

THE HR EXECUTIVE'S VIEWPOINT

Trading expertise

GAO's public-private exchange brings fresh ideas

In the 21st century, the United States faces a range of emerging challenges — from coping with an aging population and slowing workforce growth to countering new security threats. To address these and other complex issues, our government



By **SALLYANNE HARPER**

must move beyond longstanding but often ineffective ways of doing business. Too much of government is based on economic, demographic and national security considerations from the 1950s and 1960s and remains on autopilot. Transforming government will require people who can innovate and think strategically. Obviously, the federal work force itself will be an important source of such talent. But increasingly, government must be willing to reach across institutional lines and partner not only with other federal agencies but also private industry and nonprofit groups. Such

alliances can provide a unique opportunity for these sectors to come together to address issues of mutual interest and concern.

Today, there is a wealth of knowledge, skill and ability at corporations, investment banks, accounting firms and consulting groups that the federal government can tap. Employees at these entities can bring a fresh perspective to the challenges of improving government services and aligning federal programs and policies with current societal needs.

Seeking to lead by example, based on the 2004 GAO Human Capital Reform Act, the Government Accountability Office is launching a new executive exchange program that offers private-sector employees a chance to work on projects to help GAO better serve Congress and the nation. Presently, up to 30 private-sector executives and midlevel employees with backgrounds in accounting, auditing, finance, information technology, economics, law

and other specialties, as well as those with general management experience, can be detailed to GAO to work on projects lasting from three months to a year. At the same time, GAO will be seeking opportunities for up to 15 of its employees to obtain private-sector experience without having to resign their current jobs. The goal is to provide these employees with specialized training and skill development that will allow them to enhance GAO's organizational knowledge when they return to the agency.

The program is designed to benefit both sponsoring organizations and individual participants. Sponsors will gain from the contributions that detailees can make to various projects. Program participants will obtain a true, hands-on experience with different organizational cultures, job processes, and institutional goals and objectives. They will return to their organizations with a deeper understanding of how their counterparts in government

or private industry carry out their missions. In many cases, they will also have the satisfaction of having improved government services that directly affect the well-being of the American people.

Outside candidates chosen will be matched with a GAO project in their area of expertise or interest. All participants will be carefully screened to avoid potential conflicts of interest. Depending on the project and the agreement with the sponsoring organization, individuals may be assigned to GAO's Washington headquarters or one of the agency's 11 field offices or may telecommute from their home locations.

Examples of possible projects at GAO include:

- Comparing the United States' long-term fiscal outlook to that of other developed nations and identifying ways to make our finances more transparent in federal financing reporting, including such activities as Social Security and Medicare.

- Reviewing disability insur-

ance models in the private sector with an eye toward applying lessons learned to federally funded programs.

- Evaluating GAO's information technology assessment process in light of industry best practices.

Participants will be paid by their companies or other sponsoring organization. This will allow executive exchange employees to maintain their private-sector salaries and benefits while working at GAO. Likewise, agency employees detailed to a company or nonprofit group will be paid by GAO. Companies detailing individuals to GAO will not be required to accept a GAO employee in return, and vice versa.

The executive exchange program is the most recent in a series of innovative human capital initiatives that GAO has pioneered in recent years. Through the executive exchange program, we are seeking to add a new dimension to GAO's reputation for excellence. We at GAO hope that other agencies will find our experience useful in designing similar programs to meet their own needs.

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