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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-06-201T, a testimony before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, U.S. Senate

VETERANS AFFAIRS

The Role of the Chief Information Officer in Effectively Managing Information Technology

Why GAO Did This Study

In carrying out its mission of serving the nation's veterans and their dependents, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) relies extensively on information technology (IT), for which it is requesting about $2.1 billion in fiscal year 2006. VA's vision is to integrate its IT resources and streamline interactions with customers, so that it can provide services and information to veterans more quickly and effectively.

Fully exploiting the potential of IT to improve performance is a challenging goal for VA, as it is throughout government. The Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996 addressed this challenge by, among other things, establishing the position of chief information officer (CIO) to serve as the focal point for information and technology management within departments and agencies.

As agreed with the Committee, GAO will discuss the role of CIOs in the federal government and in the private sector, as well as provide a historical perspective on the roles and responsibilities of VA's CIO. In developing this testimony, GAO relied on its previous work at VA and on the CIO role, including a 2004 review of CIOs at major departments and agencies and a 2005 review of CIOs at leading private-sector organizations.
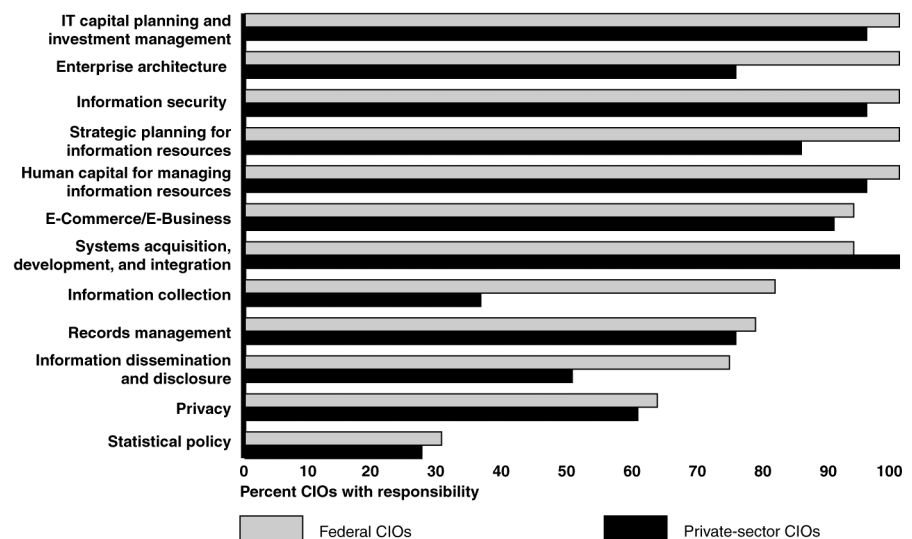
www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-201T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Linda Koontz at (202) 512-6240 or koontzl@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

In the federal government and in the private sector, the responsibilities and challenges of CIOs are largely similar. In most management areas, the federal and private-sector organizations reviewed showed little difference in the percentage of CIOs who had or shared a particular responsibility (see figure). The challenges cited by private-sector CIOs were also similar to those of federal CIOs: both groups cited improving IT management processes, developing IT leadership and skills, working with enterprise architectures, and ensuring the security of systems.

Over time, VA has increased its attention to the CIO position and to information and technology management. After several years with CIOs whose primary duty was not information and technology management or who were serving in an acting capacity, the department appointed a full-time permanent CIO in August 2001. VA also recognized that its decentralized computing environment presented challenges, with a large proportion of the department's IT budget controlled by its administrations and staff offices. As a result, in 2002, the department proposed a realignment to strengthen the department-level CIO position and centralize IT management under this official. GAO has not reviewed the current status of this proposed realignment or VA's current organizational structure, but its view is that the realignment held promise for improving accountability and helping to accomplish VA's mission by increasing the CIO's oversight over IT management and spending.

Comparison of the Extent to Which Private-Sector and Federal CIOs Are Responsible for Management Areas

Source: GAO.