of the strategies the agency plans to use to improve performance and meet emerging demands. When training is identified as a solution to improve performance, agencies can compare various training strategies by weighing their estimated costs and anticipated benefits to build a convincing business case that supports the selected training strategy. Developing a business case that sets forth the expected costs and benefits of the performance improvement investment provides decision makers with essential information for allocating necessary resources.

**Figure 6: Steps for Developing Strategies and Solutions for Training and Development Needs**



Source: GAO.

## Agencies' Experiences in Developing Strategies and Solutions for Training Needs

The agencies we reviewed used a wide range of strategies and solutions to improve performance through designing training and development programs for their employees. Officials told us they considered a mixture of both on-the-job and other developmental programs, contemplated an assortment of mechanisms for delivering the training, and assessed potential sources to meet their learning needs. For example, USACE's leadership development program for midlevel engineers and scientists involved formal classroom training, mentoring, and a 6-month developmental assignment. VHA employees can access a wide variety of informational and educational content through the VA Knowledge Network, a satellite-based system of live and on-demand programming delivered directly to employees' desktops. IRS's training unit developed an automated ROI workbook tool that the agency's business units can use to assess whether proposed training programs should be delivered in a classroom or by an e-learning approach. OPM partnered with an employee

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union to offer a midcareer development program that provided an opportunity for current OPM employees to enhance existing skills, explore new career fields, and gain practical experience. Officials from FWS's training center cited courses in negotiation, communication, and interpersonal skills as examples of vendor-provided courses. They said the center decided not to invest in designing these courses since they do not require field experience and expertise, which are critical in designing other FWS courses.

Projecting costs and benefits of proposed training and development programs was a challenge for the five agencies. They usually developed broad information on anticipated benefits and expected costs, often without tying anticipated benefits to specific performance improvements or considering all costs related to the training program. For example, VHA officials told us that the agency's assessments of anticipated benefits and expected costs of proposed training are generally unsystematic. One VHA office or field location may not have analyzed the relative costs or benefits of proposed training while another office or location may have considered anticipated benefits and developed estimates of costs and savings using different training approaches. At FWS, some proposed training programs, such as its Advanced Leadership Development Program, involved detailed estimates of costs, both for the training center and for participating FWS field offices, as well as the identification of specific competencies to be developed in the program. Other proposed training programs at FWS did not have documented and detailed estimates of expected costs and benefits. FWS officials said that they assess the anticipated costs and benefits of all their proposed training and development programs but that the extent of these assessments and the amount of documentation supporting the assessments vary, depending on many factors, such as the content, delivery mechanism, and uniqueness of the proposed training.

According to agency officials we interviewed, limited funding sometimes affected agencies' abilities to design and deliver training and development programs that officials believed were needed. USACE officials said, for example, that in a recent survey, about two-thirds of agency supervisors and one-half of agency executives believed that the agency had less funding for training civilian employees than is needed. Funding and resource limitations sometimes forced the agencies to think of new and practical ways to ensure that their employees had the knowledge and skills needed to carry out their work. For example, because of an unexpected decrease in available travel funds, VHA officials canceled plans for a large national conference on the use on an automated managerial cost accounting

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system. This system was designed to provide VHA managers with data important in making clinical decisions, managing workload, and controlling medical care costs. Instead, to enable employees to obtain the information that would have been presented at the conference, VHA officials provided the content via a satellite broadcast along with a series of audio conferences.

At FWS, the number of people that the training center can train onsite, of course, is limited by the current capacity of the facility classrooms and residences. According to FWS officials, incorporating a blended learning approach into its curriculum has enabled trainees to perform part of the course work outside class, thus allowing instructors to focus on those topics that require special attention. Training center officials also said that the agency has increased its use of e-learning and other mechanisms to develop employees where they work instead of coming to the training center. Officials told us that FWS has reduced training costs by offering more training online and using CD ROMs to provide field offices with course material that previously had been offered only on location at the training center.

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## Agencies' Lessons Learned in Developing Strategies and Solutions for Their Training Needs

Agency officials have encountered a variety of challenges in their efforts to design training programs to meet the developmental needs of their employees. How agencies respond to these challenges can greatly affect their success in aligning priorities with strategic direction, assessing strategies, identifying alternative sources and methods, weighing potential costs and anticipated benefits, and assessing how other performance improvement initiatives might complement training efforts. It is also important to consider evaluation feedback on an ongoing basis. We identified eight lessons learned related to the five agencies' efforts to develop strategies and solutions for their training and development needs.

**Lesson learned: Incorporate information on employees' various competency levels and job needs into the design of training and development programs to increase their relevancy and timeliness.**

When designing effective training and development programs, the way the work is actually to be done on the job and the developmental needs of the expected trainees are key considerations. Analyzing the tasks of specific jobs and occupations can help ensure that training accurately reflects the way employees are expected to perform on a day-to-day basis. To help ensure that the training effectively addresses employees' developmental

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needs, agencies can determine the workforce's level of proficiency in mission-critical skills and competencies by conducting skills assessments and using information obtained through interviews or surveys of employees and their supervisors. The increased information and insight provided by these approaches can allow agencies to incorporate information on employees' various competency levels and job needs into the design of training and development programs—increasing both the relevancy and timeliness of the learning.

*FWS targeted training to employees to leverage specific knowledge and experiences*

FWS's training center recognized employees' various competency levels and job needs when developing courses on the use of geographic information systems (GIS), which are becoming increasingly important mapping and information analysis tools for natural resources agencies, according to FWS officials.<sup>11</sup> Rather than providing instruction focused solely on software features and functions of GIS, the training center designed its curriculum to teach the application of GIS to employees based on their roles in natural resources management. With a focus on these varied roles and related needs, the center developed separate GIS training courses for "explorers" (natural resource managers or others just wanting to know about GIS), "users" (biologists and other personnel using GIS in their daily job) and "developers" (those individuals designing and developing a natural resources GIS for use by others). Officials at FWS's training center said that with the training targeted to the specific background and needs of employees, FWS can minimize the time spent teaching participants information that they already know or do not need to know in carrying out their job responsibilities. The training center's curriculum consists of 15 separate GIS courses, with 3 additional courses under consideration or development. According to FWS officials, about 1,200 FWS employees at over 400 offices use GIS software in their jobs.

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<sup>11</sup> GIS is a system of computer software, hardware, and data used to manipulate, analyze, and graphically present a potentially wide array of information associated with geographic locations.

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*IRS used skills assessments to focus on developmental needs*

To assist in identifying employees' competency levels and incorporating job needs into training, IRS developed and used technical assessment batteries for the agency's field assistance personnel and customer service representatives. These multiple-choice instruments were designed to assess the key technical knowledge that the employee needs in order to carry out his or her job. On the basis of each employee's test results, the agency will recommend specific training and other appropriate interventions, such as mentoring, to improve performance. IRS officials told us that in some cases where the assessments showed that individuals were already knowledgeable in a particular area, employees still wanted to take the related training because they viewed training as a job benefit as well as a way to improve knowledge and skills for their jobs. This provides an example of how important agencies' considerations of the organizational culture and working environment when designing training and development programs are in preparing for and addressing issues that may arise during implementation. As we point out in our training guide, employees need to not only understand the goals of agencies' training and development efforts, but also to accept responsibility for developing their competencies and careers, as well as for improving their organization's performance.<sup>12</sup>

**Lesson learned: Assess options for using other organizations' course content, staff, services, or facilities when designing a new training and development program in order to develop efficient and cost-effective strategies.**

When thinking about strategies and sources for the design of a new training and development program, officials can potentially discover more efficient and cost-effective approaches through the use of other organizations' course content, staff, services, and/or facilities. Adequate planning can help an agency in meeting the developmental needs of trainees without overburdening the agency's training capacity or creating excess capacity. Obtaining reasonable estimates of likely costs and identifying potential obstacles of using others' training resources can help agencies develop more informed perspectives on ways to effectively leverage resources.

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<sup>12</sup> [GAO-03-893G](#), p. 7.

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*IRS considered several options in designing a course for senior managers*

In evaluating options for designing and delivering a new training course for its senior managers, IRS considered various sources for such training, including internal resources, contractor support, and partnerships. IRS officials said that they considered internal resources to design the training but quickly realized that the agency did not have sufficient expertise. The officials also considered using a contractor but concluded that the costs would be too high. Instead, IRS decided to partner with the Federal Executive Institute, an OPM-sponsored training facility in Charlottesville, Virginia, that provides training to senior employees from across the federal government. IRS officials found that partnering IRS design and subject matter experts with institute and other renowned leaders in the field delivered the most cost-effective approach and yielded the best results. The design team produced a course called “Learning Through Others,” delivered on the Charlottesville campus. According to IRS officials, this course surpassed agency needs and expectations and was less expensive than a direct contracting arrangement with an outside vendor. They added that participants in the training program could learn public service values through lessons and encounter competency-based experiential learning, business-related challenges, and a capstone simulation. IRS officials characterized the course as high quality and said the prestige associated with studying at the Federal Executive Institute provided an additional benefit for IRS participants.

**Lesson learned: Establish mechanisms and controls to avoid unnecessary duplication or inconsistency within and across agencies’ training efforts.**

The agencies used both centralized and decentralized approaches by, for example, centrally managing reporting and record keeping while allowing some localized management of training content. Whatever mix of centralized and decentralized approaches is used, agencies recognize that it is important to limit overlap and duplication and ensure the delivery of an integrated message when appropriate. VHA and FWS officials found that establishing mechanisms and controls is important to limit duplication or inconsistencies within an agency, across component organizations within a department, or across the federal government as a whole.

*VHA’s Employee Education System helped limit duplication of effort*

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VHA's Employee Education System, which serves as an internal training consulting team within VHA, assists the agency's 21 regional networks in designing and implementing programs to develop general and specific skills for VHA employees. Within each of the 21 regional networks, an Education Service Representative acts as a liaison in coordinating numerous developmental programs with VHA headquarters—sharing information with their counterparts about effective practices and identifying areas of possible duplication or inconsistency across VHA. According to VHA officials, the coordination and communication achieved through this organizational structure has helped ensure consistency in implementing the agency's national training priorities. For example, officials said that the consulting team assisted in implementing changes to VHA's processes for collecting third-party insurance reimbursements in the wake of legislation that required VA to make greater efforts to collect unpaid debts from veterans. They told us that these legislative changes enabled local VHA facilities to receive these reimbursements, but also overwhelmed the local billing and debt collection processes. To address the problem and help ensure consistency across the agency, the training consulting team participated in redesigning the processes for coding, billing, and debt collection; trained the employees responsible for billing and debt collection in the new processes; and created graphical representations of the new processes and posted them throughout the agency's facilities to aid employees in learning.

*Interior's Training Directors Council facilitated communication across departmental components*

Interior used its Training Directors Council to facilitate communication across the department's different bureaus, thus helping to minimize duplicative training and development efforts. This council provides opportunities—through formal meetings and informal communications—for training managers from Interior's various bureaus to share curriculum and related training ideas with their colleagues. The director of the training center at FWS, who chairs the council, told us that on more than one occasion he has discovered through council business that other Interior components had developed strategies or solutions to address emerging or existing needs that FWS's training center had also identified. For instance, the training center at FWS was considering whether to add a new course on grants management to its curriculum. Through its participation in the council, FWS determined that another component agency, the Bureau of Land Management, already offered grants management courses through its National Training Center in Phoenix, Arizona. After reviewing the content



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of these Bureau of Land Management courses, officials at FWS's training center determined that they did not need to design and develop a separate grants management course. Instead, FWS and the Bureau of Land Management now jointly manage the delivery of this training course.

**Lesson learned: Develop and use criteria for determining the optimal mix of delivery mechanisms to use in order to select the most effective approaches given each learning situation.**

In response to emerging demands and the increasing availability of new technologies, agencies are faced with the challenge of choosing the optimal mix of training delivery mechanisms to design training that is as effective and efficient as possible. Agency officials consider a wide variety of instructional approaches to achieve learning—in the classroom, through distance learning, or through structured on-the-job experiences. Officials also took other factors into account, including whether to provide individualized instruction or team-based training and when to use blended learning that combines different teaching methods (e.g., Web-based and instructor-led) within the same training program. USACE found that identifying and systematically using criteria to help select effective delivery mechanisms assisted in building well-supported justifications for the design of training and development programs.

*USACE used criteria to select media and method of instruction*

To select the appropriate media and method of instruction for its training programs, USACE uses criteria contained in the Corps of Engineers Systems Approach to Training, the agency's documented process for developing training programs. The criteria include issues such as the expected frequency of changes to the training content, the size and diversity of the target population, and the degree of student interaction required. USACE officials told us that, using these criteria, course managers from USACE's training center coordinate with relevant agency program offices and subject matter experts to decide on the appropriate mode for training delivery. While most of the training center's courses occur in a conventional classroom setting, agency decision makers have focused on trying to identify courses (or modules of courses) to convert from classroom training to more economical modes of delivery, such as distance learning, computer-assisted instruction, computer-based instruction, or a combination of such approaches. USACE officials said that many of their courses now incorporate CD ROM and Internet-based

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materials as prework assignments before attending classroom training and for reference use during and after the training events.

*VHA used a profiling tool to help in selecting delivery approaches*

VHA's internal training consulting team used a training delivery strategy tool that consists of a series of questions structured to guide users through the process of selecting an appropriate delivery approach for a proposed training effort. This team designed the training delivery strategy tool to help staff plan, analyze, develop, and deliver training and development activities. To aid in decision making, the tool includes factors such as audience composition, course goals and objectives, course modules, any prerequisites, participant preparation, and course follow-up and evaluation. VHA officials said that applying this tool and analyzing the resultant profile helps maximize learner understanding, retention, and application.

**Lesson learned: Ensure that employees have the needed equipment and technologies so that they can take maximum advantage of learning opportunities.**

Many organizations are taking advantage of more flexible design and delivery methods made possible by technology to, for example, deliver training to the user's desktop, thereby making training more accessible and cost effective. As agencies move forward in using new approaches, it is important to ensure that employees have the needed equipment and technology to take maximum advantage of learning opportunities.

*IRS converted mandatory training courses to an online format*

IRS recently converted a series of mandatory training courses from face-to-face group briefings to an online format in order to more efficiently provide this training to its employees. Through these online mandatory training programs, which include computer security awareness, ethics issues, and prevention of sexual harassment, IRS wanted to (1) reduce the burden of managers who previously had to prepare for and deliver the training, (2) provide ready access of the information to line employees when and where they need it, and (3) lower the costs associated with the group briefings. IRS officials said that online delivery lessened employee time in taking the training from approximately 6 to 2 hours and in some cases eliminated the need for travel. To ensure the accessibility and usability of these online briefings, IRS worked to resolve various challenges in the

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conversion, such as designing the online product for the lowest computing capabilities of the bulk of the trainee population and providing alternative delivery mechanisms for individuals who were without a computer or Intranet access. The officials said that they also learned it is important to design the online briefings based on a common template and style guide to standardize their look and feel, provide online text-only versions of the training for persons who are visually impaired, and test the usability of the online briefings with end users on a range of equipment and allow sufficient time for needed revisions.

*OPM initiated a pilot program for its employees to use online courseware*

To explore opportunities for increased use of e-learning approaches, OPM established a pilot program that allowed about 250 of its employees access to approximately 1,800 online courses through the Department of Transportation's Transportation Virtual University. OPM's training unit worked with offices throughout OPM to identify employees to participate in the pilot program. OPM officials said that all employees selected for the pilot program had access to the equipment and technology needed to make use of the University's online training, by using a computer either at the employee's desktop or at some central location. As a result of this pilot, OPM enhanced its offerings of online training for its employees by becoming a partner in the GoLearn.com initiative, a governmentwide online training center for federal employees. OPM officials said the pilot program also showed that not all employees function effectively in an online training environment and that some employees need a more structured format in order to learn.

**Lesson learned: Plan early when developing integrated solutions that complement other planned and ongoing strategies to improve performance so that when implemented the strategies work effectively and are aligned to achieve agency goals.**

When designing training and development programs, the agencies sometimes considered how they could integrate them with other strategies to improve performance and meet emerging demands. If the work environment is not conducive to providing opportunities to use new skills or work in different ways, no matter how good the training program is it may not be effective or successful in terms of changing on-the-job performance. In addition, training and development programs represent a significant investment of resources (including time and money) and may

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not always be part of an appropriate solution. The agencies developed integrated solutions that included developing and using job aids, performance support tools, and other approaches to enhance knowledge management<sup>13</sup> and to aid employees on the job as a complement to training.

*OPM planned for an electronic support tool to aid agency employees in using a new computer system to process retirement claims*

As part of its effort to reengineer and modernize its processing and support of federal employees' retirement claims, OPM is developing plans for an integrated Electronic Performance Support System to aid the agency's benefits specialists in using a new computer system. Procedural and information job aids are to be built directly into the software to provide documentation and guidance, "just in time" assistance, and error detection. This is intended to be an integrated system to permit coordination between different modes of training and enhance the learning and performance of the OPM employees working with reengineered business processes and the new computer system. OPM officials said, for example, that this system would assist employees in completing steps using actual data and circumstances of a particular case they were working on rather than consulting a manual or using data put together just for training. According to OPM officials, as the focus under modernization shifts from processing claims to providing customer service, this system will help employees working in OPM's retirement program to interact more directly with program participants to answer questions and solve problems about retirement issues.

*USACE identified online solutions to help enhance and integrate training efforts*

As a complement to the training and development programs it offers to its employees, USACE recently entered into a joint project with the Department of Labor to use an online knowledge management system called Workforce Connections. This system, which resulted from a memorandum of understanding promoting cooperative efforts between the departments of Defense and Labor, will provide the USACE workforce with on-demand, online access to job aids, performance support materials, and

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<sup>13</sup> Knowledge management is an approach to capturing, understanding, and using the collective body of information and intellect within an organization to accomplish its mission.

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course content 7 days a week, 24 hours daily. The system will feature development and maintenance of online communities of practice to support knowledge management of USACE's Learning Network, which is USACE's overall platform for delivering a wide variety of learning resources to agency employees.<sup>14</sup> Another part of the learning network is USACE's Virtual Campus, a distance learning site that allows employees access to Web-based courses and training events. Another component of the learning network includes electronic performance support tools, such as job aids and other information resources. USACE officials said that they consider the systems in the learning network to comprise a powerful solution that effectively integrates the agency's training efforts.

**Lesson learned: Plan for the direct participation of senior agency leaders and experienced staff in the delivery of training and development programs to increase buy-in and build support for organizational change.**

Internal resources, such as subject matter experts and high performers, can often provide valuable insight into training design because of their familiarity with the agency's policies, programs, and corporate culture. To increase buy-in, help establish greater credibility, and build support for organizational change, the agencies have learned the value of planning for the direct involvement of senior managers in the training program.

*IRS and OPM involved executives and managers*

IRS officials told us that a key feature of the agency's frontline managers course is that it was designed to use senior managers and experienced frontline managers drawn from the agency's business units to teach the course. In addition, executives participate in course modules that focus on emerging issues facing the agency. The deputy commissioner of IRS's Wage and Investment business unit served as the executive sponsor of the training program and participated in course modules featuring executives. The officials also told us that IRS executives partner with outside vendors to serve as an instructor team to deliver all courses designed for senior managers. Using business unit executives and managers as course instructors helped ensure that the course's content and emphasis related to the mission, goals, and guiding principles of the agency.

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<sup>14</sup> Communities of practice provide an on-line resource for peers to ask and respond to questions and share knowledge.

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At OPM, agency managers have been the first to take special initiative training—such as courses on prohibited personnel practices, whistleblower procedures, and information technology security—before they are offered agencywide. OPM officials said that teaching the material to agency managers in advance of line employees enables the managers to model desired behaviors and learning for their employees and convincingly convey how they personally benefited from the training.

*FWS and VHA relied on in-house experts*

FWS's training center brings in FWS field office personnel when building a cadre of senior, in-house instructors. Training center officials said that involving trainers from the field helps to build trust with trainees and provides an added level of credibility that neither academics nor other subject matter experts who lack field experience can easily replicate. According to these officials, many expert employees come from the field and stay to teach at the center for 3 or 4 years. Some, however, teach only one or two courses or get involved for a short duration before returning to their positions in the field. The director of the training center said that he views this passing-on of information from seasoned veterans to less experienced employees as crucial for maintaining the unique knowledge base of the agency.

VHA used “super users” to teach medical center personnel to use its computerized patient record system, a computer interface that allows hospital personnel to keep more comprehensive patient records and enables clinicians, managers, and other staff to review and analyze data gathered on any patient. The super users—VHA employees with other job-related duties and responsibilities—were trained to be thoroughly knowledgeable about the system so they could demonstrate its capabilities and directly relate the training to employees' work. VHA initiated this strategy when the agency began rolling out the application in 1997. VHA officials said that planning to build on the direct involvement of these super users was successful because they served as first-line resources for employees' questions about the new system and helped the agency to build organizational support for the system. According to VHA, the agency developed a cadre of more than 2,500 super users, and about 180,000 VHA employees use the patient record system.

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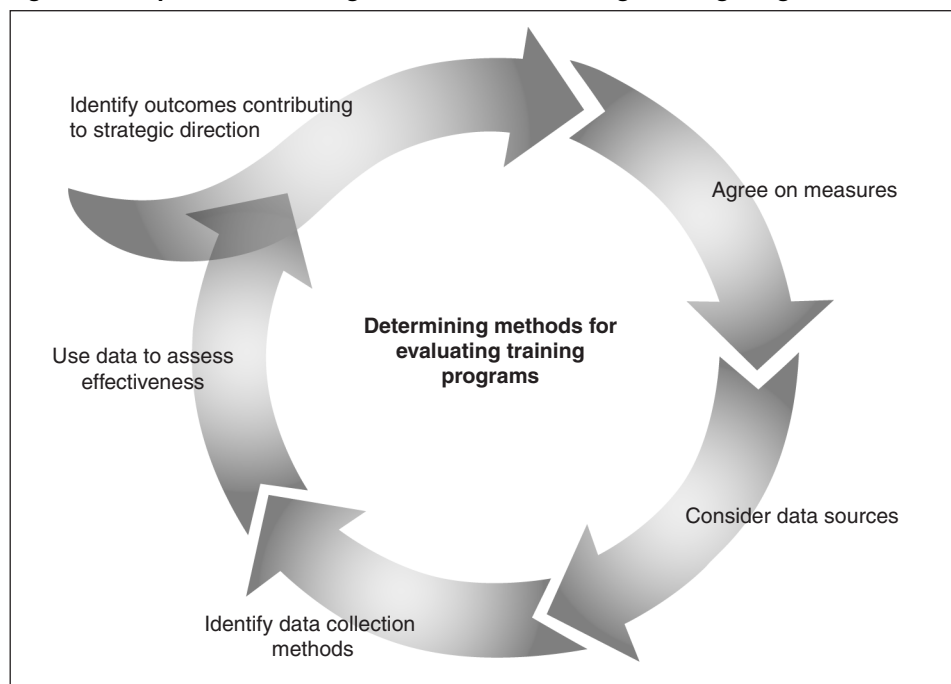
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## Agencies are Considering More Sophisticated Evaluation Approaches As Part of Designing their Training and Development Programs

Without evaluation of training programs, participants may take ineffective courses that do not provide the necessary learning experience or that do not translate to improved performance on the job. Overall, the five agencies in our review relied primarily on standard end-of-course evaluations to obtain the participants' reaction to, and satisfaction with, a specific training course or learning opportunity. Although the agencies encountered challenges given some of the difficulties associated with measuring the impact of training on individual and organizational performance, they have begun or are planning to use more comprehensive and sophisticated evaluation techniques for assessing their training and development efforts. Such techniques include the use of pre- and post-testing to determine the extent of learning accomplished, tracking the performance or advancement of individuals and work units before and after training is completed to assess professional growth and improvements in organizational performance, and limited use of ROI analyses to compare the benefits (quantified in dollars) with the costs of a training and development program.

To help determine whether the objectives of training and development are achieved, agencies can begin by incorporating measures of effectiveness into the design of training and development programs. Defining objectives in a measurable way enables agency officials to offer a more convincing business case and contributes to improving the quality of feedback. Whenever possible, training goals should measure the individual and organizational results achieved rather than the training inputs or outputs (e.g., number of available courses or people trained). Figure 7 depicts some of the steps involved in determining the evaluation methods to use in designing training and development programs.

**Figure 7: Steps in Determining Methods for Evaluating Training Programs**



Source: GAO.

## Agencies' Experiences in Determining Methods for Evaluating Their Training and Development Programs

Agency officials recognized the importance of determining during design how they planned to evaluate the effectiveness of their training and development programs. To collect information on participants' reaction to and satisfaction with the training program, for example, VHA uses a standard evaluation form with questions related to program design, delivery, outcomes, overall satisfaction, and logistics. In completing this survey, training participants evaluate their success in completing learning objectives and the performance of the faculty. Other agencies also obtained participant feedback through interviews or focus groups. OPM conducted exit interviews with individuals who participated in that agency's Presidential Management Intern program, a 2-year developmental program for individuals from a wide variety of academic disciplines who wish to enter the federal service. These exit interviews were designed to obtain feedback from the participants about their overall satisfaction and reaction to the Presidential Management Intern program, including their suggestions for enhancing the training provided.



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The five agencies have begun to use, or are planning to use, more comprehensive and sophisticated evaluation techniques to assess the extent to which training and development programs increased employees' knowledge and skills or enhanced individual and organizational performance. One of these more sophisticated evaluation techniques is the use of pre- and post-testing to determine the extent of learning during the training program. USACE's training center conducts pre- and post-tests on over 90 percent of the courses it offers and is working toward the goal of using such tests for all courses. The agencies also tracked job performance and the advancement or movement of personnel to assess the potential effectiveness of training. FWS officials told us they track participants' career advancement to determine the extent to which participation in the leadership development program for midlevel employees contributed to increased mobility into more responsible leadership positions in the agency. According to training center officials, about 37 percent of the program graduates have taken either promotions or new lateral assignments since the program's inception in January 2002.

In addition, some agencies attempted to conduct ROI analyses to compare the benefits (quantified in dollars) to the costs of a particular training and development program. VHA officials pointed to concerted efforts to conduct ROI analyses on several training and development programs, including customer service, leadership development, and computer-based training. IRS officials, on the other hand, have decided that the challenges and difficulties in conducting such analyses are not worth the effort for the resultant information—given the challenge of isolating the performance improvements that might result from a specific training activity and the difficulty in monetizing identified benefits in order to calculate the ROI. IRS instead uses the concept of “time to capability” to determine whether and to what extent a training course, program, or other training intervention has improved the organization's ability to perform its mission successfully. IRS defines time to capability as the validated accumulation over time of employees who have been trained in specific competencies deemed critical to the success of an organizational unit. Under this approach, when IRS has trained a predetermined number of employees, officials consider that the agency has achieved the goal of training a critical mass within its workforce and conclude that the agency has an organizationwide capability in the specific competencies.

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## Agencies' Lessons Learned in Determining Methods for Evaluating Their Training and Development Programs

Agencies' training and development efforts involve a continuous effort throughout planning, design, implementation, and evaluation. Therefore, it is important to recognize that evaluation is not a static requirement to be carried out after the fact. When undertaking design and development of training, agencies can rely on evaluations and benchmarking to determine what approaches work best given all the related elements, such as the proposed audience for the training program, the material to be covered, and possible delivery mechanisms that could be employed. Determining methods for evaluating training programs as part of their design can help identify and remove obstacles to successful implementation. For example, an agency official said that catching potential problems early on saved valuable time and resources that a major redesign of training later on likely would have entailed. On the basis of our review at the five agencies, we identified four lessons learned regarding the agencies' efforts to determine methods for evaluating their training and development programs.

**Lesson learned: Incorporate appropriate aspects of the evaluation approach when designing training and development programs by specifying what results are expected to better ensure the availability and use of quality performance data.**

In assessing how and to what degree performance could be improved with a specific training program, agencies should try to establish a targeted level of improved performance as well as assess the possible consequences if the training were not to occur. Determining a target level for improved performance can aid agencies in assessing whether the expected costs associated with the proposed training are worth the anticipated benefits. Agreeing upon the planned evaluation approach in the design clearly sets forth the results the agency expects to achieve through the training. In addition, planning ahead helps ensure the availability and use of sound and relevant performance data.

*VHA decided to evaluate a customer service training program after it was implemented*

In response to low scores on customer satisfaction surveys, a VHA regional network office pursued various initiatives to improve customer service, including the design, development, and implementation of a new training program focused on creating a more customer-service-oriented culture and improving employee morale and collaboration to better meet customer needs. After delivery of this new training program, called "The Customer," VHA selected a contractor to evaluate the effectiveness of the training

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effort. In its report, the contractor stated that because the opportunity to conduct the evaluation did not occur until after the training program had been delivered, the use of preferred evaluation methods was not possible. The contractor reported that this lack of preprogram planning had also been experienced in some other VHA network offices. Nevertheless, the contractor evaluated the customer service training program by surveying participating employees and their supervisors. From these survey results, the contractor concluded that the training program was viewed as successful for those who needed it, but that the training did not receive a sufficient level of support from supervisors. The contractor recommended that VHA obtain additional feedback from supervisors as well as from an individual hired to telephone or visit the VHA facilities in the network office to observe customer service activities.

**Lesson learned: Consider new approaches for collecting and analyzing performance data with the aim of increasing the quality and quantity of training evaluation feedback.**

The agencies faced various challenges in obtaining a high quality and quantity of feedback needed to evaluate their training and development programs. We previously reported that low participation on the part of employees and managers in surveys and focus groups may limit an agency's access to the data needed to complete valid and useful evaluations of training programs.<sup>15</sup> With strong agency support and proper planning, stakeholders, including training participants, supervisors, managers, and trainers, are more likely to provide the information and feedback needed to successfully and effectively evaluate agency training and development programs. USACE, for example, recognized that it needed to ensure that it incorporated a wider variety of stakeholder perspectives in assessing the impact of training on employee and agency performance. Stakeholders' perspectives can be obtained through surveys and questionnaires, individual or group interviews, or communication with more formal multidisciplinary bodies such as advisory or education councils. Valuable sources of information include the training participants; training designers, developers, and facilitators; agency leaders, managers, supervisors, subordinates, and coworkers; employee organizations; internal and external customers; and functional and subject matter experts.

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<sup>15</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Human Capital: Design, Implementation, and Evaluation of Training at Selected Agencies*, [GAO/T-GGD-00-131](#) (Washington, D.C: May 18, 2000).

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*USACE's training center altered its approach to obtaining supervisory feedback on its training efforts*

USACE's training center has been attempting to obtain more sophisticated evaluation feedback to determine if its training courses affected employees' behavior on the job. Training center officials told us that they originally had planned to evaluate all of the center's training courses by obtaining feedback from employees and supervisors 6 months after the training course on the extent to which employee on-the-job behavior had changed. In a test of this approach, the training center sent out hard copies of two generic survey forms: one for the employee and one for the supervisor. Because the training center had locator information for trainees but not for their supervisors, both surveys were mailed to the employee, who was then asked to forward one to his or her supervisor. Training center officials said the response to this survey effort was disappointing. For one 35-person class, for example, the center received 3 employee surveys and 1 supervisor survey. To increase the level of feedback, officials told us that the center is transitioning to an electronic process whereby the survey forms are sent via e-mail to the employee, who is then requested to forward the survey via e-mail to his or her supervisor. Training center officials said that in a recent test of this new approach on one course, the center received a 67 percent response rate from employees and a 36 percent response rate from supervisors. The officials told us that they are working to develop unique evaluation forms for each course in order to obtain feedback on specific learning objectives rather than rely on a generic survey form for all courses.

**Lesson learned: Plan for the use of multiple data types and sources to provide a balanced approach in assessing the effectiveness of training and development programs.**

Successful organizations typically develop and implement human capital approaches based on a thorough assessment of the organizations' specific needs and capabilities. Valid and reliable data are the starting point for such assessments. To assess the results achieved through training and development, agencies can rely upon hard (quantitative) data, such as productivity/output, quality, costs, and time, or soft (qualitative) data, such as feedback on how well a training program satisfied employees' expectations. By taking steps to agree on measures of success up front, agency officials can decide on the objectives for each training and development program. Using a balanced approach that reflects feedback from customers and employees, as well as organizational results, is

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particularly important as agencies transform their cultures and operations. In addition, because the work of federal employees can be complex and often cannot be reduced to a single task, a balanced approach to both the types and sources of data helps to strengthen the linkages between training and development programs and improved performance.

*USACE conducts evaluations of some training courses*

In addition to obtaining end-of-course participant feedback and administering pre- and post-tests for many of its courses, USACE's training center also conducts course evaluations of its offerings. To conduct this evaluation, the designated course manager from USACE's training center is responsible for observing the full course and assessing various aspects of its design and delivery, including the training content, materials, and instructors. Training center officials said that various factors can trigger the decision to conduct an overall course evaluation, including a significant decline in trainees' overall satisfaction with the course, the introduction of new instructors, the use of contractor assistance, or a specific recommendation from an agency office or unit. According to training center officials, the results of this course evaluation are assembled with the end-of-course participant survey feedback and pre- and post-testing results to present a comprehensive and balanced view of the effectiveness of the training program.

**Lesson learned: Take into account all relevant factors for determining the costs of a training and development program to better ascertain whether it is cost-effective in relation to benefits achieved.**

Calculating the ROI for a training program involves identifying and monetizing the program's benefits and then dividing this by a full tabulation of the program's costs. These costs should usually include the cost of program materials provided to each participant; the cost of the facilities; the costs of the facilitator or instructor, including time for both preparation and delivery; any travel-related expenses for participants; salaries and benefits costs of the participants for the time they attend the program; and an allocation of relevant administrative and overhead costs.

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*VHA's evaluation of a leadership development program did not include all costs*

In cooperation with VHA's internal training consulting team, one of VHA's regional network offices designed, developed, and implemented a networkwide leadership development program called "Competency Development for Leaders in the 21st Century." According to information we gathered during our review, the costs incurred for the consulting team's efforts on this training program were not included in the ROI calculation even though it contributed substantially toward developing and implementing the program. VHA officials told us that these costs were not included in the analysis because the course designers only wanted to determine the return on the network's investment, not the agency's overall investment. Agency officials said that one of the main goals of involving the consulting team was to help the network develop the capability to use the ROI process to evaluate training. Although these costs were not included in the ROI cost tabulation, VHA did include the salaries (plus employee benefits) of the participants for the time they attended the developmental program. As we noted in our recently issued assessment guide, agencies might overlook the costs of participant attendance when calculating the total costs of a training program.<sup>16</sup>

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## Conclusions and Observations

Federal agencies are faced with the need to invest resources wisely to ensure that their employees possess the information, skills, and competencies required to carry out their work successfully. The examples provided in this report may help to address this need by describing some of the experiences and lessons learned that other agencies might find applicable or adaptable to their unique situations. This information is intended to both provide a realistic perspective on how agencies have approached designing their training and development programs to date as well as to take a more detailed look at some of the concepts explored in our recently issued assessment guide focused on strategic training and development efforts in the federal government.

Our work reviewing the selected agencies' efforts to design training and development programs reinforces the significance of good planning and design of these programs to ensure their successful implementation and

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<sup>16</sup> [GAO-03-893G](#), p. 69.

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evaluation. The experiences and lessons learned we identified also demonstrate how effective design efforts—as part of a strategic training and development process—rely on the eight core characteristics that we identified in our earlier work: (1) strategic alignment, (2) leadership commitment and communication, (3) stakeholder involvement, (4) accountability and recognition, (5) effective resource allocation, (6) partnerships and learning from others, (7) data quality assurance, and (8) continuous performance improvement. Indeed, by focusing on these eight core characteristics, agencies can improve not only the design of their training and development efforts but also the planning, implementation, and evaluation of their programs to better ensure that their employees have the information, skills, and competencies needed to carry out their work successfully.

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## Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report on December 12, 2003, to the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of the Interior, the Commissioner of Internal Revenue, the Director of OPM, and the Secretary of VA. Interior, IRS, and OPM provided written comments on the draft report. In his written comments (see app. IV), Interior's Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks generally agreed with the report's findings regarding the Department and the FWS. He said that the report provides important examples that can help the Department continue to move forward with additional confidence in its actions. In his written comments (see app. V), the Commissioner of Internal Revenue said that IRS was honored to share some of its lessons learned with us for governmentwide dissemination. He said that our review also provides IRS with practices from other agencies to assist IRS in its efforts to continually improve its programs. In her written comments (see app. VI), the Director of OPM said that she appreciated the opportunity for OPM to be included in the report and to share information on OPM's training and development activities and programs. Interior, IRS, and OPM also provided technical comments to clarify specific points regarding the information presented in the draft report, which we have incorporated as appropriate. In comments by E-mail through its GAO liaison, VA agreed with the information presented regarding the Department and had no additional comments on the draft report. USACE informed us that it had no comments on the draft report.

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As agreed with your office we are sending copies of this report to the Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government

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Management, the Federal Workforce and the District of Columbia, Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs; the Chairmen and Ranking Minority Members of the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs and the House Committee on Government Reform; and other interested congressional parties. We are also providing copies to the Secretary of the Army, the Secretary of the Interior, the Secretary of the Treasury, the Director of OPM, and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. This report is available to others upon request. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you have any questions about this report, please contact me on (202) 512-6806. Key contributors to this report are listed in appendix VII.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "George H. Stalcup". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "G" and a long, sweeping underline.

George H. Stalcup  
Director, Strategic Issues



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# Objective, Scope and Methodology

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The objective of this review was to provide information on selected federal agencies' experiences and lessons learned in key aspects of designing training and development programs for their employees. Specifically, we focused on the agencies' experiences and lessons learned related to

- assessing current and future agency skill and competency requirements and identifying related training and development needs,
- developing strategies and solutions for training and development needs, and
- determining methods to evaluate the effectiveness of training and development programs.

For this review, lessons learned were defined as knowledge that could be applied in the future that the agencies gained through either positive or negative experiences.

To address this objective we focused on five agencies: the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Department of Defense; the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS), Department of the Interior; the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), Department of the Treasury; the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM); and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Department of Veterans Affairs. We chose the five agencies for a variety of reasons, including the diversity of employee occupations within the agencies, reported innovative approaches for training and developing their employees, and congressional requester interest. We selected USACE to obtain a Department of Defense perspective in light of that department's reputation as a leader in the area of training and developing military personnel. We included FWS and VHA to obtain information related to a broad mix of employee occupations. We selected IRS because of reported innovative approaches to training and development and included OPM because of its role as the federal government's human capital agency.

To obtain information and related documentation, we visited the following locations:

- USACE's headquarters human resources directorate in Washington, D.C., and its Professional Development Support Center in Huntsville, Alabama.

- FWS's headquarters human resources division in Arlington, Virginia, and its National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.
- IRS's strategic human resources division in Arlington, Virginia, and the small business and self-employed business line.
- OPM's headquarters human resources office and the career development branch of the center for retirement and insurance service.
- VHA's Employee Education System headquarters in Washington, D.C., and the medical center and local network offices in Durham, North Carolina.

It is important to note that our methodology was not designed to identify examples that would be representative of all training and development efforts at the five agencies in our review or of the government as a whole. We did not verify the accuracy and reliability of the data provided to us or the systems used to produce the information. Further, in citing training and development programs as examples in connection with lessons learned, we did not assess the effectiveness of the training programs and practices. Rather, our intent was to highlight and briefly describe some experiences and lessons learned that agency officials believed helped each agency improve or enhance its training and development programs.

To obtain information about the five agencies' experiences and lessons learned related to designing training and development programs, we

- Interviewed agency human capital and training officials and subject matter experts responsible for agency training, performance, and other initiatives; and
- Reviewed and analyzed agency documents such as workforce plans, analyses, and reports; strategic, performance, and succession plans and reports; organizational, occupational, and unit-based competency standards; knowledge and skills inventories; skills gaps assessments; competency and skill assessments; surveys of agency employees; training plans and proposals; workforce demographic data; budget data; evaluation plans and reports; and performance measures.

The lessons learned we identified for inclusion in this report were based on (1) their linkages with one or more of the eight core characteristics of a

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strategic training and development process, which we had identified in our previous work (see app. III) and (2) sufficient evidence from the agency to support the experiences that they relayed to us. At the exit conferences for the five agencies, we presented agency officials with the list of lessons learned that we had identified and wished to attribute to their experiences. At that time, we also informed each agency of the specific examples from their experiences that we would likely attribute to these lessons learned. In these meetings, agency officials expressed no objections to the lessons learned we had identified and in some cases provided additional information to support specific examples from their experiences that we proposed to use for this report.

We conducted our audit work between August 2002 and November 2003 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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# Background on Selected Agencies and Their Training and Development Functions

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The following summarizes key information on the five agencies included in this review. These summaries include information on the agencies' missions, organizational structures, and training and development functions.

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## U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), part of the Department of the Army within the Department of Defense, is comprised of approximately 34,600 civilian and 650 military men and women. USACE has a diverse workforce consisting of military and civilian engineers, biologists, geologists, hydrologists, natural resource managers, and other specialists who work in engineering and environmental matters. USACE's mission is to provide engineering services to the nation: (1) planning, designing, building and operating water resources and other civil works projects, (2) designing and managing the construction of military facilities for the Army and Air Force, and (3) providing design and construction management support for other Department of Defense and federal agencies. USACE headquarters office is located in Washington, D.C.

USACE's Professional Development Support Center, located in Huntsville, Alabama, serves as the center of learning and training for the agency. The training center manages and implements the Proponent-Sponsored Engineer Corps Training program, which provides job-related training through technical, professional, managerial, and leadership courses for USACE and other government agencies. USACE's training center offers more than 200 courses covering topics that support the agency's mission.

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## U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), a component of the Department of the Interior, is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. FWS's headquarters is located in Washington D.C., while its field units are located throughout the United States. FWS employs more than 9,600 people and is supported by a volunteer force of 29,000. Nearly 90 percent of FWS employees work in field locations.

The National Conservation Training Center, located in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, is FWS's training center and is responsible for training a wide range of employees in the conservation community and serves as a gathering place where conservation professionals from government, nonprofit organizations, and corporations work toward common goals.

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Training for FWS's law enforcement personnel is primarily conducted through the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, an interagency law enforcement training organization headquartered in Glynco, Georgia.

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## Internal Revenue Service

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) is a branch of the U.S. Department of the Treasury. IRS's mission is to provide America's taxpayers top quality service by helping them understand and meet their tax responsibilities and by applying the tax law with integrity and fairness to all. IRS's organizational structure includes the following business units: four operating divisions organized around four major customer segments (Wage and Investment, Small Business/Self-Employed, Large and Mid-Size Business, and Tax Exempt and Government Entities); four functional divisions (National Taxpayer Advocate, Appeals, Criminal Investigation, and Communications and Liaison); and two shared services/support divisions (Agency-Wide Shared Services and Modernization and Information Technology Services). As of March 2003, IRS had about 116,300 employees.

IRS takes a decentralized approach to training and developing its workforce. Each business unit has an embedded human resources component that provides advice and analysis on related policies and issues and formulates strategies, procedures, and practices to address the unit's human capital needs. Learning and Education, one of eight major divisions comprising IRS's Office of Strategic Human Resources, provides guidance and sets policy and standards on training and development for the agency's business units and headquarters offices.

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## U.S. Office of Personnel Management

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the federal government's human capital agency, provides human resources policy leadership, technical advice and assistance, and products and services to federal agencies, employees, annuitants, and job seekers. It also oversees governmentwide compensation and performance management systems, and provides retirement, health benefit, and other insurance services to federal employees, annuitants, other beneficiaries, and agencies. In March 2003, OPM completed a major restructuring process through which it consolidated various agency functions. As of March 2003, OPM employed approximately 3,500 people, many of them stationed in agency headquarters in Washington, D.C. OPM has a field presence in 16 major U.S. cities as well as operating centers in Pennsylvania and Georgia.

OPM's training and development efforts are largely decentralized to the agency's various program and staff offices. The employee training and development unit within the agency's human capital management office is responsible for setting overall strategy and for planning and implementing agencywide training such as leadership development programs and various mandatory training programs. According to OPM, the agency's newly established Chief Human Capital Officer plays a significant role in advising the OPM Director on overall employee training and development initiatives and programs, as well as the establishment of the agency's training budget.

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**Veterans Health  
Administration**

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA), one of three major administrations within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), is responsible for providing primary care, specialized care, and related medical and social support services to veterans through an integrated health care system. VHA administers its functions through a group of 21 regional network offices located around the United States. As of March 2003, VHA employed about 203,500 people out of a total VA workforce of about 225,000 employees.

VA takes a decentralized approach to training and development operations. VA's human resources office provides advice and guidance on training to VHA and the other departmental components but delegates training and development operations to each component. VHA's organization includes the Employee Education System, which is an internal training consulting group that provides educational services that support the workforce development and continuing education needs for VHA employees. This internal consulting group of about 300 individuals primarily helps to assess agency training needs at the national level, while VHA network offices and medical centers take lead responsibility for assessing their own local needs. These internal training consultants are available to assist VHA network offices and medical centers in designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating training and development programs to meet these local needs.

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# Core Characteristics of a Strategic Training and Development Process

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The following summarizes the eight core characteristics that make a training and development process effective and strategically focused on achieving results. We identified these core characteristics as part of our recent work in developing an assessment guide to assist federal agencies in evaluating their training and development efforts.<sup>1</sup>

- **Strategic alignment.** Clear linkages exist between the agency's mission, goals, and culture and its training and development efforts. The agency's mission and goals drive a strategic training and development approach and help ensure that the agency takes full advantage of an optimal mix of strategies to improve performance and enhance capacity to meet new and emerging challenges.
- **Leadership commitment and communication.** Agency leaders and managers consistently demonstrate that they support and value continuous learning, are receptive to and use feedback from employees on developmental needs and training results, and set the expectation that fair and effective training and development practices will improve individual and organizational performance.
- **Stakeholder involvement.** Agency stakeholders are involved throughout the training and development process to help ensure that different perspectives are taken into account and contribute to effective training and development programs. Stakeholders' views are incorporated in identifying needed performance enhancements, developing and effectively implementing well-thought-out strategies, and helping to conceptualize and use balanced measures that accurately reflect the extent to which training and development efforts contribute toward achieving results.
- **Accountability and recognition.** Appropriate accountability mechanisms, such as performance management systems, are in place to hold managers and employees responsible for learning and working in new ways. Appropriate rewards and incentives exist and are used fairly and equitably to encourage innovation, reinforce changed behaviors, and enhance performance.
- **Effective resource allocation.** The agency provides an appropriate level of funding and other tools and resources—along with external

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<sup>1</sup>GAO-03-893G, p. 75.

expertise and assistance when needed—to ensure that its training and development programs reflect the importance of its investment in human capital to achieving its mission and goals.

- **Partnerships and learning from others.** Coordination within and among agencies achieves economies of scale and limits duplication of efforts. In addition to benchmarking high-performing organizations, these efforts allow an agency to keep abreast of current practices, enhance efficiency, and increase the effectiveness of its training and development programs.
- **Data quality assurance.** The agency has established policies and procedures that recognize and support the importance of quality data and of evaluating the quality and effectiveness of training and development efforts. It establishes valid measures and validated systems to provide reliable and relevant information that is useful in improving the agency's training and development efforts.
- **Continuous performance improvement.** Agency practices and policies foster a culture of continuous improvement and optimal organizational performance regarding training and other activities. Stakeholders rely on and use program performance information and other data to assess and refine ongoing training and development efforts; target new initiatives to improve performance; and design, develop, and implement new approaches to train and develop employees.



# Comments from the Department of the Interior

Note: GAO comments supplementing those in the report text appear at the end of this appendix.



## United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

JAN 23 2004

Mr. George Stalcup  
Director, Strategic Issues  
U.S. General Accounting Office  
441 G Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Stalcup:

Thank you for providing the Department of the Interior the opportunity to review and comment on the draft U.S. General Accounting Office report entitled, "Human Capital: Selected Agencies' Experiences and Lessons Learned in Designing Training and Development Programs" (GAO-04-291) dated December 12, 2003. In general, we agree with the report's findings that pertain to the Department. The report provides important examples that can help us continue to move forward with additional confidence in our actions.

The Department has one specific comment. On page 37, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's mission description should be changed to: "The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is, working with others, to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people."

We look forward to receiving the final report.

Sincerely,

Assistant Secretary for Fish  
and Wildlife and Parks

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**Appendix IV**  
**Comments from the Department of the**  
**Interior**

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The following is GAO's comment on the Department of the Interior's letter dated January 23, 2004.

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**GAO Comment**

We have clarified the mission statement of the Fish and Wildlife Service to note its collaboration with others to accomplish its mission.

# Comments from the Internal Revenue Service



COMMISSIONER

DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY  
INTERNAL REVENUE SERVICE  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20224

January 12, 2004

Mr. George Stalcup  
Director, Strategic Issues  
United States General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548

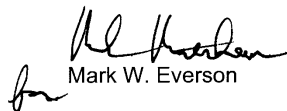
Dear Mr. Stalcup:

I have reviewed your draft report entitled, "Human Capital: Selected Agencies' Experiences and Lessons Learned in Designing Training and Development Programs" (GAO-04-291). Thank you for selecting the Internal Revenue Service to be a part of this important study. We are honored to share some of our lessons learned with you for government-wide dissemination. I am particularly pleased that we could share our work in leadership development, strategic planning, skills assessments and use of technology as best practices. The study not only recognizes some of our accomplishments but also provides us with practices from other agencies to assist us in our efforts to continually improve our programs.

Strategic management of human capital is a vital part of moving the IRS forward. As a result, I have created a new Human Capital Office. Our Chief Human Capital Officer, Beverly Ortega Babers, will provide the leadership necessary to focus our resources on critical training and development programs. We will build on the good planning and design practices cited in your report to ensure that our employees have the skills and competencies they need to provide top quality service to America's taxpayers.

If you have any questions, please contact me or Beverly Ortega Babers, Chief Human Capital Officer, at (202) 622-7902.

Sincerely,

  
Mark W. Everson

# Comments from the Office of Personnel Management



OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

UNITED STATES  
OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT  
WASHINGTON, DC 20415-0001

JAN 20 2004

The Honorable David M. Walker  
Comptroller General  
General Accounting Office  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Walker:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to GAO's draft report entitled Selected Agencies' Experiences and Lessons Learned in Designing Training and Development Programs. As you pointed out, it is critical that agencies invest training and development resources wisely to ensure that their employees have the necessary skills and competencies to carry out their agency's mission. Within the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), I am very committed to developing our employees and making the kinds of strategic investments that will enhance their ability to contribute to achieving OPM's important mission. This commitment is evident in OPM's current restructuring whereby OPM is now organized around mission goals and priorities. The restructuring better positions OPM to meet the President's plan to reform the Federal Government by recognizing the importance of talented employees to deliver a citizen-centered, results-oriented, and market-based Government.

Furthermore, OPM's *Plan for the Strategic Management of OPM's Human Capital: FY 2004-2007*, lays out an integrated and goal specific approach to ensuring OPM has the talent and capacity to meet our new and expanded responsibilities.

Since your staff conducted its review of our training and development programs, we have made enhancements to our programs. These enhancements are enclosed and are also included in our *Plan for the Strategic Management of OPM's Human Capital: FY 2004-2007*, which is also enclosed.

I appreciate the opportunity for OPM to be highlighted in your report, and to share the innovative training and development activities and programs we have created.

Sincerely,

Kay Coles James  
Director

Enclosures

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**Appendix VI**  
**Comments from the Office of Personnel**  
**Management**

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Office of Personnel Management Comments on GAO draft report: **Selected Agencies' Experiences and Lessons Learned in Designing Training and Development Programs**

Page 8 – regarding OPM’s 2001 skills assessment...

In addition to the 2001 skills assessment described in this Section, in late FY 2003, OPM conducted another skills assessment to reflect our recent restructuring and new strategic priorities. We identified mission critical occupations and competencies needed in our current and future workforce, along with initiatives to address any gaps. This business forecasting was combined with techniques to recruit, select, place and train employees and ensure an organizational climate that fosters commitment. This workforce planning initiative was a major aspect of our recently published *Plan for the Strategic Management of OPM’s Human Capital, 2004-2007*. The Plan identifies our mission critical occupations and the most critical competencies which enhance our ability to create strategic training and development plans to help us carry out our important mission.

Page 38 – regarding setting of overall training and development strategy...

OPM’s training and development activities were accurately addressed in this Section, however, since the time that the draft report was completed, OPM has increased the role of its Chief Human Capital Officer (CHCO). The CHCO now plays a more significant role in advising the Director on overall employee training and development initiatives and programs, as well as the establishment of the agency’s training budget. Under the direction of OPM’s CHCO, program offices, with the assistance from the internal Human Capital Management Office, create specific training and development strategies and activities that address mission critical competencies identified in our FY 2003 skills assessment. This strategic approach, based upon recent workforce data, better positions OPM to prioritize its training needs, and forecast funds to support those needs.

# GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contacts

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