

Why GAO Did This Study

DHS is the third largest cabinet-level department in the federal government, employing more than 200,000 staff in a broad range of jobs. Since it began operations in 2003, DHS employees have reported having low job satisfaction. DHS employee concerns about job satisfaction are one example of the challenges the department faces implementing its missions. GAO has designated the implementation and transformation of DHS as a high risk area, including its management of human capital, because it represents an enormous and complex undertaking that will require time to achieve in an effective and efficient manner. GAO was asked to examine: (1) how DHS's employee morale compared with that of other federal employees, and (2) the extent to which DHS and selected components have determined the root causes of employee morale, and developed action plans to improve morale. To address these objectives, GAO analyzed survey evaluations, focus group reports, and DHS and component action planning documents, and interviewed officials from DHS and four components, selected based on workforce size, among other things.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS examine its root cause analysis efforts and add the following, where absent: comparisons of demographic groups, benchmarking, and linkage of root cause findings to action plans; and establish clear and measurable metrics of action plan success. DHS concurred with our recommendations.

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Taking Further Action to Better Determine Causes of Morale Problems Would Assist in Targeting Action Plans

What GAO Found

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) employees reported having lower average morale than the average for the rest of the federal government, but morale varied across components and employee groups within the department. Data from the 2011 Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS)—a tool that measures employees' perceptions of whether and to what extent conditions characterizing successful organizations are present in their agencies—showed that DHS employees had 4.5 percentage points lower job satisfaction and 7.0 percentage points lower engagement in their work overall. Engagement is the extent to which employees are immersed in their work and spending extra effort on job performance. Moreover, within most demographic groups available for comparison, DHS employees scored lower on average satisfaction and engagement than the average for the rest of the federal government. For example, within most pay categories DHS employees reported lower satisfaction and engagement than non-DHS employees in the same pay groups. Levels of satisfaction and engagement varied across components, with some components reporting scores above the non-DHS averages. Several components with lower morale, such as Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), made up a substantial share of FEVS respondents at DHS, and accounted for a significant portion of the overall difference between the department and other agencies. In addition, components that were created with the department or shortly thereafter tended to have lower morale than components that previously existed. Job satisfaction and engagement varied within components as well. For example, employees in TSA's Federal Security Director staff reported higher satisfaction (by 13 percentage points) and engagement (by 14 percentage points) than TSA's airport security screeners.

DHS has taken steps to determine the root causes of employee morale problems and implemented corrective actions, but it could strengthen its survey analyses and metrics for action plan success. To understand morale problems, DHS and selected components took steps, such as implementing an exit survey and routinely analyzing FEVS results. Components GAO selected for review—ICE, TSA, the Coast Guard, and Customs and Border Protection—conducted varying levels of analyses regarding the root causes of morale to understand leading issues that may relate to morale. DHS and the selected components planned actions to improve FEVS scores based on analyses of survey results, but GAO found that these efforts could be enhanced. Specifically, 2011 DHS-wide survey analyses did not include evaluations of demographic group differences on morale-related issues, the Coast Guard did not perform benchmarking analyses, and it was not evident from documentation the extent to which DHS and its components used root cause analyses in their action planning. Without these elements, DHS risks not being able to address the underlying concerns of its varied employee population. In addition, GAO found that despite having broad performance metrics in place to track and assess DHS employee morale on an agency-wide level, DHS does not have specific metrics within the action plans that are consistently clear and measurable. As a result, DHS's ability to assess its efforts to address employee morale problems and determine if changes should be made to ensure progress toward achieving its goals is limited.