



Highlights of [GAO-05-517T](#), a testimony to the Subcommittee on the Federal Workforce and Agency Organization, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Defense's (DOD) new human resources management system—the National Security Personnel System (NSPS)—will have far-reaching implications for civil service reform across the federal government. The 2004 National Defense Authorization Act gave DOD significant flexibilities for managing more than 700,000 defense civilian employees. Given DOD's massive size, NSPS represents a huge undertaking for DOD. DOD's initial process to design NSPS was problematic; however, DOD adjusted its approach to a more deliberative process that involved more stakeholders. NSPS could, if designed and implemented properly, serve as a model for governmentwide transformation in human capital management. However, if not properly designed and implemented, it could severely impede progress toward a more performance- and results-based system for the federal government as a whole.

On February 14, 2005, DOD and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) released for public comment the proposed NSPS regulations. This testimony (1) provides GAO's preliminary observations on selected provisions of the proposed regulations, (2) discusses the challenges DOD faces in implementing the new system, and (3) suggests a governmentwide framework to advance human capital reform.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-517T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Derek B. Stewart at (202) 512-5559 or stewartd@gao.gov.

HUMAN CAPITAL

Preliminary Observations on Proposed Department of Defense National Security Personnel System Regulations

What GAO Found

Many of the principles underlying the proposed NSPS regulations are generally consistent with proven approaches to strategic human capital management. For instance, the proposed regulations provide for (1) elements of a flexible and contemporary human resources management system—such as pay bands and pay for performance; (2) DOD to rightsize its workforce when implementing reduction-in-force orders by giving greater priority to employee performance in its retention decisions; and (3) continuing collaboration with employee representatives. The 30-day public comment period on the proposed regulations ended March 16, 2005. DOD and OPM have notified the Congress that they are preparing to begin the meet and confer process with employee representatives who provided comments on the proposed regulations. The meet and confer process is critically important because there are many details of the proposed regulations that have not been defined. (It should be noted that 10 federal labor unions have filed suit alleging that DOD failed to abide by the statutory requirements to include employee representatives in the development of DOD's new labor relations system authorized as part of NSPS.)

GAO has three primary areas of concern: the proposed regulations do not (1) define the details of the implementation of the system, including such issues as adequate safeguards to help ensure fairness and guard against abuse; (2) require, as GAO believes they should, the use of core competencies to communicate to employees what is expected of them on the job; and (3) identify a process for the continuing involvement of employees in the planning, development, and implementation of NSPS.

Going forward, GAO believes that (1) the development of the position of Deputy Secretary of Defense for Management, who would act as DOD's Chief Management Officer, is essential to elevate, integrate, and institutionalize responsibility for the success of DOD's overall business transformation efforts, including its new human resources management system; (2) DOD would benefit if it develops a comprehensive communications strategy that provides for ongoing, meaningful two-way communication that creates shared expectations among employees, employee representatives, and stakeholders; and (3) DOD must ensure that it has the institutional infrastructure in place, including a modern performance management system and an independent, efficient, effective, and credible external appeals process, to make effective use of its new authorities before they are operationalized.

GAO strongly supports the concept of modernizing federal human capital policies, including providing reasonable flexibility. The federal government needs a framework to guide human capital reform. Such a framework would consist of a set of values, principles, processes, and safeguards that would provide consistency across the federal government but be adaptable to agencies' diverse missions, cultures, and workforces.