

# **FEDERAL GOVERNMENT CASE STUDIES**

## Workforce: 3,200

### Synopsis

The Government Accountability Office's (GAO) Professional Development Program (PDP) is designed to bring new, entry-level analysts on board, get them up to speed and make them fully productive as quickly as possible. The program also serves to help retain these new hires and prepare them for diverse assignments. By carefully choreographing the first two years of a new analyst's career, GAO is executing a methodical, long-range strategy for developing future leaders. Many components of the program could be adopted by agencies of any size.

### Challenges

- **Retirements.** The profile of GAO's workforce, like that of many federal agencies, was radically reshaped by the human capital practices of the 1990s. In response to significant budget cuts from FY 1992 through 1997, GAO shrunk its field offices from 30 in FY 1992 down to 11. It reduced its workforce by 39 percent and instituted a hiring freeze for entry-level positions. The net effect of these measures was to drive up the average age of GAO's workforce and, with that, the percentage of employees approaching retirement eligibility. Looking ahead, GAO could see that 34 percent of its employees would be eligible for retirement by the end of 2004. The proportion was even higher for senior staff: 48 percent of all Band III managers (the second highest tier) and 55 percent of all Senior Executive Service members.
- **Eliminating silos.** GAO undertook a huge reorganization in 2000 so that its organizational structure would be better aligned with the agency's strategic plan. Thirty-five "issue areas"—akin to practice areas within a consulting firm—were reconfigured into thirteen teams. In the past, a GAO staffer might spend an entire career working in a narrow subject area. But in the wake of 9/11, Comptroller General David Walker felt GAO needed the flexibility to send people to where the work was. Giving new employees a variety of assignments, GAO reasoned, "would enlighten people at entry-level and break down the stovepipes" the old structure had created, explains Mark Gebicke, Managing Director of GAO's Professional Development Program.

GAO's thirteen teams include ten teams which have direct contact with the federal programs and agencies that GAO evaluates. Most PDP staff in these ten teams are called "amongst" since they will rotate to various engagements among these teams. The other three teams also work with all federal agencies and are composed of staff who have functional expertise in accounting, information technology, and research and methodology. PDP staff in these three teams are called "withins" because they will rotate to various engagements within their respective teams. An IT professional, for example, might consult with a team that's evaluating the security of the Federal Aviation Administration's system and facilities. Later, she might be assigned to a project that will assess printing and information dissemination in the federal government.

- **Refilling the leadership pipeline** As a result of these two challenges — the urgent need to prepare for retirements and the need to develop employees with the breadth of experience to handle more varied assignments — GAO began an intensive effort in 2001 to recruit new entry-level analysts and to develop them into the skilled workforce the agency will need in the future. In 2002, it hired 328 entry-level employees; 175 in 2003, 200 in 2004, and about the same number is anticipated in 2005. GAO is currently limited to roughly a one-for-one replacement policy: it hires one new person for each one who leaves the workforce.

GAO's Human Capital Strategic Plan for FY 2004-2006 (available at [www.gao.gov/new.items/d041063sp.pdf](http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d041063sp.pdf)) describes a long list of actions GAO has taken and the metrics it is using to assess those actions' outcomes. For a case study describing GAO's strategy for attracting the cream of the crop from top programs in public policy and public administration, go to the Partnership for Public Service's Solutions Center: [www.ourpublicservice.org/solutions/solutions\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=197634](http://www.ourpublicservice.org/solutions/solutions_show.htm?doc_id=197634)

### Approach

GAO is often referred to as the investigative arm of Congress or the congressional watchdog. Independent and nonpartisan, GAO studies programs and expenditures of the federal government. GAO advises Congress and the heads of executive agencies (such as Environmental Protection Agency [EPA], Department of Defense [DOD], and Health and Human Services [HHS]) about ways to make government more effective and responsive. GAO evaluates federal programs, audits federal expenditures, and issues legal opinions. When GAO reports its findings to Congress, it recommends actions. Its work leads to laws and acts that improve government operations and save billions of dollars.

Under recently passed legislation, GAO changed its name from the General Accounting Office to the Government Accountability Office.

Having written about GAO in our first study, *The Aging-and-Retiring Government Workforce: How Serious Is the Challenge? What Are Jurisdictions Doing About it?*, we would not have considered a second GAO case study—even one that focused on a different set of practices. Two things changed our mind. Asked to identify which federal agencies excel at building the next generation of leaders, most experts mentioned GAO, usually near the top of the list. And once we looked into GAO’s master plan for bringing entry-level analysts on board and rapidly developing them through rotational job assignments, we felt that a GAO case study could illustrate tactics that no other case study could.

### **GAO’s Professional Development Program**

GAO’s Professional Development Program (PDP) is designed “to maximize the orientation and education of new hires so they can operate at full capacity as quickly as possible,” says Sally Jaggar, managing director, Recruitment and Employment Services. To achieve this goal, GAO has listened well and paid close attention to the myriad small details that influence how new employees feel about their employer. They’ve also gotten the big things right. By carefully choreographing the first two years of a new analyst’s career, GAO is executing a methodical, long-range strategy for developing future leaders. Many components of the PDP could be adopted by agencies of any size.

The Professional Development Program is designed to make the entry process for newly hired analysts smooth, welcoming, and effective. By immersing PDP participants in a series of GAO teams and practice areas, the program aims to turn them into productive analysts as quickly as possible and to retain these new employees despite growing competition for their skills. “PDP is designed to make sure new analysts have tools, knowledge, information, and opportunities,” says Jaggar, “to apply those things in situations that will stretch them.”

The description that follows focuses on the PDP program at GAO’s main facility in Washington, DC. New analysts who are assigned to one of GAO’s 11 field offices also participate in the PDP program, which is designed to provide a consistent, one-GAO experience across locations.

### **The First Day of the Rest of Your Life**

“Today is the first day of the rest of your life,” is a hackneyed phrase, but GAO has taken the idea to heart. The agency had two compelling reasons to think through every aspect of the entry process: It needed to recruit substantial numbers of entry-level employees over a period of several years. And it hoped to develop and retain those new entrants long after they had learned the ropes. With that in mind, GAO designed the first days on the job the way a four-star hotel might plan the amenities for its guest rooms. Combining thoughtful touches, impeccable quality, sleek processes, and real work, the PDP aims “to maximize the orientation and education of new hires so they can operate at full capacity as quickly as possible,” says Jaggar.

In part, that’s accomplished by “making sure they’re not sitting around twiddling their thumbs,” she explains, as so often happens with a new job. “The worst thing is when people come to work the first day and their desk isn’t ready. They find other people’s candy wrappers in the drawers and their computer doesn’t arrive for a week. Our goal is to make their experience at GAO the opposite.”

To eliminate such bumps in the road, the process for bringing in new hires has been engineered to deliver a smooth and comfortable ride. It begins well before the first day of work, as soon as the new employee accepts a job offer. Once that information is entered into a computer database, it sets in motion a whole process to make sure every i is dotted and every t is crossed. The desk is cleaned, the computer readied, the payroll system primed to deliver the first paycheck on time. There is even a box, printed with the employee’s name and chock full of fresh office supplies, prepared for his or her arrival. “First impressions matter,” says Jaggar. “In those first few days on the job, new people form a lasting opinion, so it’s important that everything is ready the day you come in.”

Their first morning at GAO, new employees are met at the door by the New Hire Champion, someone who's waiting to welcome them and to introduce them to others who are also starting that day. Even the security staff is prepped to welcome the newcomers by name. The New Hire Champion shepherds them to an orientation session, where they're greeted by a senior GAO staff person, briefed on the usual first-day topics such as GAO's goals, core values, relationship to the Congress, and standards of performance. In addition, new staff are taken on a tour of the building. At the end of the morning, a member of their new team appears to take them to lunch.

But the entry process isn't just about warm welcomes and new staplers. It's also about rolling up your sleeves and getting to work. In many organizations, newcomers find there's not very much for them to do right away. That's another pitfall the PDP is designed to avoid. New recruits are trained on the telephone system and the IT infrastructure. They get started on a set of e-learning assignments that must be completed before classroom-based case study training begins. And by the end of the second day at the latest, each PDPer is already working on a client engagement.

### Learning the "GAO Way"

New recruits need to learn GAO's methodology, which is based on "generally accepted government auditing standards" laid out in the official Yellow Book. That translates, says Gebicke, to mean "the stuff you absolutely have to be familiar with to work here." It used to be that new analysts spent three weeks in the classroom to get this training. Now, they pick up the basics online, at their own pace. Then they meet for a one-week class to hash out a case study that simulates an actual GAO engagement from start to finish. They develop a work plan based on the Request Letter sent by Congress, collect and analyze data, manage prickly or uncooperative informants, conduct meetings with the target agency, present recommendations, and write the final report. They even have to submit to "indexing and referencing," the quality control process that all GAO reports undergo to make certain every sentence is verifiable by facts.

### Building Broad Competencies through Job Rotations

Another process that's set into motion each time a new entry-level analyst is hired is the PDP advising system. A GAO Advisor immediately contacts the new recruit to discuss which of GAO's practice areas might make the most interesting assignments. Perhaps she completed a paper in graduate school on counter-terrorism and would like to spend some time working on the GAO team that's studying gun control, critical infrastructure protection, or port security. Maybe he has a master's degree in public health and was hoping to be assigned to a team studying Medicare or local and state preparedness to respond to bioterrorism or other, major public-health epidemics. Over the two-year PDP program, every participant will have three team assignments, each lasting from seven-to-nine months.

Ten of GAO's 13 teams take part in the PDP job rotations. That means that PDPers will have experience working in almost a third of them by the end of the program. "That's more teams than most senior people have worked in," notes Gebicke. "They may also have better networks."

They've worked under three different managing directors and three different supervisors in three different subject areas. When they finish the program, PDPers prioritize which team they'd like to be placed in initially, while the managing directors identify which PDPers they'd like to have back. Nearly 90 percent of each class is placed in their first-choice team. But they might not stay there forever. They still could move into other areas in future years, or be tapped by a managing director whose eye they caught during a PDP rotation.

"Flexibility works for most people," says Gebicke. "Entry-level analysts usually aren't subject-matter experts, so they don't know yet which area would be most interesting." Not only do job rotations help PDPers determine their interests, they ensure that new analysts aren't "pigeon-holed the first day they start."

### Advisors

Ten PDP Advisors, chosen from among GAO's best managers, serve in the role full-time for two to three years. Their primary responsibility is to work closely with about 25 new analysts, their supervisors, and the managing directors. "It's akin to an executive coach," explains Gebicke. But unlike an executive coach, "advisors are organizational insiders. They're very experienced in the work we do and they really know their way around the organization."

Advisors manage the PDPers' job rotations, which requires year-round prospecting for potential team assignments, close communication with team leaders and supervisors, and regular meetings with each advisee. GAO calls this "progress monitoring." It's not as formal as performance management (which comes later); it's more ongoing and real-time. Advisors and each advisee discuss what new skills he or she is developing, how the current team assignment is going and how he or she is adjusting to GAO. The Advisor also looks for issues that need to be addressed with the supervisor.

Advisors meet regularly with each PDPer's supervisor for much the same conversation, ferreting out issues or problems that should be discussed and making sure the new analyst is being challenged, developing new skills, and performing well.

The Advisor, the PDPer and the team manager share joint responsibility for making sure the new analyst grows in six clearly defined areas:

- Achieving results
- Maintaining client and customer focus
- Thinking critically
- Collaborating with others
- Presenting information orally
- Presenting information in writing

In addition, new staff are briefed on the standards used to assess job performance and the opportunities for development, advancement, and recognition.

For Advisors, it's a delicate balance serving as both an advocate for the individual PDPer and a steward of GAO's long-term interests, says Gebicke.

### Managing—and Paying for— Performance

In most organizations, “performance management” is HR-speak for annual job reviews. At GAO, it's built into the PDP to be an ongoing process. The Advisors meet with team management to assess the PDP participant's progress and performance. The Advisor also helps make certain that the new analyst receives feedback from team management soon after.

Every six months, the managing or regional directors, the PDP Advisor, and team management conduct a formal performance review for each PDP participant. They discuss the participant's progress over the past six months in developing the critical skills (listed above). They also rate his or her progress on a scale of one to four. This rating determines the level of pay increase the employee receives. The highest rating earns an increase of up to a 7 percent of the base salary.

In addition, once a year PDPers are eligible for a merit based student-loan repayment of up to \$6,000.

### Building a Support Network

The on-boarding process, job rotations, Advisors, progress monitoring, and performance reviews all serve, as Jaggar puts it, to “maximize your growth and advance your career as fast as possible.” But PDPers also need a life outside of work. Even that has been factored into GAO's plan for helping new analysts make a successful, long-term match.

Each PDPer gets an officially designated “Buddy.” Buddies are different than advisors. They're coworkers and peers who may themselves be relatively new to GAO, but who've been around long enough to know the ropes. A Buddy is the person who can answer all those practical questions that a new employee—especially one who's just out of school—needs answered. Where is the nearest drug store? How do I find a permanent apartment? Even, can I wear my sandals to work?

“Buddies are there to help them acclimate to our environment and to the DC area,” explains Jaggar. “They're also there to help them get socially connected.” When the GAO hires new employees at a more senior level, chances are they already live in the area and have a family or other support network. But the PDPers are likely to be transplants and starting from scratch. Making sure they're not isolated is “just plain human courtesy,” says Jaggar. Yet it is also a smart retention tactic, one of many small touches to which GAO pays attention.

### This Job Is about Retention

Since 2000, Jaggar has headed up GAO's recruitment effort, which is one component of a much broader campaign. “This isn't just about recruitment,” she says. “It's about retention. You can do the best job in the universe getting people in the door. But the rubber hits the road when they put their toe across the threshold. Once we've made the investment to get them here, we need to maximize the chance they'll be effective.”

### Using Research to Design and Refine a Program

GAO's strategy to recruit, develop, and retain new analysts shows passionate commitment to getting both the big and the little things right. Yet it's a commitment that goes beyond virtuous practices; it's deeply grounded in hard data.

Jaggar and her staff have mined relevant data wherever they could find it to understand which factors are most influential when new graduates decide where they'll work. They've looked at survey data from the National Association of Colleges and Employers, the Brookings Institution, and the Partnership for Public Service. GAO also conducts its own research. The results have shaped the agency's recruitment, retention, and development strategy for entry-level analysts and have helped to refine it.

- **Follow-up Survey for New Staff.** GAO surveys all new employees after their first week on the job. The anonymous online survey queries them about their experiences as prospective job applicants: How useful was agency's web site? What led them to consider a job at GAO? How did they feel about specific aspects of the recruiting and hiring process? Which factors influenced their decision to accept GAO's job offer? And how satisfied were they with the orientation and the nuts-and-bolts of their new workspace and equipment?

■ **Exit Survey.** All employees are asked to complete an anonymous online survey when they leave GAO. The survey queries them about what they will be doing once they leave. They're asked to rate which factors influenced their decision to leave and to answer specific question about the work environment; supervisor and recognition they experienced at GAO; opportunities and benefits available at other organizations; and personal factors that may have influenced their departure. The survey asks how they would rate GAO as an employer. Finally, in a section of the survey called "Parting Words," they have the opportunity to write open-ended comments about GAO's products and services and its management.

As with the new staff survey, the exit survey's results can be segmented to identify factors that contribute to turnover within specific groups of employees, including analysts who have been at the agency for only a few years.

■ **Annual Employee Feedback Survey.** GAO surveys all employees every year to assess their satisfaction with various aspects of their jobs at GAO and to measure the agency's progress in areas that have been targeted for improvement. Although most of the survey questions are closed-ended, there is space for narrative comments. Each comment is read personally by the Comptroller General.

That's not the extent of GAO's employee research. The agency also maintains a knowledge-and-skills inventory that each employee updates biannually to assist in workforce planning and engagement staffing. On alternate years, employees can voluntarily complete a "preference survey" that gives them the opportunity to be considered for a new team should they wish to change teams. And, like all federal agencies, GAO can compare its responses to OPM's biannual federal employee survey for 2002 and 2004, and to responses from other agencies' employees.

GAO's ambitious level of employee research, its analysis of workforce data (such as attrition, performance, and career progress), and its evaluation of developmental programs such as PDP set the standard for data-driven human capital strategy. GAO hasn't just aped the tactics of other agencies simply because they've been designated as "best practice." It has defined its most critical target groups—prospective job applicants and current employees whom it needs to groom for future leadership. It has carefully investigated which factors can have the greatest impact on GAO's ability to execute its human capital strategy. And then, grounded in that empirical data, it has developed approaches such as the PDP and evaluated their impacts. It's the rigor of GAO's methods combined with the thoughtfulness of its practices that make it stand out.

GAO's active program of employee research, its analysis of workforce data, and its evaluation of programs such as the PDP set the standard for data-driven human capital strategy.

## Cost

The primary cost to GAO is the ten Advisors' annual salaries, which can range from \$70-110,000 each. That makes the program "not inexpensive," says Jaggard "but we think it is a good investment." The pay-off must be measured against GAO's bottom-line needs: "We have to have the right people to do GAO work. We have to get them up to speed as quickly as possible. And this has to be a good work environment so they want to stay."

The PDP program is staffed by Gebicke, three regional directors, and the Advisors. The PDP is a collateral responsibility for the regional directors. However, the backbone of the program is the many first-line supervisors who provide the critical on-the-job training day in and day out.

## Evaluation

Since GAO implemented the PDP in 2001, nearly 900 GAO staff have completed the program or are currently enrolled.

GAO evaluates the PDP program several ways.

■ **Survey of PDP Participants and their Supervisors.** GAO surveyed employees who participated in the PDP between September 1, 2003 and September 1, 2004. Current and previous supervisors of PDPers and the Managing Directors of GAO's 13 teams were also surveyed. (See sidebar on next page for selected results of this survey.)

■ **Retention of PDPers during and after the program.** The annual attrition rate for GAO's workforce is 8 percent, including retirements. Like other organizations, GAO sees slightly higher turnover rates among recent hires than among employees with longer tenure. Yet GAO's annual attrition rate is about 10 percent for Band I (entry-level) staff, which compares favorably to an annual rate of about 17 percent for new federal employees. Since the PDP's inception in 2001, 84 percent of former and current participants are still at GAO.

While it's too soon to know about the program's long-term impacts, 70 percent of PDPers surveyed in 2004 plan to remain at GAO for more than three years. There's anecdotal evidence, says Gebicke, that "quite a few are moving up very quickly" in the organization, although GAO has not formally analyzed their career progress.

**Future Challenges**

Responsible for closely monitoring the PDP’s design and outcomes, Gebicke notes several issues that have recently emerged:

- **Recognizing previous job experience.** From 60 to 65 percent of entry-level hires already have professional work experience. Their supervisor needs to adjust his or her expectations accordingly. That’s exactly the sort of issue Advisors can pay attention to when they talk to PDP participants and their managers.
- **The optimum length for a rotational assignment.** The original concept was for rotational assignments to last approximately six months. In practice, they are more likely to last two-to-three months longer. If the PDPper can contribute to a project’s final product—drafting testimony that will be delivered to Congress, for example, or helping to write a report—they should get that opportunity, says Gebicke, rather than being redeployed to another project team.
- **Adjusting the performance management cycle.** Because job rotations last longer, GAO may need to adjust the timing of performance reviews so they’re in sync with the rotations.

**Selected Results from 2004 Survey of PDP Graduates and Their Supervisors**

**82 percent of PDP staff indicated that they would probably or definitely accept employment at GAO if they had to do it again.**

- 13 percent were uncertain.
- 5 percent would probably or definitely not accept employment.

**A majority of respondents indicated that they plan to stay at GAO more than 3 years.**

- 70 percent plan to stay more than 3 years.
- 26 percent plan to stay between 1 and 3 years.
- 4 percent plan to stay less than 1 year.

**A higher percentage of field respondents plan to stay more than 3 years.**

- Among field respondents, 83 percent plan to stay more than 3 years.
- Among HQ respondents, 64 percent plan to stay more than 3 years.

**How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the progress of the Band I employee you supervise in meeting each of the following expectations of new employees?**

