

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-132](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on the Judiciary, U. S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government annually spends millions of dollars on executive training programs administered by external training providers. GAO was asked to review the costs and value of this training. This review (1) describes what is known about how much CHCO Council agencies have spent on executive training offered by external providers and assesses the reliability of available cost data; (2) assesses how CHCO Council agencies evaluate the effectiveness of the training; (3) compares executive training efficiency opportunities identified by agency CHCOs to leading practices; and (4) provides views of career SES and SES candidates from selected agencies on the value of the training they received. GAO obtained information from CHCO Council agencies through a questionnaire, and selected three of 26 CHCO Council agencies—the Departments of Energy, Treasury, and Veterans Affairs—to provide illustrative examples. GAO based its selection, in part, on workforce size, number of career SES, and total training costs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OPM (1) establish interim milestones for meeting with agencies to address training data deficiencies and establish time frames for improving the reliability of agency data, (2) share information and examples of how agencies have evaluated the impact of executive training on agency mission and goals, and (3) assess potential efficiencies identified by agencies for possible government-wide implementation. OPM concurred with the recommendations and has taken useful steps. GAO still believes that more effective activities can be taken.

View [GAO-14-132](#). For more information, contact Yvonne D. Jones at (202) 512-2717 or Jonesy@gao.gov.

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HUMAN CAPITAL

Agencies Should More Fully Evaluate the Costs and Benefits of Executive Training

What GAO Found

Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCO) from 26 agencies reported that, from fiscal years 2008 through 2012, they spent almost \$57 million (in constant 2012 dollars) on executive training provided by external providers. CHCOs reported using the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Federal Executive Institute and the Harvard Kennedy School of Government most often. Agencies are required to maintain records of training plans, expenditures, activities, and (since 2006) to report training data to OPM. However, half of the CHCOs reported data to GAO that they deemed incomplete, or with limitations. For example, two agencies did not include travel related costs; one did not include costs for course materials; another did not include costs from all components. OPM officials agree that training cost data reported by agencies continues to be unreliable, and is probably lower than actual agency expenditures. OPM officials said they are meeting with agencies to address data deficiencies. However, OPM has not set interim milestones for meeting with agencies or established a timeframe to improve reporting. One leading practice is to establish such interim milestones and timeframes, in order to demonstrate progress towards achieving goals. By not establishing interim milestones and timeframes for improving the reliability of executive training cost data, OPM may be missing an opportunity to better position itself to hold agencies accountable for improving their data.

Most CHCOs reported evaluating participant reaction and changing their training programs based on participant input, but fewer reported assessing training impact on agency mission. Agencies are required by statute and OPM implementing regulations to evaluate how well training programs contribute to mission accomplishment and performance goals. OPM is not sharing lessons learned from agencies that have experience assessing executive training impact on agency mission. However, OPM acknowledged that some agencies struggle with these evaluations; in response, OPM has issued guidance on the subject. CHCOs cited time, costs, and difficulty as reasons for not conducting the required evaluations and reported the need for additional OPM assistance. Eight agencies reported conducting these evaluations and may have lessons learned from which other agencies could benefit. For example, VA has a process for assessing the impact of executive training on its mission that it has used to make better training investment decisions.

CHCOs identified opportunities for agencies and OPM to achieve efficiencies in executive training. CHCOs said agencies could (1) increase interagency cooperation by sharing training facilities and expanding eligibility to Senior Executive Service (SES) candidates from other agencies, and (2) implement or expand computer-based training. CHCOs also said OPM could, among other things, (1) help centralize training offerings by creating a centrally funded SES candidate development program, and (2) assist agencies in identifying programs open to other agencies and departments. By not assessing lessons learned and other efficiencies identified by agencies, OPM may be missing an opportunity to better position agencies to achieve these efficiencies in executive training.

Career SES and SES candidates generally said external executive training is useful and valuable, but suggested that it would be more cost-effective for the government to negotiate prices as a large-scale buyer, versus individual agencies purchasing training.