

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-529T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Government Operations, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

A growing body of research on both private- and public-sector organizations has found that increased levels of engagement—generally defined as the sense of purpose and commitment employees feel towards their employer and its mission—can lead to better organizational performance.

This testimony is based on GAO's ongoing work examining the federal government's efforts to improve employee engagement, including (1) trends in employee engagement from 2006 through 2014; (2) practices that could strengthen engagement levels based on the EEI results and the experiences of selected agencies and GAO; and (3) certain limitations of the EEI that will be important for agency managers and leaders to consider as they use this metric to assess and improve engagement within their own organizations.

To identify engagement trends, GAO analyzed responses to FEVS questions from 2006 through 2014 from which the EEI is derived. To identify drivers of the EEI in 2014, GAO conducted a regression analysis. To identify practices that could strengthen engagement, GAO interviewed officials at OPM and three case study agencies (selected for sustained or increased EEI levels) that were responsible for engagement efforts.

What GAO Recommends

Because this statement is based on ongoing work, GAO is not making any recommendations at this time.

View [GAO-15-529T](#). For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-6806 or goldenkoffr@gao.gov.

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FEDERAL WORKFORCE

Preliminary Observations on Strengthening Employee Engagement During Challenging Times

What GAO Found

GAO's ongoing work indicates that the recent government-wide decline in engagement, as measured by the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Employee Engagement Index (EEI) masks the fact that the majority of federal agencies either sustained or increased employee engagement levels during the same period. Government-wide, engagement has declined 4 percentage points from an estimated 67 percent in 2011 to an estimated 63 percent in 2014. This decline is attributable to several large agencies—like the Department of Defense and Department of Homeland Security—bringing down the government-wide average. Specifically, 13 out of 47 agencies saw a statistically significant decline in their EEI from 2013 to 2014. While this is 28 percent of agencies, they represent nearly 69 percent of federal workforce. However, the majority of federal agencies either sustained or increased engagement levels during this period. Specifically, from 2013 to 2014, 31 agencies sustained and 3 agencies increased their engagement level.

GAO's preliminary analysis of selected Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) questions indicates that six practices were key drivers of the EEI:

- constructive performance conversations,
- career development and training opportunities,
- work-life balance,
- inclusive work environment,
- employee involvement, and
- communication from management.

Importantly, these practices were generally the consistent drivers of higher EEI levels government-wide, by agency, and by selected employee characteristics (such as federal agency tenure) and therefore could be key starting points for agency efforts to improve engagement. Some agencies that have improved employee engagement, or that already have high levels of engagement, apply these practices.

OPM provides a range of tools and resources to help agencies use EEI data to strengthen employee engagement. They include, for example, an online tool to share OPM-generated survey reports to facilitate agency data analysis. GAO's ongoing work indicates that these resources could provide agencies with needed support. However, OPM does not report whether changes to an agency's EEI are statistically significant—that is, whether an up or down change is not due to random chance. As a result, agency officials may be misinterpreting changes to the EEI and acting on data that may not be meaningful. GAO's preliminary analysis of the FEVS shows that 34 percent of the absolute changes in agency EEI scores from 2013 to 2014 were statistically significant. In smaller agencies and at component or lower levels within larger agencies, large absolute differences are not always significant. GAO's ongoing work has noted that agency officials need to understand and take this (and other limitations) into account so that they properly interpret the information and target corrective actions accordingly.