

Pentagon Lacks Complete Strategy for Managing Workforce, Officials Say

By Emily Long

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The Defense Department has not clearly identified its staffing needs or developed a comprehensive long-term plan for managing its workforce, witnesses told members of the House Armed Services Committee on Thursday. The department also faces challenges in balancing the number of contractors, civilian employees and military personnel necessary to meet its mission, they said.

Defense has long been under fire for its human capital strategy. The Government Accountability Office in February found that federal agencies have made progress on human capital management, but noted the area remains on its high-risk list "because of a need to address current and emerging critical skills gaps that are undermining agencies' abilities to meet their vital missions." A shortage of trained acquisition professionals at Defense is a particular cause for concern, GAO said.

According to Brenda Farrell, director of defense capabilities and management at GAO, Defense's workforce plan only identifies the skills and competency gaps that exist for three of its 22 mission-critical occupations and does not address leadership development. It will be difficult for the department to develop recruitment, retention and investment strategies, she said, noting that Defense should quickly identify existing gaps and determine what needs still must be met to create a balanced and skilled workforce.

Defense by 2015 aims to complete a more comprehensive workforce plan, said Pat Tamburrino, Defense's deputy assistant secretary for civilian personnel policy. For example, the department will determine the skills each employee should have, develop career roadmaps for individual positions, roll out common planning tools across each service and track progress in meeting human capital goals.

In response to concerns about an appropriate mix of workers, Tamburrino said the department is trying to ensure that inherently governmental functions, or those that could not be performed by private sector, are insourced. Officials noted, however, that there is no "magic solution" and the balance of contractors and government employees varies by service down to the local level.

Witnesses also said gaps continue to exist in the acquisition workforce. Defense faces a shortage of midcareer acquisition professionals, which could be a "disaster," said Keith Charles, director of human capital initiatives in the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics.

"Each year we've made progress, and now we really do have a good sense," Tamburrino said. "We're right in the middle . . . We have a good line of sight of where we're going, and we've benchmarked 2015 as being done."

