

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies spent more than half a trillion dollars in fiscal year 2011 through contracts to acquire goods and services in support of their missions, but have historically faced significant acquisition management challenges preventing them from getting the best return on their investments. The SARA legislation requires 16 federal civilian agencies to appoint a Chief Acquisition Officer to advise and assist agency leadership to help ensure that the agency's mission is achieved through the management of its acquisition activities. GAO was asked to examine: (1) how agencies have filled the CAO position; (2) the extent to which CAOs are involved in performing the acquisition management functions set forth in the SARA legislation and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance; and (3) what challenges, if any, agency CAOs report in fulfilling their responsibilities. GAO administered a questionnaire to 16 CAOs, reviewed documentation on CAOs' roles and responsibilities, organizational placement, and backgrounds, and interviewed a number of CAOs and other acquisition officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Administrator of OMB's Office of Federal Procurement Policy work with the CAO Council to issue guidance directing agencies to more clearly define CAOs' roles and responsibilities. The Administrator agreed with the recommendation.

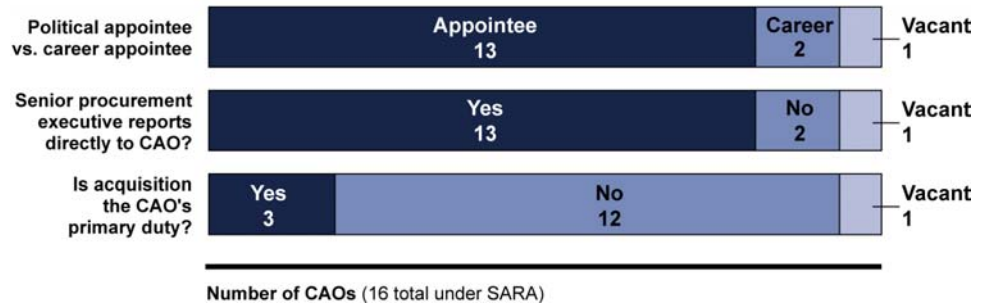
CHIEF ACQUISITION OFFICERS

Appointments Generally Conform to Legislative Requirements, but Agencies Need to Clearly Define Roles and Responsibilities

What GAO Found

Most agencies have appointed Chief Acquisition Officers (CAO) in accordance with two of the three key requirements in the Services Acquisition Reform Act of 2003 (SARA): that the CAOs be political appointees and have agency Senior Procurement Executives report directly to them. However, few CAOs have acquisition management as their primary duty; other areas of responsibility included financial, information, and human capital management.

CAO Characteristics



Source: GAO analysis of CAO survey.

Several CAOs noted that their additional responsibilities were not a detriment. Rather, they believe that performing multiple roles helps them positively influence acquisition management across their agencies. For example, the CAO at the Department of Commerce stated that his additional responsibilities gave him the ability to integrate planning, budgeting, risk management, human resources, and acquisition to achieve the agency's mission.

CAOs reported varying levels of involvement in the acquisition management functions for which they are responsible. Generally, CAOs see their role as providing high-level oversight of the acquisition function as opposed to day-to-day management, which they typically delegated to the Senior Procurement Executive or other officials as permitted by the legislation. Many CAOs said that the amount of their involvement is related to several factors, such as the nature of goods and services that the agency buys and whether the agency has a centralized or decentralized acquisition function.

Having clearly defined roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the acquisition process is a key element of an effective acquisition function. Yet at many agencies, the statutory roles and responsibilities of the CAO position are not described in detail in acquisition regulations, policies, or other documentation. These agencies may be missing an opportunity to fully institutionalize the CAO position within their senior leadership structures.

CAOs at the 16 agencies generally did not report facing significant challenges related to the CAO position, such as the level of influence they have in their agency's acquisition process, amount of control over acquisition budget resources, and access to agency leadership. Consistent with our prior work on the acquisition workforce, however, most CAOs reported that not having enough staff to manage acquisitions was moderately to extremely challenging.