

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-627](#), a report to the Republican Leader, Subcommittee on Social Security, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

SSA is responsible for delivering services that touch the lives of virtually every American. To do so, SSA relies on a variety of products and services, including information technology (IT) systems. SSA obligates approximately \$1.5 billion annually to procure goods and services, 65 percent of which are IT-related.

GAO was asked to assess how SSA implements its contracting and acquisition processes. This report examines: (1) how SSA awards and oversees contracts for products and services, and (2) the extent to which SSA has updated its guidance regarding the role of contracting personnel in software development efforts.

GAO reviewed SSA's acquisition policies, interviewed contracting officials, and reviewed a non-generalizable sample of 27 high- and lower value contracts and orders with dollars obligated in fiscal years 2014 through 2018. GAO also examined data from fiscal years 2015-2019 to determine what SSA contracted for and reviewed IT guidance. GAO compared SSA's practices to leading practices for Agile software development with respect to the roles of contracting personnel.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that SSA revise relevant guidance to identify the roles of contracting personnel in Agile software development. SSA agreed with this recommendation.

View [GAO-20-627](#). For more information, contact William Woods at (202) 512-4841 or woodsw@gao.gov.

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SOCIAL SECURITY CONTRACTING

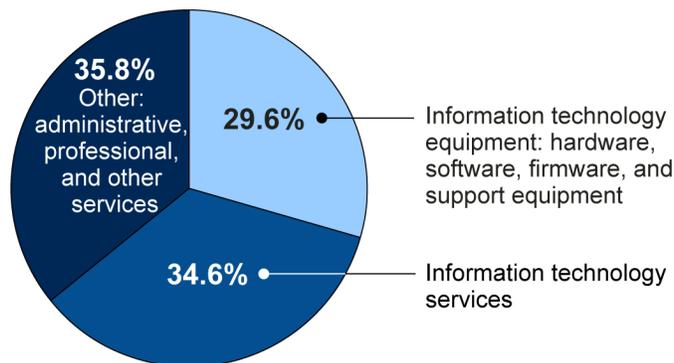
Relevant Guidance Should Be Revised to Reflect the Role of Contracting Personnel in Software Development

What GAO Found

The approach followed by the Social Security Administration (SSA) in awarding and overseeing contracts generally aligns with the requirements GAO reviewed. For the 27 contracts and orders GAO reviewed, SSA varied its approach depending on the contract type used and the dollar value. For example, one of SSA's written acquisition plans acknowledged the risks to the government associated with time-and-materials contracts. From fiscal year 2015 through 2019, SSA obligated 22.7 percent of its contract dollars on time-and-material contracts compared with 10.5 percent at other civilian agencies. In addition, from fiscal year 2015 through 2019, the rate at which SSA used competitive award procedures to achieve the best value for the agency increased by nearly 20 percentage points. This increase was the result of the agency's increased use of competition in its contracting for information technology (IT).

SSA relies heavily on IT resources to support the administration of its programs and related activities. During fiscal years 2015 through 2019, about 65 percent of the \$8.3 billion in contract obligations were for IT goods and services compared with about 16 percent at other civilian agencies. The figure shows the percentage of obligations for IT goods and services at SSA.

Percentage of Social Security Administration's Contract Obligations for Goods and Services during Fiscal Years 2015 through 2019



Source: GAO analysis of Federal Procurement Data System-Next Generation data. | GAO-20-627

SSA adopted an Agile approach to software development for some of its critical IT programs in 2015. An Agile approach to software development involves incremental improvements to software rather than the more traditional single-track approach. Subsequently, SSA developed an IT modernization plan in 2017 that states SSA will use an Agile methodology. GAO's draft Agile Assessment Guide states that an organization's acquisition policies and guidance should support an Agile development approach and identify clear roles for contracting personnel, since this is a different approach than federal agencies previously used. However, GAO found SSA's acquisition handbook does not specifically identify a role for contracting personnel with respect to contracts and task orders involving Agile, which GAO has identified as a leading practice. Identifying a role for contracting personnel in the Agile process should better position SSA to achieve its IT modernization goals and provide appropriate levels of oversight.