



Highlights of GAO-07-912, a report to congressional requesters

July 2007

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

FBI Following a Number of Key Acquisition Practices on New Case Management System, but Improvements Still Needed

Why GAO Did This Study

The Sentinel program is intended to replace and expand on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) failed Virtual Case File (VCF) project and thereby meet the bureau's pressing need for a modern, automated capability to support its field agents and intelligence analysts' investigative case management and information sharing requirements. Because of the FBI's experience with VCF and the importance of Sentinel to the bureau's mission operations, GAO was asked to conduct a series of reviews on the FBI's management of Sentinel. This review focuses on the FBI's (1) use of effective practices for acquiring Sentinel and (2) basis for reliably estimating Sentinel's schedule and costs. To address its objectives, GAO researched relevant best practices, reviewed FBI policies and procedures, program plans and other program documents, and interviewed appropriate program officials.

What GAO Recommends

To increase the chances of Sentinel's success, GAO is recommending that the FBI (1) strengthen support contractor tracking and oversight and (2) establish and implement policies, procedures, and tools needed to develop reliable schedule and cost estimates for IT programs, including Sentinel. The FBI concurred with GAO's second recommendation, but not the first. GAO does not agree with FBI's position.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrp?GAO-07-912.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Randolph C. Hite at (202) 512-3439 or hiter@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The FBI is managing its Sentinel program according to a number of key systems acquisition best practices. For example, the FBI has followed best practices when soliciting offers from contractors to lead the development of Sentinel; it has also followed the practices in evaluating the offers and making a contract award decision. In addition, it has established and is following effective processes to proactively identify and mitigate program risks before they have a chance to become actual cost, schedule, or performance problems. Further, it has taken a range of steps to effectively define expectations for its prime contractor and to measure performance against these expectations and related incentives and hold the contractor accountable for results. However, the bureau has not done the same for one key aspect of tracking and overseeing its program management support contractors. In particular, it has not established performance and product quality standards for these support contractors. According to FBI officials, such standards are not necessary because they monitor their support contractors on a daily basis, including the review and approval of all work products. By not implementing this practice, GAO believes that the FBI's monitoring does not adequately ensure that Sentinel support contractors are performing important program management functions effectively and efficiently.

The FBI's policies, procedures, and supporting tools that form the basis for Sentinel's schedule and cost estimates do not adequately reflect key best practices. While the FBI has issued an IT program management handbook, related guidance, and tools that define how IT program schedules and costs are to be estimated, this handbook and related material do not, for example, address such key practices as having a historical database of program schedule and cost estimates to inform future estimates. As a result, the reliability of Sentinel's schedule and cost estimates is questionable. GAO's analyses of the Sentinel cost estimates and program officials' statements confirm this. For example, the analyses show that the estimates do not include all relevant costs, such as a technology refresh, and are not grounded in fully documented methodologies or a corporate history of experiences on other IT programs. FBI officials agreed that they need to update their IT program management handbook and related materials to incorporate schedule and cost estimating best practices and to establish a historical database of its estimating experiences on IT programs. Until FBI takes these steps, IT programs, such as Sentinel, are unlikely to have reliable schedule and cost estimates to support informed investment decision making, and their actual progress is unlikely to track closely to estimates.