

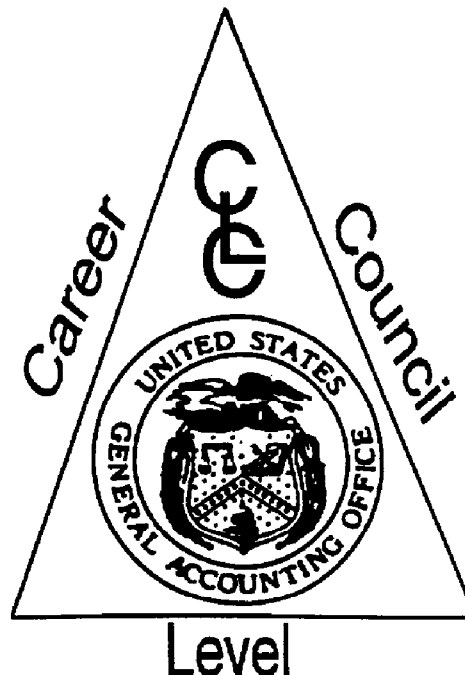
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Testimony Before the Committee on
Government Operations,
House of Representatives

October 28, 1993

GAO CAREER LEVEL COUNCIL

Issues Important to GAO's
Career Level Staff



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Introduction

Good Morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:
My name is Kelly Wolslayer. I am a Band I evaluator in the Accounting and Information Management Division, and I serve as the Chair of GAO's Career Level Council, also known as the CLC. I am accompanied by Craig Hall, the Vice Chair of the CLC. Craig works in the Norfolk Regional Office.

We are pleased to accept the Committee's invitation to present our views on issues affecting career level staff at GAO. In general, career level staff are proud to work for GAO because it contributes toward improving government operations. And, because of our professionalism and commitment to maintaining quality in our work, we seek ways to improve our organization. Within this context, we would like to address some areas of concern to career level staff. These issues fall into three categories: the effect of GAO's budget reductions on the ability to do our work, staff performance assessments, and organizational matters. Our statement reflects a composite of comments solicited from CLC constituents in the headquarters offices, the 14 regional offices, and the two overseas offices.

Background

The CLC was established to provide a means for career level professional staff to express, through their representatives, ideas, opinions, and recommendations to GAO's top management on policies, procedures, and work environment. We represent about 1,400 staff, including band I evaluators (who were designated as GS-7 through 12 before GAO adopted broad banding), computer scientists, editors, auditors, attorneys, personnel specialists, and other nonevaluator staff in grades GS-7 through 12. Career level staff perform many tasks, including collecting and analyzing data, supervising, and drafting reports.

Budget Reductions

Past reductions in GAO budgets have limited the resources, including staffing, technology, and travel, that are available for career level staff to do our work. The uncertainties about GAO's future budget levels and our workforce size cause continuing concerns for career level staff.

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Staffing

The career level staff are concerned that continued downsizing of GAO will lead to reductions in force (RIF), increased workloads for remaining staff, and an erosion of the collective technical skills of GAO as a whole. While the CLC has no indication that RIFs will be used to reduce the GAO staff, it remains a possibility. However, we are pleased that Congress has given GAO the "go ahead" for early retirement incentives as an alternative to RIFs. We are also quite concerned about the potential of fewer staff being able to meet the demands for GAO work. For example, between fiscal years 1988 and 1992, our workload increased by over 200 assignments, while GAO staff decreased by about 100. In 1993, GAO reduced its staff by about an additional 200. Finally, the hiring freeze will preclude GAO from bringing in new staff with knowledge of "cutting edge" technology and analytical skills.

Career Advancement

The outlook for our career advancement is uncertain in view of GAO's downsizing and the hiring freeze. Promotion opportunities have already been limited over the last few years, and, as GAO downsizes, the number of Band II and equivalent GS openings will probably be even fewer. For example, last year in one GAO division, the number of promotions decreased by about one-third. Many career level staff are now performing duties typically performed by mid-level staff and are qualified for promotion, but may not be promoted. The hiring freeze also limits opportunities for career level staff to gain supervisory experience.

Technology Resources

Although GAO has made progress in updating its technological capabilities, career level staff feel there is not enough sophisticated software or hardware to enable all staff to do their work as efficiently as possible. Staff are concerned that budget reductions will exacerbate this situation.

Two areas of technology in which GAO has made progress in supporting its staff are modernizing the telephone system and making video conferencing more widely available. The new telephone system with its voice mail capabilities is a vast improvement over the previous telephone system. Video conferencing has helped regional and headquarters staff assigned to the same job share information more frequently. The voice and data transmission capabilities available through these systems have im-

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proved efficiency and communications in GAO, both internally and externally.

With respect to computer resources, we believe it is extremely important that such resources not be made a target for helping to bring about GAO's downsizing. Although almost all of the career level staff have computers available to them, many of these computers are outdated and do not support the most capable analytical software. Indeed, many GAO staff perform their analyses and prepare their products with obsolete computers. We are concerned that GAO is not able to achieve the enhanced productivity and improved quality of analyses that new technology could provide.

Because we lack certain computer resources, GAO audits can be negatively affected. In extreme cases, GAO jobs have been limited, or their focus changed, so that staff can work around a shortfall in computing power. Such situations impair our ability to do our work in the most thorough and responsive manner.

GAO staff will continue to do their best to perform their work with the equipment they are given. However, the current situation leads to staff frustration and, we believe, underutilization of staff skills.

Travel

Decreasing budgets have also reduced travel funds, which could adversely affect our ability to perform quality work and has reduced developmental opportunities for career level staff. Doing our work often requires considerable travel to obtain information, conduct interviews, and review documents. Often, there is no other way to collect the data we need. In some cases, limited travel funding has forced us to scale back the scope of the assignment. In other cases, we have had to find alternative methods to obtain the necessary data. Restricted travel funds have also limited developmental opportunities for career level staff. For example, attendance at critical internal job meetings is often not possible as there simply is not enough travel money to send every team member. It is most often the career level staff who are excluded.

Performance Assessment

The second major area of concern to career level staff is GAO's reward and compensation system, specifically pay for performance (PFP). PFP is GAO's performance, recognition, and reward system. We agree with the principles of PFP in GAO, but we have concerns about how it is used

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because of the difficulty in quantifying and comparing individual staff performance. Staff who do not receive bonuses or merit pay increases often do not know the reasons why; as a result, their morale may suffer. GAO has made a number of changes to PFP in response to staff criticisms, including removing arbitrary limits on the percentage of staff who may receive bonuses and merit pay increases. The CLC believes the changes could help improve career level staff satisfaction with the PFP process. We understand other efforts are underway in this area, including an effort to examine the long-term future of GAO's compensation system and a pilot project in a regional office to award team bonuses. However, the recent indication that there will probably be no bonuses this year because of budget difficulties will not engender much faith in GAO's commitment to the system.

Organizational Matters

Lastly, organizational issues, such as report processing, internal communications, and total quality management, are important to career level staff. GAO has initiatives underway that may address some of our concerns.

Report Processing

Career level staff are concerned with the length of time it takes to process GAO products. The agency has recognized that the current report processing procedures used to produce quality products take longer than necessary. In general, report processing refers to the period between the production of the first draft and issuance of the final product. GAO reports go through many reviews to ensure that they are convincing and complete and that they maintain the quality and objectivity that is expected of all GAO products. We believe the current process generally improves the quality of GAO reports but sometimes costs more in timeliness than it adds in quality. GAO has a number of efforts underway to identify ways to shorten the review process while ensuring the product quality that Congress has come to expect.

Communication

Currently, many staff are concerned about the lack of communication within GAO. For example, on policies that affect career level staff and our working conditions, we are often not asked for our input until after a

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decision is reached. This situation has contributed, in some cases, to an atmosphere of mistrust between management and staff. Improved communication could contribute to a more open environment, promote management respect for staff, and increase employee morale.

Total Quality Management

Although many staff have expressed concern with the limited results of GAO's Total Quality Management (TQM) efforts to date, career level staff support the principles of TQM. On the whole, career level staff believe a successful implementation of the TQM program can improve communication and efficiency at GAO. TQM initiatives undertaken thus far have begun to open the lines of communication and helped the staff to see that GAO is interested in continuous improvement.

Conclusion

In summary, CLC concerns focus on constraints to doing our jobs. Even with resource limitations, performance assessment concerns, cumbersome report review, and communication difficulties, staff put quality first and make the necessary adjustments. Because of the nature of the work GAO does, we tend to be highly critical of ourselves as well as of the agencies we review. As a result, we often identify weaknesses within GAO and voice our concerns. Although all of us would agree that GAO is not perfect, the CLC believes GAO is making a concerted effort to become a more effective organization. CLC has and will continue to work with management on many issues, including those discussed today, to ensure that GAO continues to meet the needs of both its customers and staff.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes our formal statement. We would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.