

GAO's Policy and Procedures Manual
Chapter 21, Product Quality
App. III, Dimensions of Quality

Introduction

The following dimensions of quality are essential throughout GAO's engagements and products. These dimensions emerged from discussions with senior GAO officials and a variety of staff from all levels in GAO teams. Congressional views, as expressed during the 1992 customer survey, are also reflected in these dimensions. The GAO Quality Council approved the dimensions of quality in September 1994.

The dimensions of quality were brought together to clarify the core concepts of quality, so that managers and staff alike would better understand and implement these concepts. They are intended to create a common understanding of quality and a language to discuss it in all aspects of our work, not just a single engagement or product. In that regard, the dimensions are often complementary, but sometimes they may interact.

Since the quality of our products goes hand-in-hand with the quality of our work, we describe the dimensions from two perspectives:

Prospectively, we focus on how we plan to do our work. We highlight key features that are required or expected to ensure quality, or that could jeopardize quality but are important to consider during our work. These aspects of the dimensions of quality are particularly relevant during engagement assessment, engagement design, and data collection and analysis.

Retrospectively, we focus on how we incorporate quality into the products or outputs of our work. We highlight key features that exemplify quality in reporting our findings, conclusions and recommendations. These aspects of the dimensions of quality are particularly relevant to message agreement and product development.

Accuracy

Prospectively: Information used in forming the basis of our observations and conclusions must be correct factually, logically, arithmetically, or otherwise. Whatever the nature of our work--financial, compliance, program evaluation, or legal--we must use the highest appropriate technical standards to produce accurate and defensible findings. Data and factual analyses should be done with the goal of achieving appropriate precision in results or estimates. Processes that help ensure accurate data collection and analysis include collecting adequate and sufficient evidence; verifying the reliability and validity of data and resolving inconsistencies; identifying and ensuring the reasonableness of the assumptions used; and determining the degree of confidence we can assign to the data and its analyses. Adequate planning and staffing, proper supervision, review of working papers and drafts, and consultation with relevant experts also help ensure accuracy.

Retrospectively: The information we present should be correct, complete, and clear to avoid ambiguous interpretation or misrepresentation. Products should be fact-based, with a clear statement of sources, methods, and assumptions so that the reader can judge how much weight to give the information reported. Data limitations or other qualifications should be explicitly stated. Exit conferences, referencing, and input from relevant stakeholders and experts help ensure the accuracy of our products.

Objectivity/Fairness

Prospectively: Our work must be unbiased. We should not subscribe to partisan points of view or merely "give the requestor what he or she wants to hear." To achieve quality in this dimension, we must (1) understand all sides of an issue, (2) ensure that facts are supported and independently checked, (3) fairly and accurately present the facts and any alternative views and their significance, and (4) assess the sensitivity of our findings and conclusions to alternative assumptions and analytic methods. We

strongly condemn departures from objectivity and encourage a spirit of inquiry that does not rush to closure but allows for open, rational discussion on the interpretation of facts. The staff must be free of conflicts of interest or impairments in objectivity; must have integrity, professional proficiency, and commitment; and must be independent and results-oriented.

Retrospectively: In conveying the results of our work, we should be balanced, constructive, and neutral in tone. Staff should adequately address agency comments or dissenting views, and no one involved with our work should feel they have been surprised or not been treated fairly. We should explicitly state where we obtained our information and what our assumptions are. GAO's results and products should demonstrate that the work has been done by a professional, unbiased, independent, and knowledgeable staff.

Context Sophistication

Prospectively: Our analyses should not be naive or superficial. This concept combines (1) a thorough understanding of the technical and substantive issues of the engagement; (2) practicality (that is, do what is realistic and reasonable given the broader context of the issue and fiscal constraints; and make recommendations without micromanaging and with consideration of costs and risks in relation to benefits); (3) an awareness of the political environment of our work and the way to achieve accurate, objective, and nonpartisan results within that environment; and (4) use of the experience and knowledge of other GAO teams and GAO's senior managers.

Staff experience, subject expertise, and overall professional proficiency should be maintained through continuing education. In addition, early and consistent participation of managers in job design, message agreement, and product development, and consultation with key stakeholders and experts throughout the engagement will help ensure that we achieve quality in this dimension.

Retrospectively: Just as work should not be naive or superficial, our products should not be shallow or convey simplistic messages that are not useful. We should expect GAO products to receive critical scrutiny and be ready to withstand any challenges.

Scope/Completeness

Prospectively: Engagement objectives should be clear and valid, and the job should be doable. That is, staff should be able to gather sufficient information on which decisions can be made about the objectives. We should develop well-defined engagement questions that are objective, clear, and responsive to clients' needs, and scope must be closely linked to those questions. We should consider alternative methods and use appropriate methodological tools and techniques to answer the questions. When access problems arise, we should be persistent and, if necessary, seek alternative sources and methods to meet engagement objectives. It is critical that we meet applicable professional standards--government auditing standards, standards for legal, economic, or statistical research and analysis; principles of evaluation; or others as appropriate. In their respective domains, these standards reflect significant dimensions of quality, as do other aspects of GAO policy and practice.

Scope and completeness also involve efficiency in the design and management of an engagement. For example: Is the analysis at the level the issue requires? Are we making efficient use of time and resources available? Internally, efficiency is a major part of managing quality. Is our contribution worth the internal investment in staff-days or other costs? Conversely, can we address a narrower issue with fewer resources and thus achieve higher quality for that effort? Over time, are we maximizing our use of resources to make the most significant contributions possible?

Retrospectively: In our results and our products, we should address all the relevant issues necessary to properly answer the questions asked and to justify our recommendations. We need to clearly state what was and was not done and explicitly describe any data limitations, constraints imposed by access problems, or other

qualifications. We should not overstate results but stay within the limits of the work done.

Significance/Value

Prospectively: During strategic planning we should identify work that has the greatest potential for making important contributions. We should formulate action-oriented and convincing recommendations that can be implemented and ultimately have the intended impact. Recognizing that some work necessary to our mission involves narrower issues, we should try to obtain optimum value within the scope of the engagement.

Retrospectively: Significance involves the contribution of new information to decisionmaking, the extent of potential change, the magnitude of program intervention or effects, the importance of issues, and dollar savings. It also involves ensuring that agencies accurately account for major programs; comply with laws; and avoid mismanagement, fraud, waste, and abuse. The impact of our work need not be immediate; its value could be in developing an innovative approach or original information that causes others to rethink positions. There is also value in enhancing GAO's reputation for leadership in the use of methodological and technical skills. Work on less significant issues can have value if it provides useful and accurate information that satisfies the valid needs of congressional or agency decisionmakers or results in useful recommendations.

Timeliness

Prospectively: We should plan our work to provide information to requestors or decisionmakers in time to fully respond to their needs. This requires that we set realistic engagement milestones and meet those deadlines to ensure that our information is as current as possible and that staff are available when needed for other significant engagements. To produce useful information that is based on an understanding of the legislative agenda or the timing of the importance of an issue, we should proactively anticipate emerging issues on which information will be needed for decisions. We need to manage our time efficiently to minimize unnecessary delays and control the costs associated with our work.

Retrospectively: To be useful, the results of our work must be delivered on time. Meeting congressional needs on time may require revisions in plans or priorities, and scope and completeness may need to be adjusted to achieve a timely result. Meeting a timeliness goal may require special efforts to ensure that appropriate quality assurance is accomplished.

Clarity

Prospectively: Workpapers should be clear and convincing. Data collection instruments (especially those that are structured) should be clear and appropriate to the audience and minimize burdens on the respondent. Beginning with engagement design, we should plan how to most effectively communicate the results of our work, including choosing an appropriate type of product and adhering to GAO's visual and format standards to ensure readability and a consistent GAO corporate identity.

Retrospectively: We should provide clear and concise written and oral presentations, adapt the writing style and degree of difficulty to our audience, and use appropriate graphics or other visual materials. At a minimum, our study results should be plainly understandable to readers. We should structure our reports so that the evidence is linked to our engagement questions, and clearly supports and logically leads to our conclusions and recommendations. In communicating results while the work is in progress, care should be taken to identify appropriate qualifications.

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