



HUMAN CAPITAL

Opportunities to Improve Federal Continuity Planning Guidance

Highlights of [GAO-04-384](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies must have the capacity to serve the public during disruptions to normal operations. This depends, in part, on continuity efforts that help agencies marshal, manage, and maintain their most important asset—their people, or human capital. GAO identified the human capital considerations relevant to federal continuity efforts; described efforts by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to address these considerations relevant to continuity of operations (COOP); and described the role Federal Executive Boards (FEB) play in coordinating such efforts outside Washington, D.C.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FEMA and OPM more fully address human capital considerations in emergency preparedness guidance, including COOP, by incorporating key actions identified in this report. GAO also recommends that OPM clearly define the role FEBs play in improving emergency preparedness coordination and address any resulting capacity issues. FEMA agreed to implement our recommendations. OPM said its guidance already incorporates the key actions and highlighted its leadership role with respect to FEBs. GAO maintains that OPM has opportunities to address a fuller range of human capital considerations related to resuming broader agency operations and to clearly define the role of FEBs.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-384.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact J. Christopher Mihm at 202-512-6806 or mihmj@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

According to recognized experts from the private and public sectors, continuity efforts should give priority to the immediate aftermath of a crisis—securing the safety of all employees and addressing the needs of employees who perform essential operations. However, experts noted that additional human capital considerations, especially those associated with the majority of an organization’s employees who would be needed to resume all other operations, are also crucial and have not been well developed by many public and private sector organizations. To more fully address human capital considerations, experts identified two human capital principles that should guide all continuity efforts—demonstrating sensitivity to individual employee needs and maximizing the contributions of all employees—and six key organizational actions designed to enhance continuity efforts.

Key Organizational Actions to Enhance Continuity Efforts

Demonstrate top leadership commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instill an approach to continuity planning that includes human capital considerations Allocate resources and set policies Set direction and pace of recovery
Seek opportunities for synergy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate continuity efforts with broader decision making Consider how continuity investments benefit other program efforts
Maintain effective communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build relationships through two-way communication Establish roles, responsibilities, and expectations Develop redundant communication vehicles
Target investments in training and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raise awareness of continuity efforts Build skills and competencies to increase flexibility Foster a culture that values flexible employees who are empowered to make effective decisions
Leverage the flexibility of human capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enable employees associated with resumption activities to contribute to mission results in alternate assignments Sustain the contribution of employees associated with essential operations Maintain organizational knowledge of staffing requirements and availability
Build process to identify and share lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a learning environment Make learning explicit and shared

Source: GAO.

FEMA and OPM have exhibited leadership in addressing human capital considerations relevant to COOP, but opportunities to improve exist. For example, while both agencies have issued guidance that addresses securing the safety of all employees and responding to the needs of personnel performing essential operations, neither agency’s guidance addresses human capital considerations related to resuming broader agency operations.

Although not specifically tasked with coordinating emergency preparedness efforts, including COOP, FEBs are uniquely positioned to do so, given their general responsibility for improving coordination among federal activities in areas outside of Washington, D.C. While some FEBs already play an active role in coordinating such efforts, the current context in which FEBs operate, including the lack of a clearly defined role and varying capacities among FEBs, could lead to inconsistent levels of preparedness across the nation.