

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-223](#), a report to Congressional Requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Mission-critical skills gaps both within federal agencies and across the federal workforce pose a high risk to the nation because they impede the government from cost-effectively serving the public and achieving results.

GAO was asked to review progress OPM has made in closing government-wide skills gaps, achieving its cross-agency priority goal, and additional steps needed to better identify and address skills gaps. This report assesses (1) lessons learned from initial efforts to close critical skills gaps and how they can inform future initiatives, (2) what progress OPM has made in building a predictive capacity to identify future mission-critical skills gaps, and (3) how OPM and agencies are using HRstat to identify and close skills gaps. To address these objectives, GAO reviewed documentation; interviewed OPM officials; and reviewed the implementation of HRstat meetings at Commerce, DOE, and USAID.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OPM (1) strengthen its methodology for identifying and addressing skills gaps, (2) establish a schedule and process for collecting government-wide staffing and competency data, and (3) develop a core set of metrics for use in agencies' HRstat reviews. OPM generally concurred with the first and third recommendations but did not concur with the second recommendation because of funding implications. GAO acknowledges there may be funding constraints; however, GAO's recommendation may help OPM address these constraints.

View [GAO-15-223](#). For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or [goldenkoffr@gao.gov](mailto:goldenkoffr@gao.gov).

January 2015

## FEDERAL WORKFORCE

### OPM and Agencies Need to Strengthen Efforts to Identify and Close Mission-Critical Skills Gaps

## What GAO Found

Lessons learned from initial efforts to try to close skills gaps could strengthen future approaches. For example, the Chief Human Capital Officer (CHCO) Council Working Group (Working Group) identified skills gaps in six government-wide occupations, such as cybersecurity and auditors. Although this effort was an important step forward, GAO's work has identified skills gaps in nearly two dozen occupations with significant programmatic impact. In some cases, such as cybersecurity, the skills gaps GAO identified were consistent with the Working Group's findings. But GAO's work has also identified additional skills gaps. For example, a decline in telecommunication expertise at multiple agencies contributed to delays and cost overruns of 44 percent when those agencies were transitioning to a new network of telecommunications services. The Working Group did not address a more comprehensive list of skills gaps because of various methodological shortcomings that included insufficient analysis of workforce data early in the process. In 2015, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the CHCO Council plan to identify and address a new set of government-wide skills gaps. It will be important that key lessons learned from the initial efforts to identify skills gaps inform this next round of work, including the need to (1) use a data-driven approach early in the process, (2) prioritize occupations using criteria that consider programmatic impact, and (3) consult with subject matter experts and other stakeholders prior to the identification of skills gaps in occupations.

Key features of OPM's efforts to predict emerging skills gaps are in the early planning stages. GAO has previously reported that further progress in closing skills gaps will depend on, among other things, the extent to which OPM develops a capacity to predict emerging skills gaps beyond those areas already identified. A re-named interagency group, known as the Federal Agency Skills Team, plans to strengthen the methodology used to identify emerging skills gaps. Additionally, OPM officials are discussing plans to modify OPM's workforce database to capture government-wide staffing data. However, OPM will need to establish a schedule for modifying this database to ensure its implementation. OPM officials also stated that because agencies' capacity to assess workforce competencies varies, OPM does not have government-wide data on competency gaps, which is needed to identify emerging cross-agency skills gaps. In conjunction with agencies' CHCOs, OPM will need to strengthen agencies' ability to assess their competency needs that are critical to successfully achieving their mission and goals.

OPM and selected agencies that GAO reviewed—the Departments of Commerce (Commerce) and Energy (DOE), and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)—could improve efforts to address skills gaps by strengthening their use of quarterly data-driven reviews, known as HRstat meetings. Specifically, the metrics used by the selected agencies during their HRstat meetings vary from agency to agency, making it difficult for OPM to assess agencies' progress in closing skills gaps government-wide. Although it is important for agencies to have their own HRstat metrics, OPM should work with the CHCO Council to develop a core set of HRstat metrics that all agencies use so that OPM may have the ability to analyze skills gap data across the government.