



441 G St. N.W.  
Washington, DC 20548

October 26, 2023

The Honorable Gina M. Raimondo  
Secretary of Commerce

**International Trade Administration: Global Markets Employee Focus Groups Raise Workforce Management Concerns**

Dear Secretary Raimondo:

The Global Markets (GM) unit in the Department of Commerce’s International Trade Administration (ITA) supports U.S. businesses by assisting them in increasing their exports and entering new international markets, advancing U.S. business interests abroad, and attracting investment in the U.S. economy. At the end of fiscal year 2021, GM had about 1,440 employees. These included Foreign Commercial Service Officers in 76 countries, as well as Civil Service staff in U.S. field offices in metropolitan areas around the country and at GM headquarters in Washington, D.C.<sup>1</sup>

In a May 2023 report, we found that Commerce should improve GM’s workforce planning and management.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, we found that GM had limited funding increases and a decreasing federal workforce, did not document some staffing allocation procedures, lacked a comprehensive workforce plan, and had difficulty providing core human capital services, among other issues. We made four recommendations, which Commerce agreed to implement. We recommended that Commerce (1) document the processes for updating staff allocation models, (2) regularly review the need for positions that exceed model recommendations, (3) develop a comprehensive workforce plan, and (4) address human capital office vacancies.

During our audit work for that report, in April 2022 and May 2022, we conducted six virtual focus group sessions with a total of 35 GM employees to obtain their perspectives on GM’s workforce planning and management. Of the six focus groups, two each were composed of participants from (1) headquarters, (2) overseas, and (3) the U.S. field. The focus group sessions involved structured small-group discussions designed to gather in-depth information about specific workforce management issues. In each focus group session, we asked a series of discussion questions as well as five polling questions.

The Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the Consolidated Appropriations Act for fiscal year 2021 included a provision for us to assess aspects of Global Market’s workforce and management. Your staff asked us to provide additional information on the perspectives of participants in the focus group sessions conducted for our May 2023 report. This report

<sup>1</sup>GM also employs locally employed staff, who are foreign nationals working at posts overseas. In fiscal year 2021, GM employed 698 locally employed staff. We did not conduct focus group sessions with locally employed staff overseas and did not include them in the scope of this report.

<sup>2</sup>GAO, *Export Promotion: Commerce Should Improve Workforce Planning and Management of Its Global Markets Unit*, [GAO-23-105369](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 11, 2023).

describes the range of perspectives across focus groups by type of participant on several selected workforce management areas. These areas include (1) human capital activities, (2) resources, (3) organizational structure, (4) collaboration and coordination, (5) administrative functions and technology, and (6) agency mission and impact. More information on our findings in each of these areas can be found in enclosure 1.

In summary, the following six themes emerged from our analyses of the focus group discussions, in order, starting with the most frequently discussed:

1. **Human capital activities:** Participants discussed issues related to hiring; vacancies and succession planning; employee career progression; and diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA).
2. **Resources:** Headquarters participants raised concerns about the timing of the budget cycle, overseas participants highlighted increasing administrative costs, and U.S. field participants noted strong concerns about understaffing.
3. **Organizational structure:** Participants differed on the effects of GM's workforce structure. Headquarters participants raised concerns about GM's leadership consisting mostly of Foreign Service Officers, while overseas and U.S. field participants raised concerns about the organization being too focused on headquarters operations.
4. **Collaboration and coordination:** Headquarters participants cited positive collaboration and coordination efforts, while overseas and U.S. field participants discussed challenges in this area.
5. **Administrative functions and technology:** Participants discussed a lack of formal processes for administrative functions and a lack of technology that would help them collaborate more effectively and better serve U.S. business clients.
6. **Agency mission and impact:** Participants discussed various concerns regarding GM's mission, branding, and performance metrics.

Obtaining employee input is a component of workforce management leading practices. Focus groups are not methodologically designed to measure the extent or magnitude of a problem or generalize results to a larger population of all GM employees. Nevertheless, these findings provide a cross-section of thoughts and ideas that may be similar or different across the groupings of participants. More information on our objective, scope, and methodology can be found in enclosure 2.

We conducted this performance audit from April 2023 to October 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

### **Agency Comments**

We provided a draft of this report to Commerce for review and comment. ITA provided comments via email, stating that ITA values all channels of employee feedback and recognizes the themes raised in the draft report, while also highlighting its commitment to enhancing workforce planning and management within GM.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-8612 or [gianopoulosk@gao.gov](mailto:gianopoulosk@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. In addition to the contact named above, Adam Cowles (Assistant Director), Brian Hackney (Analyst in Charge), Debbie Chung, Chris Keblitis, Terry Richardson, and Nicole Willems made key contributions to this report. Other staff who made key contributions to the May 2023 report cited in this report were James Boohaker, Bethany Gracer, Samantha Jorgensen, Adam Peterson, Marc Rockmore, and Mona Sehgal.

We are sending copies of this report to your office and the appropriate congressional committees. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

Sincerely yours,



Kimberly Gianopoulos  
Director, International Affairs and Trade

Enclosures – 2

cc: The Honorable Jeanne Shaheen  
Chair  
The Honorable Jerry Moran  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate

The Honorable Hal Rogers  
Chair  
The Honorable Matt Cartwright  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies  
Committee on Appropriations  
House of Representatives

## Enclosure 1: GM Employee Perspectives on Six Selected Workforce Management Areas

### Human Capital Activities

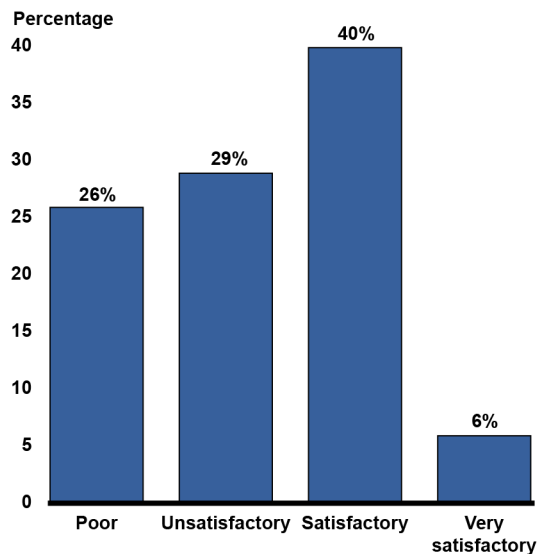
#### Focus Group Participants Identified Challenges in Hiring, Career Progression, Succession Planning, and DEIA Efforts

In May 2023, we found that Global Markets (GM) did not have a comprehensive workforce plan and that both the Department of Commerce’s International Trade Administration (ITA) and GM had difficulty in providing core human capital services to their employees.<sup>3</sup> ITA and GM manage GM’s workforce activities in a fragmented way, depending on each component of the workforce. ITA’s Human Capital Division manages Civil Service employees, while GM’s Office of Global Talent Management manages overseas Foreign Commercial Service Officers.

We asked a polling question about focus group participants’ perspectives on ITA’s and GM’s performance related to human capital management. Participants were split on their responses. Collectively, 54 percent of all participants said the quality of human capital management was “poor” or “unsatisfactory,” while 46 percent said it was “satisfactory” or “very satisfactory.” See figure 1.

**Figure 1: Focus Group Ratings of Global Markets’ Human Capital Management**

We asked participants, “How would you rate Global Markets’ or the International Trade Administration’s (depending on which entity directly provides these services) performance related to human capital management?” (n=35)



Source: GAO analysis of focus group participant polling responses. | GAO-24-106747

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

<sup>3</sup>In May 2023, we made two recommendations related to these issues: Commerce should ensure that (1) there is a workforce plan that comprehensively and strategically considers GM’s entire overseas and domestic workforce and describes leadership action to improve diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility; and (2) the Director General of Global Markets takes steps to address staffing vacancies in the Office of Global Talent Management. [GAO-23-105369](#).

We asked participants in each of the six focus groups several questions about GM's human capital activities, which was the most-discussed topic across all six focus groups. Participants discussed the following issues:

- *Hiring:* Participants expressed concerns about recruiting, advertising positions, interviewing and electing candidates, and onboarding new hires. For example, headquarters participants said the process can sometimes take up to 15 months, while some participants noted difficulties in onboarding interns. Participants said that hiring time frames have been shortening but expressed concerns that they still may not be short enough.
- *Career progression:* Participants said that, once hired, employees experience a lack of transparency in their career path, including a shortage of training programs that allow them to progress to higher ranks. Overseas participants said the promotion process can be opaque and voiced concerns about who serves on promotion assessment panels. U.S. field participants said they do not believe they can be promoted above the General Schedule 13 level, which makes it difficult to progress within the agency.
- *Succession planning:* Participants said they often have to contend with vacancies and a loss of knowledge retention when employees leave the agency. They said that, although GM has begun to ensure continuity of mission by implementing a risk-based approach that includes exit interviews, the effort is still in the beginning phases.<sup>4</sup>
- *Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA):* Participants across all six focus groups also discussed their perspectives on GM's efforts on DEIA issues. While some participants said that GM has made progress in this area, others cited concerns. For example, participants said that some groups of people appear not to be as valued as other groups.<sup>5</sup> In May 2023, we found that ITA and GM had established affinity groups of employees that could help inform leadership about specific DEIA-related concerns.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, we heard concerns about a commitment to DEIA. We heard that promotion assessment panels tend to be mostly male, which may inadvertently affect the number of women selected for promotion, which may in turn contribute to women feeling that they are treated unfairly and valued less than their male counterparts. We also heard that a participant was told to deemphasize traits that "sound too feminine" in

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<sup>4</sup>For our May 2023 report, ITA officials told us that ITA had developed a succession planning program for Civil Service staff in the U.S. field and at headquarters who were eligible for retirement. The program has three phases and is currently in the first phase. [GAO-23-105369](#).

<sup>5</sup>In May 2023, we found that, from fiscal years 2014 through 2021, the percentage of White GM employees decreased from 76 percent to 72 percent, while the overall proportion of Black or African American and Asian American employees remained constant, and the proportion of Hispanic or Latino employees increased from 6 percent to 9 percent. In addition, we found the proportion of younger employees at GM increased during that period, while that of older employees decreased. We also found that, in fiscal year 2014, women made up about 55 percent of the Civil Service (292 of 530 employees) and about 34 percent of the Foreign Commercial Service (90 of 264 employees). In fiscal year 2021, women made up about 54 percent of the Civil Service (263 of 484 employees) and about 35 percent of the Foreign Commercial Service (92 of 260 employees). [GAO-23-105369](#).

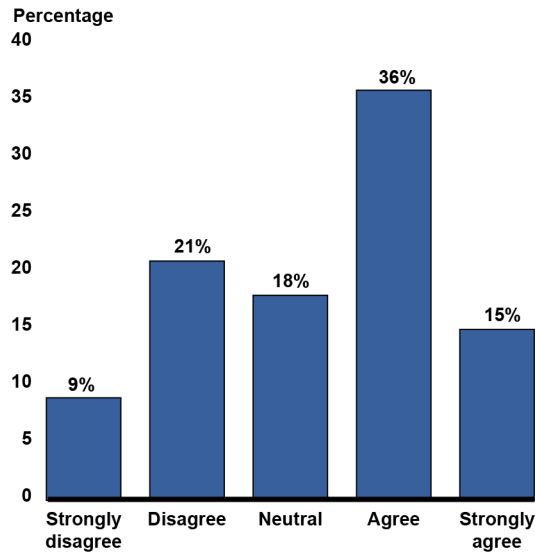
<sup>6</sup>We met with employee affinity groups and reported on their perspectives on GM's DEIA efforts. For example, some members of GM's Blacks Building Opportunities to Leverage Diversity group noted a general lack of diversity at different levels of the organization, ranging from the leadership to incoming staff. In addition, some members of the Women's Commercial Officer Group noted that they believed GM makes promotion decisions in an informal, obscure fashion that seems linked to personal networks favoring White men in the organization. [GAO-23-105369](#).

promotion applications—such as an interest in helping other people—because it could negatively affect promotion potential. We also heard that senior levels of GM leadership lack racial diversity.

We asked another polling question about the extent to which participants agreed that GM employees have an equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of race, gender, or other characteristics. Fifty-two percent of all participants responded that they either “agreed” or “strongly agreed,” 30 percent said they either “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed,” and the remaining 18 percent responded “neutral.” See figure 2.

**Figure 2: Focus Group Ratings of the Extent to Which Global Markets Employees Have an Equal Opportunity to Succeed**

We asked participants about the extent to which they agreed with the statement, “All Global Markets employees have an equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of race, gender, or other characteristics.” (n=33)



Source: GAO analysis of focus group participant polling responses. | GAO-24-106747

Note: Two participants did not respond to this question. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

## Resources

### Focus Group Participants Cited Budgetary and Staffing Resource Concerns and Agreed that Resource Levels Limit GM from Meeting Its Mission

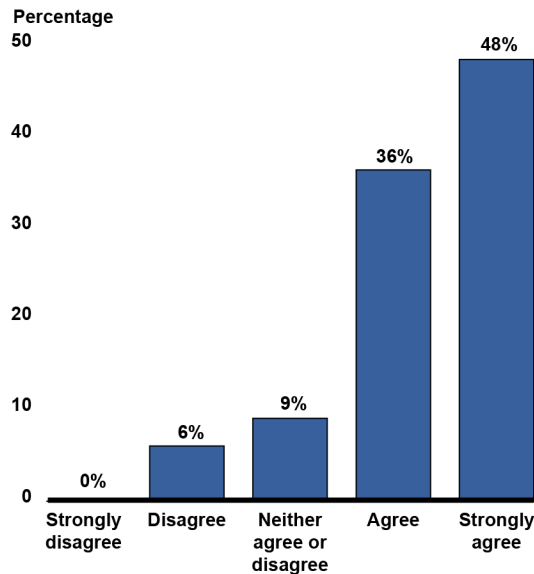
In May 2023, we found that GM had received limited funding increases from ITA’s allocations since 2014, while its federal employee workforce had decreased by 7 percent.<sup>7</sup> GM’s costs for administrative services accounted for an increasing share of GM’s total obligations, which has meant funding available for payroll and other expenses has remained relatively constant each fiscal year since 2014.

<sup>7</sup>From fiscal years 2014 through 2021, GM’s net funding available for obligation remained consistent, not changing annually by more than 4 percent. Although GM’s payroll obligations consistently averaged 54 percent of total obligations, service costs paid to Commerce and the Department of State increased from 23 percent to 32 percent. Staffing levels for GM’s federal employees declined by about 7 percent because of the increasing service costs and vacancies created by attrition, according to GM officials. [GAO-23-105369](#).

We asked participants in all six focus groups whether they agreed with the statement, “GM's current resource level limits its ability to meet its mission.” Participants generally agreed that GM’s current resource level limits its ability to meet its mission. More specifically, 28 of the 33 participants who responded (85 percent) either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement, “GM’s resource level limits its ability to meet its mission.” See figure 3.

**Figure 3: Focus Group Ratings of the Extent to Which Global Markets’ Resource Level Limits Its Ability to Meet Its Mission**

We asked participants about the extent to which they agreed with the statement, “Global Markets’ current resource level limits its ability to meet its mission.” (n=33)



Source: GAO analysis of focus group participant polling responses. | GAO-24106747

Notes: Two participants did not respond to this question. No participants responded, “strongly disagree.” Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

We asked participants in all six focus groups about their perspectives on GM’s budgetary and staffing resources. Resources were the second most-discussed topic across the six focus groups, but concerns varied across groups. Headquarters participants raised concerns about the timing of the budget cycle, while overseas participants highlighted increasing administrative costs and U.S. field participants noted strong concerns about understaffing.

- **Headquarters:** Participants at headquarters said that GM’s funding arrives at different times each fiscal year, which makes it difficult to plan and budget for staffing activities such as hiring. Headquarters focus group participants also noted the difficulty in reorganizing GM’s staffing profile to reflect changing administration priorities, such as increased emphasis on export promotion in Africa.
- **Overseas:** Participants in the overseas focus groups said that increasing administrative costs overseas, such as embassy security charges, have resulted in fewer available resources for travel to trade shows and other mission-related activities. Overseas participants said the Department of State has control over many of the administrative costs, with limited input or negotiating ability from Commerce. Overseas participants also said that staffing levels in headquarters and U.S. field offices are sometimes insufficient to adequately support the Foreign Service Officers’ (FSO) mission-related work.

- *U.S. field:* Participants in both U.S. field focus groups raised concerns about understaffing. They said that many of their offices around the country are staffed by one person, which can significantly increase workload. They also said they often have to generate additional funding by holding webinars and charging fees to pay for activities such as professional development and travel.

Organizational Structure

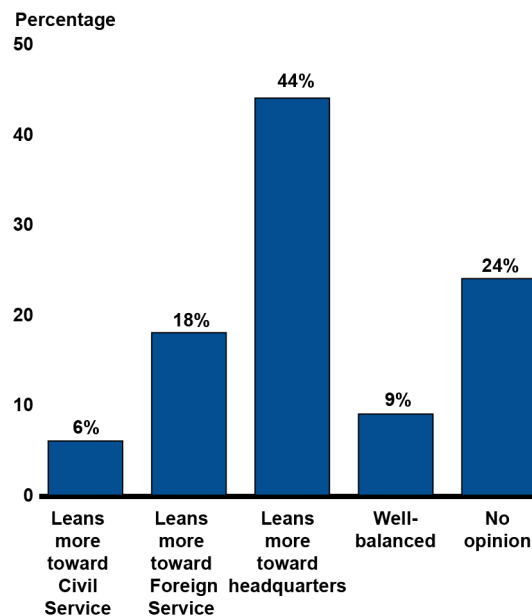
Focus Group Participants Differed on the Effects of GM’s Workforce Structure

Commerce established GM in a 2013 ITA reorganization when it merged the U.S. and Foreign Commercial Service with the Market Access and Compliance unit. GM has undergone two reorganizations since then with the goal of creating a more flexible organizational structure and enhanced resource management.<sup>8</sup> GM’s current federal workforce includes Civil Service employees in the U.S. field and headquarters, as well as Foreign Commercial Service Officers posted overseas.

We asked focus group participants a polling question about the balance of staff across the three components of GM’s workforce. Nearly half (44 percent) of the participants said it leaned more toward headquarters, while only 9 percent said it was well-balanced. See figure 4.

**Figure 4: Focus Group Ratings of the Balance of Global Markets’ Workforce**

We asked participants, “How would you characterize the balance between Foreign Service, U.S. field, and headquarters staff within Global Markets?” (n=34)



Source: GAO analysis of focus group participant polling responses. | GAO-24-106747

Notes: One participant did not respond to this question. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

<sup>8</sup>Although GM has taken steps to consolidate its workforce, we found that challenges remain regarding divided organizational purpose, weak brand identity, and transparency of staffing. [GAO-23-105369](#).



We asked participants in all six focus groups about their perspectives on GM's organizational structure, including their thoughts on the balance of staff across (1) headquarters, (2) overseas, and (3) the U.S. field. GM's organizational structure was the third most-discussed topic across the six focus groups. Headquarters participants raised concerns about GM's leadership consisting mostly of Foreign Service Officers, while overseas and U.S. field participants raised concerns about the organization being too focused on headquarters activities.

- *Headquarters:* Participants in both headquarters focus groups voiced concerns about GM's structure. We heard that the restructuring that led to the creation of GM in 2013 placed too much of an emphasis on the overseas field and favored the work of Foreign Commercial Service Officers. They also said that the leadership at GM is now almost entirely composed of Foreign Commercial Service Officers, rather than domestic Civil Service employees.
- *Overseas:* Overseas participants said there should be a larger presence overseas. They raised concerns that GM was focusing too much on headquarters operations at the expense of field operations overseas. They said that GM's overseas presence was its main value and that GM should expand its footprint to place more Foreign Commercial Service Officers in more locations around the world. In both overseas groups, participants said they could not communicate information effectively and efficiently to either headquarters or the U.S. field to better help clients react to changing conditions.
- *U.S. field:* Participants in both U.S. field focus groups noted problems with headquarters. They expressed concerns that GM officials at headquarters make many key decisions without consulting staff in the field, even though field staff have a closer relationship with the small and medium-sized businesses that GM aims to support. They noted an overall dissatisfaction with the structure of GM and said that the U.S. field has special concerns that should be taken into account when decisions are made at headquarters.

### Collaboration and Coordination

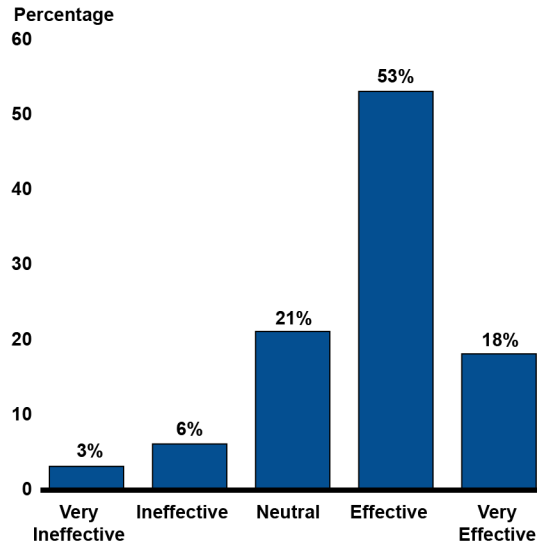
#### In Focus Groups, Headquarters Participants Cited Strengths, While Field Participants Noted Challenges

In May 2023, we found that since the 2013 reorganization, GM had identified challenges and implemented several initiatives to consolidate Market Access and Compliance and U.S. and Foreign Commercial Service employees into a unified workforce.

We asked focus group participants a polling question about how effectively GM staff collaborate across headquarters, overseas, and the U.S. field. Seventy-one percent of the participants responded that this collaboration is either "effective" or "very effective," while 9 percent responded that it is "ineffective" or "very ineffective." The rest of the respondents replied "neutral." See figure 5.

**Figure 5: Focus Group Ratings of GM Employees' Ability to Collaborate across GM's Workforce**

We asked participants, "How effectively do Global Markets staff collaborate across headquarters, the U.S. field, and overseas?" (n=35)



Source: GAO analysis of focus group participant polling responses. | GAO-24-106747

We asked participants in all six focus groups about the extent to which they felt able to collaborate and coordinate across the agency. Collaboration and coordination was the fourth most-discussed topic across the six focus groups. Some headquarters participants cited positive examples of collaboration and coordination efforts, while overseas and U.S. field participants cited challenges in this area. Participants also mentioned "Global Teams," a collaborative platform to develop and share knowledge to support offices in both the U.S. field and the Foreign Commercial Service.

- Headquarters participants largely discussed collaboration and coordination as a strength of GM, citing examples such as organizing trade missions, regular communication with their field colleagues, and strong interoffice connections.
- Overseas and U.S. field participants mentioned communication problems related to issues such as time zone coordination, information management practices, and a lack of a universal directory that would allow them to identify and communicate with other relevant current employees at the agency.
- U.S. field participants said they often work well with the overseas field and have more interactions and more connection with the overseas field than they have with headquarters.

### Administrative Functions and Technology

#### Participants Cited a Lack of Formalized Administrative Functions and Difficulty with Technology

In May 2023, we found that some administrative support for GM employees is provided by Commerce's Enterprise Services and by ITA offices. This support includes information technology, legal, security, and some human capital services. The costs for these services

accounted for an increasing share of GM's total obligations. We found that ITA and GM manage GM's workforce activities in a fragmented way, depending on each component of its workforce. Moreover, we also found that because of vacancies in GM's human capital office, GM leadership has had difficulty in ensuring its Foreign Commercial Service employees consistently receive core human capital services.

Although we did not include a specific question about GM's administrative functions or technology, participants across all six focus groups raised and discussed these issues.<sup>9</sup> Participants said that GM lacks formal processes for some basic administrative functions, which can include onboarding, training, and travel. For comparison, some participants referred to State's operations overseas, noting State's formalized policies and procedures in the *Foreign Affairs Manual*. They said that GM is a large and complex organization that operates across the country and worldwide. As such, they said that GM should have similarly documented administrative procedures. In addition, overseas participants said that assignments to a new post can be determined on short notice and affect their ability to relocate personal belongings, secure housing, and find school placements for their children.

Participants across five of the six focus groups raised concerns about technology resources, such as needing better tools to support their business clients. Participants also discussed technology challenges related to GM employees' ability to collaborate among offices and coordinate using directory databases, as mentioned earlier in this report.

### Agency Mission and Impact

#### Focus Group Participants Had Concerns about Agency Branding, Mission, and Performance Metrics

In May 2023, we found that GM has lacked a unified brand identity since it was created in 2013 and has not broadly adopted Global Markets as its name in such a way that clients and other agencies can generally recognize it.<sup>10</sup> We also reported on how GM sought to align its staff with its goals and priorities to support the broader organizational objectives of promoting U.S. exports and protecting U.S. business interests abroad. We found that officials based staffing decisions on a variety of factors, including both macroeconomic data and internal performance data.

We asked focus group participants how well GM ensures its resources are appropriately aligned to meet its organizational goals and priorities. Participants across all six focus groups discussed some of these issues but discussed them less than the other workforce management issues mentioned above. Participants discussed GM's branding, mission, and performance metrics.

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<sup>9</sup>Participants in one overseas focus group did not raise technology issues specifically but did discuss GM's administrative functions.

<sup>10</sup>In addition, the Department of Commerce Office of Inspector General identified several challenges resulting from ITA's consolidation, including confusion among employees about the organization's new purpose, a lack of a unified brand identity, and limited transparency regarding changes in staff and resource distribution. Department of Commerce, Office of Inspector General, *International Trade Administration: ITA Management Should Address Significant Challenges Related to Its Recent Consolidation*, OIG-15-021-1 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 25, 2015). We also found challenges related to a divided organizational purpose, and limited transparency regarding staffing decisions. [GAO-23-105369](#).

- *Branding:* U.S. field participants noted a difficulty in representing GM and its specific services to U.S. businesses since members of Congress and many clients continue to refer to them by previous names such as ITA, U.S. and Foreign Commercial Service, and Commercial Service.
- *Mission:* Participants across all six focus groups discussed GM's mission. We heard that GM's mission covers more than export promotion; it also includes investment promotion, commercial advocacy, and commercial diplomacy. Participants said that all these mission-related elements do not have resources and that the mission can be affected when not fully resourced.
- *Performance metrics:* Headquarters participants said that performance metrics are very important to how GM measures success; however, they also noted that these metrics are often quantitative and therefore do not measure significant qualitative accomplishments of GM's work around diplomacy and advancing U.S. commercial interests.

## Enclosure 2: Objective, Scope, and Methodology

The Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the Consolidated Appropriations Act for fiscal year 2021 included a provision for us to assess the priority of resource use within Global Markets (GM); analyze GM's workforce and succession strategy, including the diversity of senior management and workforce; and review the current management structure of GM. Your staff asked us to provide additional information on the perspectives of participants in the focus group sessions conducted for our May 2023 report. This report describes the range of perspectives of Global Markets (GM) focus group participants on several selected workforce management areas, including (1) human capital activities, (2) resources, (3) organizational structure, (4) collaboration and coordination, (5) administrative functions and technology, and (6) agency mission and impact.

For our May 2023 report, we conducted six virtual focus group sessions with a total of 35 GM employees. Of the six focus groups, two each were composed of participants from (1) headquarters, (2) overseas, and (3) the U.S. field. The focus group sessions involved structured small-group discussions designed to gather in-depth information about specific workforce management issues.

Prior to holding focus group sessions, we developed a brief electronic survey that we sent to all GM federal employees to solicit their interest in and availability to participate in a focus group session organized by employee type. The survey asked staff members for their position classification (either Foreign Commercial Service or Civil Service), location (headquarters, U.S. field, or overseas), office (if in headquarters), the state or country in which they worked (if in the field), and whether they would be willing and available to participate in a 2-hour focus group session. We received 346 completed survey responses. Of the 346 completed responses, 205 (approximately 59 percent) responded that they were willing to participate.

Next, we selected and organized focus group participants on the basis of their willingness to participate and location, using three groupings of participants: (1) overseas-based Foreign Service Officers, (2) Civil Service staff located in U.S. field offices, and (3) Civil Service staff located at headquarters. In addition, we selected employees who began working at GM prior to January 1, 2020. We did not select staff in senior leadership positions to participate in our focus group sessions because we met with them separately and did not want their presence to affect the other employees' level of participation. In addition, we did not assign staff to the same focus group as their supervisor in an effort to ensure they were able to speak openly and freely. Finally, we invited up to eight employees to participate in one of the six focus group sessions on the basis of their status, as described previously.

A methodologist from our Applied Research and Methods team facilitated the sessions using a structured guide of questions and probes, encouraging participants to share their thoughts and experiences. We also asked five polling questions. In each focus group, we asked participants about GM's (1) organizational structure, (2) workforce composition, (3) workforce planning, (4) succession planning, (5) workforce diversity, and (6) alignment of resources to priorities. Although we used a standardized list of questions in each focus group session, the responses and discussions of these items varied across groups according to participants' knowledge and experience. Each focus group session lasted approximately 2 hours. At least two analysts took notes during each session and jointly created a comprehensive written summary of bulleted discussion points for each session.

Obtaining employee input and views is a component of workforce management best practices. Findings from our focus groups can help inform Commerce managers as they seek to improve

workforce management. Focus groups are intended to generate in-depth information regarding participants' thoughts, experiences, and preferences on specific topics. However, focus groups are not methodologically designed to measure the extent or magnitude of a problem, generalize results to a larger population, or provide statistically representative samples or reliable quantitative estimates. Although the information produced by our focus groups may not be generalized to all GM employees, it provides a cross-section of thoughts and ideas that may be similar or different across the groupings of participants.

We conducted this performance audit from April 2023 to October 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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