



July 2022

STATE DEPARTMENT

Additional Actions Needed to Address IT Workforce Challenges

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-105932](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

State depends on information systems to support its mission to advance the interests of the American people in foreign policy. State in turn relies on its IT personnel to maintain and protect these information systems.

GAO was asked to review State's IT workforce. This report examines to what extent State has (1) implemented recruitment and retention processes that are consistent with applicable leading practices, and (2) identified IT workforce recruitment and retention challenges and evaluated the effectiveness of its actions to address these challenges.

GAO analyzed recruitment and retention processes and leading practices, and documentation on IT workforce challenges and actions taken by State. GAO also interviewed officials at State headquarters and six overseas posts, which it selected based on factors such as the number of IT staff.

This is a public version of a sensitive report that was distributed on a limited basis. In response to State officials' request, GAO excluded from this public report (1) its evaluation of IT workforce vacancies and the impact of such vacancies, and (2) selected recruiting and retention challenges.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 16 recommendations to improve State's IT workforce management. State concurred with 15 but did not concur with one on expanding the number of Foreign Service IT positions available to external applicants year-round. As discussed in the report, GAO believes the recommendation is still warranted.

View [GAO-22-105932](#). For more information, contact David Hinchman at (214) 777-5719 or HinchmanD@gao.gov; or Jason Bair at (202) 512-6881 or BairJ@gao.gov.

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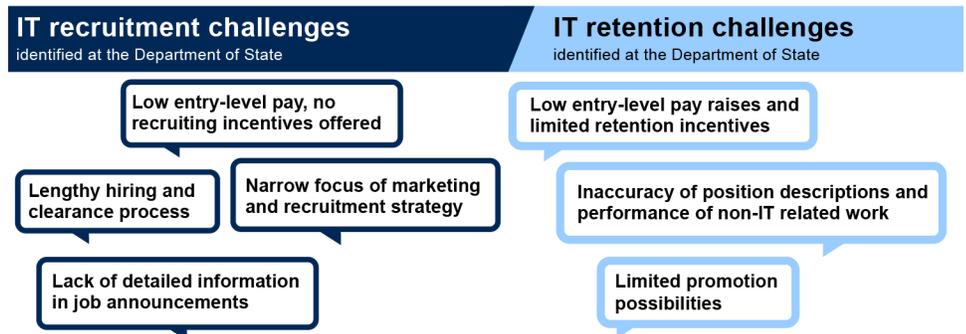
Additional Actions Needed to Address IT Workforce Challenges

What GAO Found

Implementing leading workforce practices is essential to successfully recruiting and retaining IT staff. Of 15 recruitment and retention practices GAO evaluated, the Department of State (State) has fully implemented one, partially implemented 11, and not implemented three. For example, State has collected training performance data, but has not recruited continuously year-round for most of its IT positions or regularly assessed staffing needs. If State increases its focus on recruitment and retention practices, the department can better compete with other employers for critical IT staff with key skills and abilities.

GAO identified 10 challenges related to State recruiting and retaining its IT workforce. GAO did not include three challenges in this report due to State's sensitivity concerns. The recruitment and retention challenges in State's IT workforce included a narrow marketing and recruiting focus, low pay and a limited number of incentives and promotions, a lengthy hiring and clearance process, and inaccurate position descriptions and insufficiently detailed announcements (see figure). For example, IT staff said State's marketing and recruitment strategies focused on reaching a small portion of the population. Further, IT staff noted the general public did not have an awareness of State's mission and the IT employment opportunities that were available.

IT Workforce Recruitment and Retention Challenges at the Department of State



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-22-105932

Note: GAO did not include three challenges in this report due to State's sensitivity concerns.

State has acted to overcome some of these challenges, including raising entry-level pay for experienced IT applicants and expanding its incentive pay program. State's policy calls for access to timely and accurate data to set performance metrics and for a plan to monitor and evaluate progress toward achieving goals. However, State does not have such IT workforce data needed to set performance metrics, nor does it have a plan to monitor and evaluate progress toward achieving its goals. Consequently, State does not know if its actions are improving its recruitment and retention, and achieving its goals.

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Abbreviations

FSI	Foreign Service Institute
GEMS	Global Employment Management System
GTM	Bureau of Global Talent Management
IRM	Bureau of Information Resource Management
IM	information management
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
SIP	Skills Incentive Program
State	Department of State

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July 12, 2022

The Honorable Gary C. Peters
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Jacky Rosen
United States Senate

The security of federal information systems and data is critical to the nation's safety, prosperity, and well-being. However, federal systems and networks are inherently at risk because of their complexity, technological diversity, and geographic dispersion. Further, threats to federal IT infrastructure continue to grow in number and sophistication.

A key component of the government's ability to mitigate and respond to cybersecurity threats is having a qualified, well-trained IT workforce whose professionals can help to prevent or mitigate vulnerabilities in federal IT systems. Building and maintaining the IT workforce by addressing mission-critical skills gaps is one of the federal government's most important challenges, as well as a national security priority.¹ As such, our 2021 High-Risk Series continued to identify mission-critical skills gaps in the IT workforce as one of our nation's top challenges.²

Like other federal agencies, the Department of State (State) is increasingly dependent upon its IT workforce to maintain and protect its

¹Mission-critical skills gaps both within federal agencies and across the federal workforce pose a high risk to the nation because they impede the government from serving the public in a cost-effective manner and from achieving results. This area was added to GAO's High-Risk List in 2001. GAO, along with the Office of Personnel Management and individual agencies, have identified skills gaps in such government-wide occupations in the fields including science, technology, engineering, cybersecurity, and acquisitions. Mission-critical skills gaps are a contributing factor in making other areas across the government high risk, as noted in the current high-risk list's sections, "Ensuring the Cybersecurity of the Nation" and "Improving the Management of IT Acquisitions and Operations."

²GAO, *High-Risk Series: Dedicated Leadership Needed to Address Limited Progress in Most High-Risk Areas*, [GAO-21-119SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2, 2021).

information systems and data from threats. At the same time, IT staff provide support to the department's mission to lead U.S. foreign policy.

You asked us to review State's IT workforce and evaluate its efforts to address challenges to recruiting and retaining these personnel. Our specific objectives were to examine to what extent State has (1) identified vacancies in its IT workforce since January 2017 and the impact of any such vacancies;³ (2) implemented recruitment and retention processes that are consistent with applicable leading practices; and (3) identified IT workforce recruitment and retention challenges and evaluated the effectiveness of its actions to address these challenges.

This report is a public version of a sensitive report that we issued in April 2022.⁴ State deemed some of the information in our April report to be sensitive, which must be protected from public disclosure. Therefore, this report omits our evaluation of objective (1) and some related sensitive information in objectives (2) and (3). Nevertheless, the report is based on the same methodology as the sensitive report.

For all three objectives, our scope of work included a selection of six State overseas posts⁵ at geographic regional bureaus,⁶ and five functional bureaus.⁷ This is a nonprobability sample and is not generalizable to all State IT staff or to all State Department bureaus.

³For the purposes of this report, we will refer to both "staffing gaps" and "vacancies" as "vacancies" unless otherwise stated.

⁴GAO, *State Department: Additional Actions Needed to Address IT Workforce Challenges*, GAO-22-104233SU (Washington, D.C.: April 26, 2022).

⁵For the purposes of this report, we use the term "overseas posts" to collectively refer to U.S. embassies, consulates general, consulates, branch offices, and missions other than embassies. We remotely conducted interviews with State officials from six overseas posts. State officials requested we not identify these overseas posts due to sensitivity concerns.

⁶Regional bureaus oversee U.S. foreign policy for a given region of the world. The six regional bureaus are the: Bureau of African Affairs, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, and Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs.

⁷Functional bureaus have responsibility for different critical operations and aspects of administration or focus on specific issues and are responsible for foreign policy areas which affect all regions and countries. The five functional bureaus in our review were: Consular Affairs, Diplomatic Security, Foreign Service Institute (FSI), Global Talent Management (GTM), and Information Resource Management (IRM).

To select the overseas posts for interviews, we analyzed staffing data for all State overseas posts and categorized them as having a large, medium, or small number of IT Foreign Service specialist positions.⁸ We then selected two posts from each of those categories, taking into consideration four additional factors:

1. We chose a mix of posts with different levels of IT Foreign Service specialist position vacancies, with those levels identified as being either mostly staffed (75 percent or higher), partially staffed (around 50 percent), and under staffed (under 50 percent).
2. We chose at least one post from each of State's different geographic overseas regions.⁹
3. We chose posts with a State-defined higher relative importance of overseas posts to economic, national security, or other foreign policy interest.
4. We also took into account posts with additional considerations, such as locations specifically identified by regional bureaus as having experienced IT staffing challenges, and whether the post was operational.¹⁰

After selecting the posts using the above factors, we coordinated with State overseas posts, who identified multiple Foreign Service IT

⁸According to State staffing data, the number of IT staff positions at posts range from one position to 60 positions. We categorized a post as a large post if it had 30-60 IT Foreign Service staff, a medium post if it had 10-29 IT Foreign Service staff, and a small post if it had 1-9 IT Foreign Service staff.

⁹State divides overseas posts into six different regions: African, East Asian and Pacific, European and Eurasian, Near Eastern, South and Central Asian, and Western Hemisphere, but State officials stated that they combined the Near Eastern / South and Central Asian regions for management purposes.

¹⁰Our selections were designed to obtain a diverse mix of State officials and staff perspectives at overseas posts regarding the impact of any staffing gaps on State's IT environment, challenges in recruitment and retention in that workforce, and the effectiveness of reported actions to address those challenges.

managers and IT specialists, where available, for us to interview.¹¹ From that list of staff, we interviewed IT staff with varying areas of expertise at each of the six overseas posts.

To select State functional bureau IT staff for interviews, we analyzed IT staffing data from the functional bureaus. Specifically, we identified IT managers and specialists who (1) were employed by one of the four functional bureaus (together those bureaus represented a majority of IT positions at State);¹² (2) were in the 2210 occupational series (because this series accounts for approximately 88 percent of all functional bureau IT staff); and (3) had one of the four common IT job titles across the bureaus.¹³ We then coordinated with State functional bureaus, who identified multiple Civil Service IT managers and IT specialists that met these criteria for us to interview.

To examine State's recruitment and retention processes, we first identified topic areas associated with human capital management based on our review of IT workforce planning and management practices identified in Office of Personnel Management guidance and GAO's prior work. Among these topic areas, we selected five areas that were of particular importance to successful workforce planning: (1) strategic workforce planning, (2) talent acquisition, (3) talent management, (4) engaging employees, and (5) employee morale. We then analyzed those reports and selected 15 leading practices applicable to these topic areas. These 15 practices can be categorized as supporting either the

¹¹State's Foreign Service represents the interests of the United States in relation to foreign countries and international organizations, and responds to the needs of U.S. citizens in other countries. Members of the Foreign Service can be sent to any embassy, consulate, or diplomatic mission anywhere in the world to serve U.S. diplomatic needs. While Foreign Service employees travel far and frequently, generally rotating every 2 to 3 years, Civil Service employees remain stateside, primarily serving in Washington, D.C. Civil Service employees are involved in every area of the department, from human rights to narcotics control to trade to environmental issues. Some are the domestic counterparts to consular officers abroad, issuing passports and assisting U.S. citizens overseas.

¹²The four functional bureaus were Consular Affairs, Diplomatic Security, Global Talent Management (GTM), and Information Resource Management (IRM).

¹³We determined these four IT job titles were the most common by analyzing a list of State IT staff job titles and determined these titles had the largest number of staff for each title. The four most common IT job titles included the IT project managers, software developers, system testing and evaluation specialists, or technical support specialists.

recruitment or retention of the IT workforce.¹⁴ We then reviewed State's workforce documentation on IT recruitment and retention efforts, including State's practices, policies and procedures, strategic plans, and staffing models applicable to the workforce, and compared them to the leading practices we selected. We determined whether State's Foreign Service and, separately, Civil Service, had fully implemented, partially implemented, or not implemented each of the 15 selected applicable leading practices.¹⁵ We provided these leading practices and our assessment to State officials for their review and incorporated their comments in our assessment, as appropriate.

To examine State's IT workforce recruitment and retention challenges and the effectiveness of its actions, we conducted interviews with relevant State officials from the five functional bureaus and IT Foreign Service staff from the six overseas posts and reviewed prior GAO reports, as well as State documentation and Office of Inspector General reports to identify information on any challenges State faces in recruiting and retaining its IT workforce. Further, we conducted those interviews and document reviews to determine the extent to which State has identified actions to address its challenges, and evaluated the effectiveness of those actions.¹⁶ In addition, we held semi-structured interviews with State Department

¹⁴To select those recruitment and retention leading practices, we reviewed 17 prior GAO and OPM reports on recruiting and retention efforts, employee morale and strategic planning.

¹⁵*Fully implemented* = State documentation demonstrated all aspects of the applicable leading practice; *partially implemented* = State documentation demonstrated some, but not all, aspects of the applicable leading practice; *not implemented* = State officials did not provide any documentation, or if documentation was provided, it did not demonstrate any aspect of the applicable leading practice.

¹⁶Prior work we reviewed included: GAO, *Information Technology: Agencies Need to Fully Implement Key Workforce Planning Activities*, [GAO-20-129](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 30, 2019); GAO, *Department of State: Integrated Action Plan Could Enhance Efforts to Reduce Persistent Overseas Foreign Service Vacancies*, [GAO-19-220](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 6, 2019); GAO, *Department of State: Foreign Service Midlevel Staffing Gaps Persist Despite Significant Increases in Hiring*, [GAO-12-721](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jun. 14, 2012); GAO, *Department of State: Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts*, [GAO-09-874](#), (Washington, D.C.: Sep. 17, 2009); State, Office of Inspector General, *Inspector General Statement on the Department of State's Major Management and Performance Challenges—2018*, OIG-EX-19-01, (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 27, 2018); State, Office of Inspector General, *Review of the Effects of the Department of State Hiring Freeze*, ISP-I-19-23 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 9, 2019); State, Office of Inspector General, *Management Assistance Report: Continued Deficiencies in Performance of Information Systems Security Officer Responsibilities at Overseas Posts*, ISP-21-07 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 2020).

officials, including Civil Service and Foreign Service IT staff, to obtain their views of the challenges the department faced in recruiting and retaining its IT workforce, actions State had taken to address those challenges, and if the department had determined the effectiveness of its actions.

We developed a list of IT workforce challenges identified by most of the Civil Service and Foreign Service IT staff during our interviews as well as a list of actions taken. We determined the extent to which State had evaluated the effectiveness of its actions by comparing them to federal guidelines, models, standards, and practices for strategic workforce planning and methods for measuring workforce performance. These federal guidelines, models, and standards include State's evaluation policy, as well as those published by OPM and others.¹⁷ We also compared State's actions to practices we identified in previous GAO publications.¹⁸ We provided these IT workforce challenges and actions to State officials for their review and incorporated their comments in our assessment, as appropriate.

For all of our objectives, we supplemented our analyses with interviews of staff who performed various IT-related functions at headquarters and at selected overseas posts. Specifically, we conducted interviews with relevant State management officials and IT staff (headquarters and selected overseas posts mentioned previously), and Office of Inspector General officials, in order to obtain perspectives on the IT environment, recruitment and retention processes, challenges, and actions to address those challenges. For more information on our objectives, scope, and methodology, see appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from March 2020 to July 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

¹⁷Federal requirements, standards, and practices we reviewed include: Office of Personnel Management, *OPM's Workforce Planning Model*, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/human-capital-framework/reference-materials/#url=Strategic-Alignment>; State, *Department of State Program and Project Design, Monitoring, and, Evaluation Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2017); Department of Homeland Security, *Cybersecurity Workforce Development Toolkit: How to Build a Strong Cybersecurity Workforce*, (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2016); Office of Management and Budget, *Federal Cybersecurity Workforce Strategy*, M-16-15 (Washington, D.C.: Jul. 12, 2016).

¹⁸GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014) and *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, [GAO-04-39](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

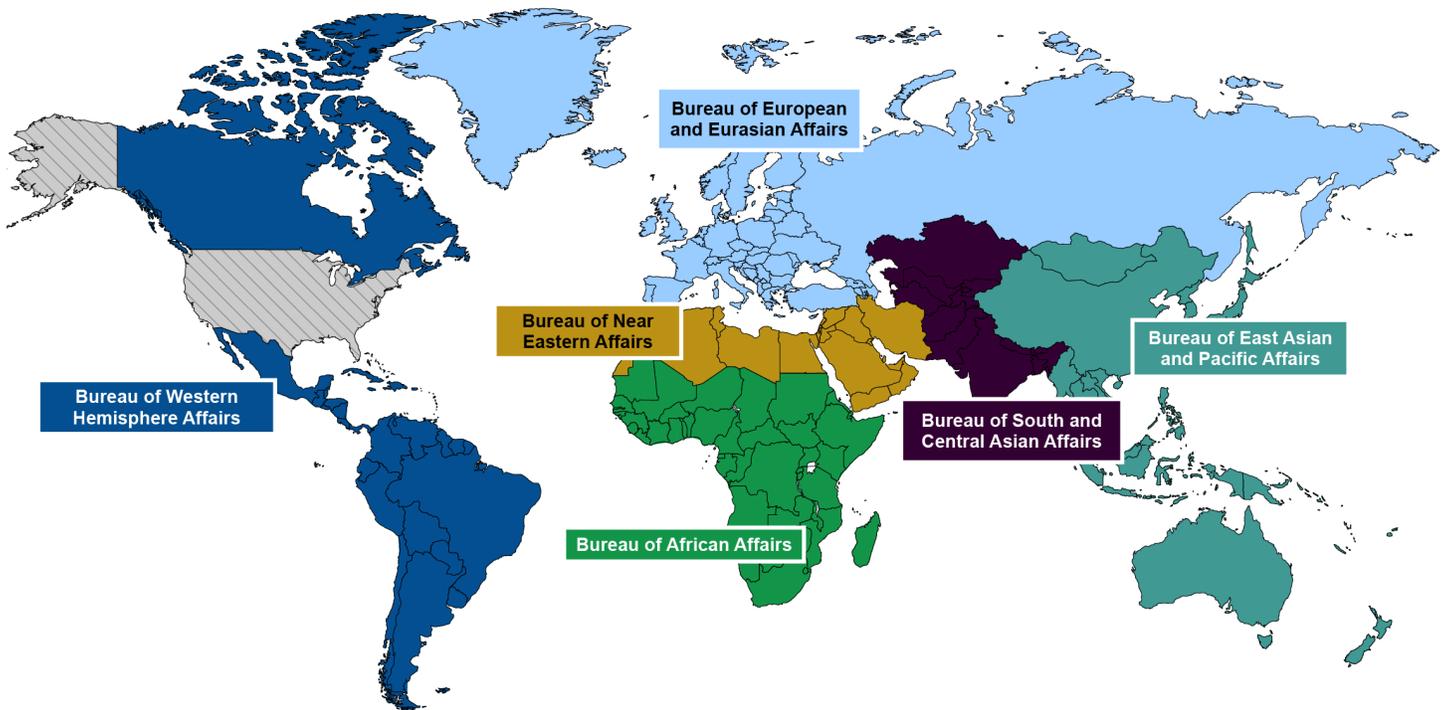
Background

State is the lead agency involved in implementing U.S. foreign policy and representing the United States abroad. According to State's and the U.S. Agency for International Development's joint strategic plan for fiscal years 2018 through 2022, State's goals are to (1) protect U.S. security at home and abroad; (2) renew U.S. competitive advantage for sustained economic growth and job creation; (3) promote U.S. leadership through balanced engagement; and (4) ensure effectiveness and accountability to the U.S. taxpayer.¹⁹

As of April 2021, State employed a workforce of about 76,000 employees in the U.S. and in more than 270 embassies, consulates, and other posts worldwide. State groups countries and U.S. overseas posts into six regional bureaus: the Bureaus of African Affairs, East Asian and Pacific Affairs, European and Eurasian Affairs, Near Eastern Affairs, South and Central Asian Affairs, and Western Hemisphere Affairs. Regional bureaus focus on U.S. foreign policy and relations with countries within their geographical areas; overseas posts report to State through their corresponding regional bureaus. For example, U.S. overseas posts in Nigeria report through the Bureau of African Affairs to State headquarters. Figure 1 shows State's six regional bureaus.

¹⁹The State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development have shared goals and work together to ensure that foreign policy and development activities are successfully achieving the objectives of the National Security Strategy of the United States. U.S. Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development, *Joint Strategic Plan: Fiscal Years 2018-2022* (February 2018).

Figure 1: Department of State's Regional Bureaus



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data, as of April 30, 2021. | GAO-22-105932

State's Under Secretary for Management directs 14 functional bureaus and offices, including the Bureaus of Consular Affairs, Diplomatic Security, Global Talent Management (GTM), Information Resource Management (IRM), and the Foreign Service Institute (FSI).²⁰ The Under Secretary of State for Management is also the department's official who is responsible for implementing the President's Management Agenda.²¹

²⁰The other bureaus and offices are: Bureaus of Administration, Budget and Planning; Medical Services; Overseas Buildings Operations; Comptroller and Global Financial Services; and Office of the Director of Diplomatic Reception Rooms; Office of Foreign Missions; Office of Management Strategy and Solutions; and the White House Liaison.

²¹The President's Management Agenda is a set of management initiatives designed to make government more citizen-centered, effective, and efficient. There are five government-wide initiatives in the agenda: Human Capital, E-Government, Competitive Sourcing, Financial Management, and Budget and Performance Integration. State is also working with the Office of Management and Budget on an initiative focused on "rightsizing" the U.S. government's overseas presence.

The Director General of the Foreign Service, who also holds the post of the Director of Global Talent, is the head of GTM and leads the recruitment, assignment, and career development processes to build State's workforce. The chief information officer for State is the head of IRM and oversees the department's IT resources. According to IRM's website, its mission is to "create an interconnected, secure, and informed Department through the prioritized, secure, and innovative application of IT resources."

Four Different Components with IT Roles and Responsibilities Make Up State's Workforce

State's workforce is comprised of four different components, each of which has IT roles and responsibilities. These components are the Foreign Service, Civil Service, contractors, and Locally Employed staff.²²

As of April 2021, the department's Foreign Service and Civil Service employees totaled about 26,000 employees.²³ Contractor employees working for State in the U.S. totaled more than 14,000, while Locally Employed staff, which included contractors overseas, totaled about 50,000.²⁴ State maintains personnel data in GEMS, which shows the total number of authorized Foreign Service and Civil Service positions at State and whether each position is currently filled or vacant.

State's Foreign Service staff who perform IT functions at overseas posts are classified as Foreign Service specialists in the IT career track. These Foreign Service IT specialists are responsible for ensuring the security and maintenance of post facilities, computer networks, and supplies,

²²Locally Employed staff are generally citizens of the countries in which State maintains diplomatic posts and consulates. They are members of the mission teams and provide continuity for the transient American staff and possess local language and cultural expertise.

²³This total count also includes eligible family members. Regardless of country of citizenship, an eligible family member may be a spouse or domestic partner of the employee; an unmarried child of the employee under the age of 21, or unmarried and incapable of self-support regardless of age; or parents, sisters, or brothers who are at least 51 percent dependent on the employee for support and are listed on the employee's OF-126 (dependency report) or the employee's official travel orders.

²⁴Locally Employed staff includes foreign nationals and U.S. citizen residents in a foreign country who are employed by State via direct-hire appointments, personal services agreements, and personal services contracts.

among other functions.²⁵ They serve in one of three skill groups: Information Management (IM) Specialist, IM Technical Specialist, and IT Manager. According to GTM data, as of April 2021, about 1,000 of the approximately 13,500 Foreign Service staff were IT specialists.

The number of IT specialists allotted to each overseas post ranged from one to approximately 60 staff, and these Foreign Service staff are at overseas posts for typically 1-, 2-, or 3-year assignments. Most posts do not have IM Technical Specialist staff assigned to them; rather, IM Technical Specialists travel to different posts to assist with the specialized technologies mentioned above.²⁶

IT specialists in the Civil Service who perform IT functions generally work in the U.S. and are responsible for project and program management, system administration, database administration, network administration, systems testing and evaluation, software development, and cybersecurity. Approximately 95 percent are classified as IT specialists in the General Schedule 2210 Information Technology Management job series, with about half of State's IT Civil Service workforce in IRM.²⁷ According to GTM data, as of April 2021, about 900 of State's approximately 10,500 employees in the Civil Service were IT specialists.

²⁵There are also Foreign Service specialists in other career tracks such as budget analysts and medical professionals. The other type of Foreign Service employees are Foreign Service generalists, who help formulate and implement U.S. foreign policy and are assigned to work in one of five career tracks: consular, economic, management, political, or public diplomacy. Generalists at overseas posts collect information and engage with foreign governments and citizens of foreign countries and report the results of these interactions back to State headquarters in Washington, D.C., among other functions.

²⁶State employs technical and support staff who help run State's IT systems and programs. Eligible family members are among the temporary staff who perform IT functions overseas and domestically. According to GTM data, as of April 2021, State employed about 120 eligible family members who performed IT functions. IRM also funds about 50 Information Management positions in the Expanded Professional Associates Program.

²⁷State defines its Civil Service IT workforce as staff who fall within any one of the following 10 General Schedule job series defined by OPM: Computer Operation (0332), Computer Specialist (0334), Computer Clerk and Assistant (0335), Telecommunications (0391), General Telecommunications (0392), Computer Engineering (0854), Electronics Engineering (0855), Computer Science (1550), IT Management (2210), and IT Student Trainee (2299).

In addition to having IT specialists in the Foreign Service and Civil Service, State employs contractors who help run the department's IT systems and programs overseas and domestically. State's Civil Service IT workforce oversees contractors who support and maintain IT systems and projects. According to data from its Safety and Accountability for Everyone system, as of April 2021, State relied on approximately 3,700 IT contractor staff.²⁸

Locally Employed staff who perform IT functions often are responsible for IT management, system administration, and telephone and radio maintenance. As of April 2021, of the more than 50,000 Locally Employed staff at overseas posts, approximately 2,000 of them performed IT functions.

Selected Recruitment and Retention Leading Practices for the IT Workforce Are Central to Effective Management

Workforce planning processes are essential for ensuring that federal agencies have the talent, skill, and experience mix they need to execute their missions and program goals. Leading practices for recruitment and retention can be related to five workforce areas: (1) strategic workforce planning, (2) talent acquisition, (3) talent management, (4) engaging employees, and (5) employee morale. Within these five areas are 15 selected leading practices that are central to effectively managing the recruitment and retention of the IT workforce. Table 1 shows the 15 selected recruitment and retention leading practices of the IT workforce.

Table 1: Selected Recruitment and Retention Leading Practices for the IT Workforce

Workforce Area	Selected Recruitment Leading Practice	Description of Recruitment Leading Practice
Strategic workforce planning	1. Establish and maintain workforce plans	Establish and maintain a strategic workforce planning process, including developing strategies and implementing activities to address all competency and staffing needs and IT vacancies.
	2. Develop competency and staffing requirements	Develop competency and staffing requirements, regularly assess competency and staffing needs, and analyze the IT workforce to identify gaps in those areas.
	3. Monitor competencies and vacancies	Monitor the agency's progress in addressing competencies and vacancies and report to agency leadership on progress.

²⁸According to State officials, the Safety and Accountability for Everyone (SAFE) system contains workforce data for State personnel, including contractors. SAFE is a portal where personnel can input their own information. This information is used to send emergency notifications to all personnel and must be updated every 60 days, according to State officials. The number of IT contractors includes only domestic contractors with an OpenNet account.

Workforce Area	Selected Recruitment Leading Practice	Description of Recruitment Leading Practice
	4. Establish and track recruiting metrics	Establish and track metrics to monitor the effectiveness of the recruitment program and hiring process, including their effectiveness at addressing skills and vacancies, and report to agency leadership on progress addressing skill and vacancy gaps.
Talent acquisition	5. Recruit continuously year-round	Recruit continuously and start the hiring process early in the school year.
	6. Strategically leverage hiring flexibilities	Strategically leverage available hiring flexibilities and fully engage the agency's human resources staff and offer recruiting incentives such as recruitment bonuses, relocation expenses, and student loan repayments.
Workforce Area	Selected Retention Leading Practice	Description of Retention Leading Practice
Strategic workforce planning	1. Determine key performance objectives and goals	Use data to determine key performance objectives and goals that enable the agency to evaluate the successes of its human capital approaches.
Talent management	2. Continually assess agency needs	Management continually assesses the knowledge, skills, and ability needs of the agency so that the agency is able to obtain a workforce that has the required knowledge, skills, and abilities to achieve organizational goals.
Engaging employees	3. Collect and assess training performance data	Collect and assess performance data (including qualitative or quantitative measures, as appropriate) to ensure that training is connected to improving individual and agency performance.
	4. Implement meaningful rewards	Implement meaningful rewards programs and provide incentives to motivate and reinforce expected levels of performance and desired conduct, including training and credentialing, as appropriate.
	5. Develop tailored flexibilities, benefits, and incentives	Develop a tailored approach to the use of available flexibilities, benefits, and incentives by taking advantage of those flexibilities that are appropriate for their particular organization and its mission accomplishment and tailoring benefits to employees' needs.
Employee morale	6. Align employee performance with agency goals	Align individual employee performance expectations with agency goals so that individuals understand the connection between their daily activities and their organization's success.
	7. Establish and track retention metrics	Establish and track metrics of success for improving employee morale, and report to agency leadership on progress in improving morale.
	8. Determine morale problems and take action	Determine root causes of employee morale problems by analyzing employee survey results using techniques such as comparing demographic groups, benchmarking against similar organizations, and linking root cause findings to action plans. Develop and implement action plans to improve employee morale.
	9. Involve employee input in strategies	Involve employees and other stakeholders on a periodic basis in developing and implementing future workforce strategies and explicitly address and use that input.

Source: GAO analysis of workforce-related areas and practices identified in federal guidance and GAO's prior work. | GAO-22-105932.

The Federal Government and State Department Have Long-Standing Workforce Challenges

The federal government faces long-standing challenges in strategically managing its workforce. We first added federal strategic human capital management to our list of high-risk government programs and operations in 2001.²⁹

Skill gaps within individual federal agencies—as well as across the federal workforce—can lead to costly, less efficient government. For example, federal agencies varied widely in their efforts to implement key IT workforce planning activities that are critical to ensuring that agencies have the staff they need to support their missions.³⁰ While most agencies had made significant progress implementing certain workforce related activities such as developing competency and staffing requirements, most agencies did not establish processes in other areas, such as monitoring progress in addressing competency and staffing gaps. This was due, in part, to federal agencies not making IT workforce planning a priority.

State has also experienced long-standing challenges with vacancies in its overall Foreign Service workforce. In March 2019, we reported that State’s data showed persistent Foreign Service vacancies at overseas posts since 2008. The overseas posts with State’s highest foreign policy priorities had the highest percentages of vacant Foreign Service positions; in addition, the vacancies were in regions that were considered high security risks and that could threaten U.S. foreign policy interests.³¹

Our report noted that, as of March 2018, 13 percent of overseas Foreign Service positions were vacant. According to staff at overseas posts, these vacancies adversely affected State’s ability to carry out U.S. foreign policy. To address these vacancies, we recommended that the Secretary of State develop an integrated action plan that defined the root causes of persistent Foreign Service vacancies at overseas posts and provide suggested corrective measures to reduce such vacancies, including steps necessary to implement solutions.

State concurred with our recommendation and, in March 2020, provided us with its plan to address vacancies at overseas posts. Among other things, the plan noted that Foreign Service employees transfer to different posts every 1 to 3 years and that posts frequently experience a staffing gap when one employee departs before their successor arrives.

²⁹GAO, *High Risk Series: An Update*, [GAO-01-263](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 1, 2001).

³⁰[GAO-20-129](#).

³¹[GAO-19-220](#).

According to the plan, State intended to implement a new monthly review of Foreign Service positions to see if those positions were accurately described and still needed.

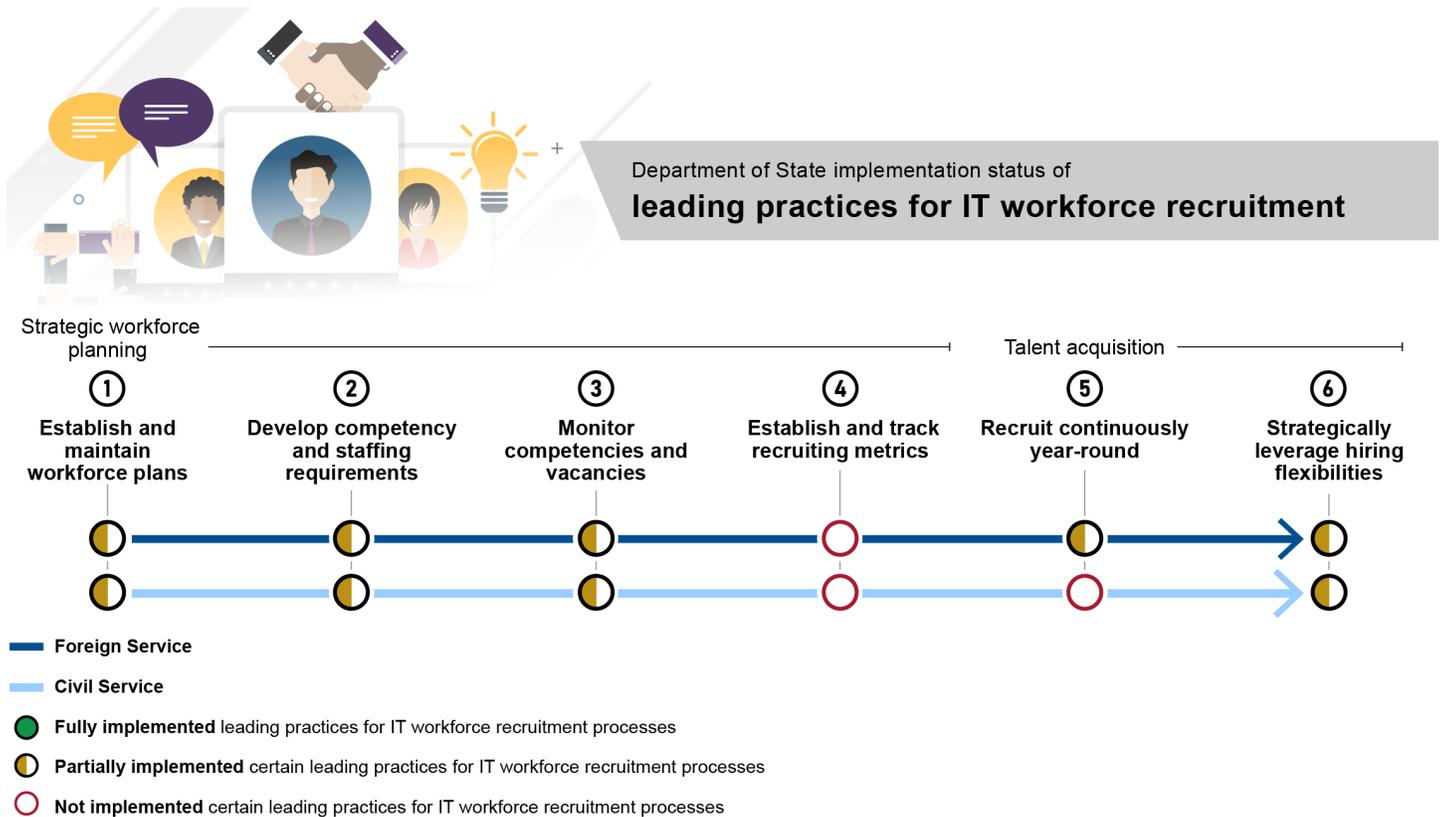
State Partially Implemented Most Workforce Leading Practices

Among the 15 leading practices that we identified as central to effectively managing the IT workforce, State's Foreign Service and Civil Service fully implemented one selected practice, partially implemented 11, and did not implement three. For example, State partially implemented selected leading practices related to regularly assessing competency and staffing needs. Without fully addressing these selected leading practices, State may have difficulties meeting its recruitment and retention goals.

State Partially Implemented Many Recruitment Leading Practices

State's Foreign Service and Civil Service each partially implemented most of the six selected recruitment leading practices for its IT workforce. Figure 2 shows the Foreign Service and Civil Service implementation of the six selected recruitment leading practices for IT personnel. Table 2 follows the figure, and summarizes GAO's assessment of State's implementation of each of the practices.

Figure 2: The Department of State's Implementation of Selected Leading Practices for the Recruitment of IT Personnel



Source: GAO analysis of State documentation; images: Cifotart/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-22-105932

Table 2: GAO’s Assessment of the Department of State’s Implementation of Selected Leading Practices for the Recruitment of its IT Workforce

Workforce Area	Selected Recruitment Leading Practice	GAO Evaluation	GAO’s Assessment of the Foreign Service and Civil Service
Strategic workforce planning	1. Establish and maintain a strategic workforce planning process, including developing strategies and implementing activities to address all competency and staffing needs and IT vacancies.	Foreign Service ● Civil Service ●	State developed various strategic planning documents for the Foreign Service and Civil Service, including the <i>State IT Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2019-2022</i> and <i>Five-Year Workforce Plan Fiscal Years 2019-2023</i> . ^a Developed in 2019 and 2020, respectively, these documents detailed plans and actions to address domestic and foreign needs, such as reducing overseas vacancies. State intended to establish a more IT-focused strategic workforce plan in 2020. However, at the completion of our audit work, that plan for the Foreign Service and Civil Service was not complete and State did not have an up-to-date IT strategic workforce plan that addressed all competencies, staffing needs, and IT vacancies.
	2. Develop competency and staffing requirements, regularly assess competency and staffing needs, and analyze the IT workforce to identify gaps in those areas.	Foreign Service ● Civil Service ●	State’s strategic plans discussed the practice for assessing staffing needs using the domestic staffing model (DSM). The Foreign Service and Civil Service workforce used the DSM to assess staffing needs for all domestic positions. The Foreign Service workforce used the overseas staffing model (OSM) to assess staffing models for all positions overseas. Global Talent Management (GTM), Information Resource Management (IRM), Foreign Service Institute (FSI) and other partner bureaus, have continued to discuss areas of improvement for assessing competencies of the IT workforce. However, while State’s Foreign Service and Civil Service used the OSM and DSM to develop staffing requirements, neither model had been updated since 2018. A GTM official stated that the models are usually updated every 2 years. Further, while State had commissioned competency studies for the Foreign Service and Civil Service, the Foreign Service competency study had not been updated with information since March 2016 and the Civil Service study had not been updated with information since July 2017.
	3. Monitor the agency’s progress in addressing competencies and vacancies and report to agency leadership on progress.	Foreign Service ● Civil Service ●	State used the OSM and DSM as the primary tools to monitor progress on IT vacancies for the Foreign Service and Civil Service. GTM and IRM officials used the data from the DSM and OSM to draft the strategic plans to report on staffing data and trends as part of its workforce planning process. GTM in partnership with IRM, FSI, and other partner bureaus has continued to discuss areas of improvement for assessing competencies of the IT workforce. However, although used to help monitor the agency’s progress in addressing vacancies, the DSM and OSM had not been updated since 2018. State officials stated that the models are usually updated every 2 years. Further, while State had commissioned competency studies for the Foreign Service and Civil Service, the Foreign Service competency study had not been updated with information since March 2016 and the Civil Service study had not been updated with information since July 2017.

Workforce Area	Selected Recruitment Leading Practice	GAO Evaluation	GAO's Assessment of the Foreign Service and Civil Service
	4. Establish and track metrics to monitor the effectiveness of the recruitment program and hiring process, including their effectiveness at addressing skills and vacancies, and report to agency leadership on progress addressing those gaps.	Foreign Service ○ Civil Service ○	Foreign Service and Civil Service staff stated that the department did not establish and track metrics or collect information on the effectiveness of programs in relation to the IT workforce. ^b Additionally, State did not provide documentation on the effectiveness of State programs for the Foreign Service and Civil Service, such as the Skills Incentive Program (SIP) or the Foreign Affairs Information Technology Fellowship or State's other actions to address skill gaps because State officials in IRM and GTM noted that no such documentation exists. ^c
Talent acquisition	5. Recruit continuously and start the hiring process early in the school year.	Foreign Service ● Civil Service ○	For the Foreign Service workforce, State listed the Information Management (IM) Specialist position as a position that could be applied for year-round on USAJobs.gov. However, State did not list other Foreign Service positions on USAJobs, such as the IM Technical Specialist, as open for applications continuously year-round, nor did State recruit for any Civil Service IT workforce positions continuously year-round on USAJobs.gov.
	6. Strategically leverage available hiring flexibilities and fully engage the agency's human resources staff and offer recruiting incentives such as recruitment bonuses, relocation expenses, and student loan repayments.	Foreign Service ● Civil Service ●	State documented the authority for the Foreign Service and Civil Service to use various hiring incentives, such as the Smarter IT Fellowship Hiring Authority; Direct Hire Authority for cybersecurity positions; the Civil Service and Foreign Affairs Fellowship program and the student loan repayment program. State's Foreign Service offers a relocation bonus. However, State did not offer a recruitment bonus to newly hired staff for either the Foreign Service or the Civil Service IT positions. Further, while State provided documentation of having access to and using hiring authorities, State did not provide information to GAO on how it directed human resources staff to strategically use the available hiring flexibilities.

Legend: ● Fully implemented = State documentation demonstrated all aspects of the applicable leading practice;

● Partially implemented = State documentation demonstrated some, but not all, aspects of the applicable leading practice;

○ Not implemented = State officials in GTM and IRM did not provide any documentation, or if documentation was provided, it did not demonstrate any aspect of the applicable leading practice.

Source: GAO analysis of State Foreign Service and Civil Service data and documentation. | GAO-22-105932.

^aU.S. Department of State, *IT Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2019–2022*, (Washington, D.C.: March 2019); U.S. Department of State, *Five-Year Workforce Plan Fiscal Years 2019–2023*. (Washington, D.C.: February 2020).

^bIn 2019, the department created the Office of Management Strategy and Solutions' Center for Analytics to be the department's official enterprise data management and analytics capability. That office developed a tool, the Global Presence Navigator, which contains descriptive presence data (e.g., personnel, spending, facilities, and foreign assistance). Those data consolidate datasets across the department, but does not produce recommendations or information on programs for the IT workforce.

^cThe Skills Incentive Program (SIP) provides a 10 or 15 percent pay incentive if an IT employee in the Foreign Service and Civil Service completes specific IT certificates. The Foreign Affairs Information Technology fellowship is a 2-year program for college undergraduate students who are in their junior year pursuing an IT-related degree or entering an IT-related master's degree program. After completion of the program, candidates become an IM Specialist and enter into a 5-year service agreement with State.

State officials in GTM and IRM provided various reasons for not fully implementing the selected recruitment leading practices. Regarding the need for a strategic workforce planning process, officials from both GTM and IRM stated that they did not complete State's *Strategic Workforce Plan for Fiscal Year 2020* as planned. These officials also stated that State did not have an up-to-date strategic workforce plan that addressed all competencies, staffing needs, and IT vacancies.

In addition, with respect to the need for developing competency and staffing requirements and monitoring that progress, State's overseas staffing model (OSM) and domestic staffing model (DSM) had not been updated because of factors including leadership changes and the 2021 change in the presidential administration. GTM officials reported that these factors made the current cycle an atypical one. Additionally, GTM and IRM acknowledged the need for an updated competency study by planning a competency review of the IT workforce in the beginning of fiscal year 2023 and updating IT strategic plans and related documents in fiscal year 2024. With regard for the need to establish and track metrics for the recruitment program and hiring process, State did not provide documentation on metrics or on the effectiveness of State programs for the Foreign Service and Civil Service because State officials in IRM and GTM noted that no such documentation exists.

According to GTM and IRM officials, the department does not recruit continuously for most positions because the bureaus and hiring managers are responsible for creating and posting job announcements at their discretion.³² The Foreign Service has a centralized hiring process, while the Civil Service individual bureaus handle their own recruiting process. In addition, State's policies only require that positions be open for a minimum of 5 days for Civil Service positions. State did not provide policies or procedures related to opening periods for the Foreign Service.

As for strategically leveraging available hiring flexibilities, according to GTM and IRM officials, State does not have a documented strategy to clearly communicate how to leverage the use of hiring flexibilities and recruitment incentives. The officials stated the reason for the lack of a strategy was that the bureaus and hiring managers for the Civil Service

³²With IM Specialist positions available throughout the fiscal year, the department could begin the hiring process early in the school year and was able to compete with other agencies and the private sector for new graduates.

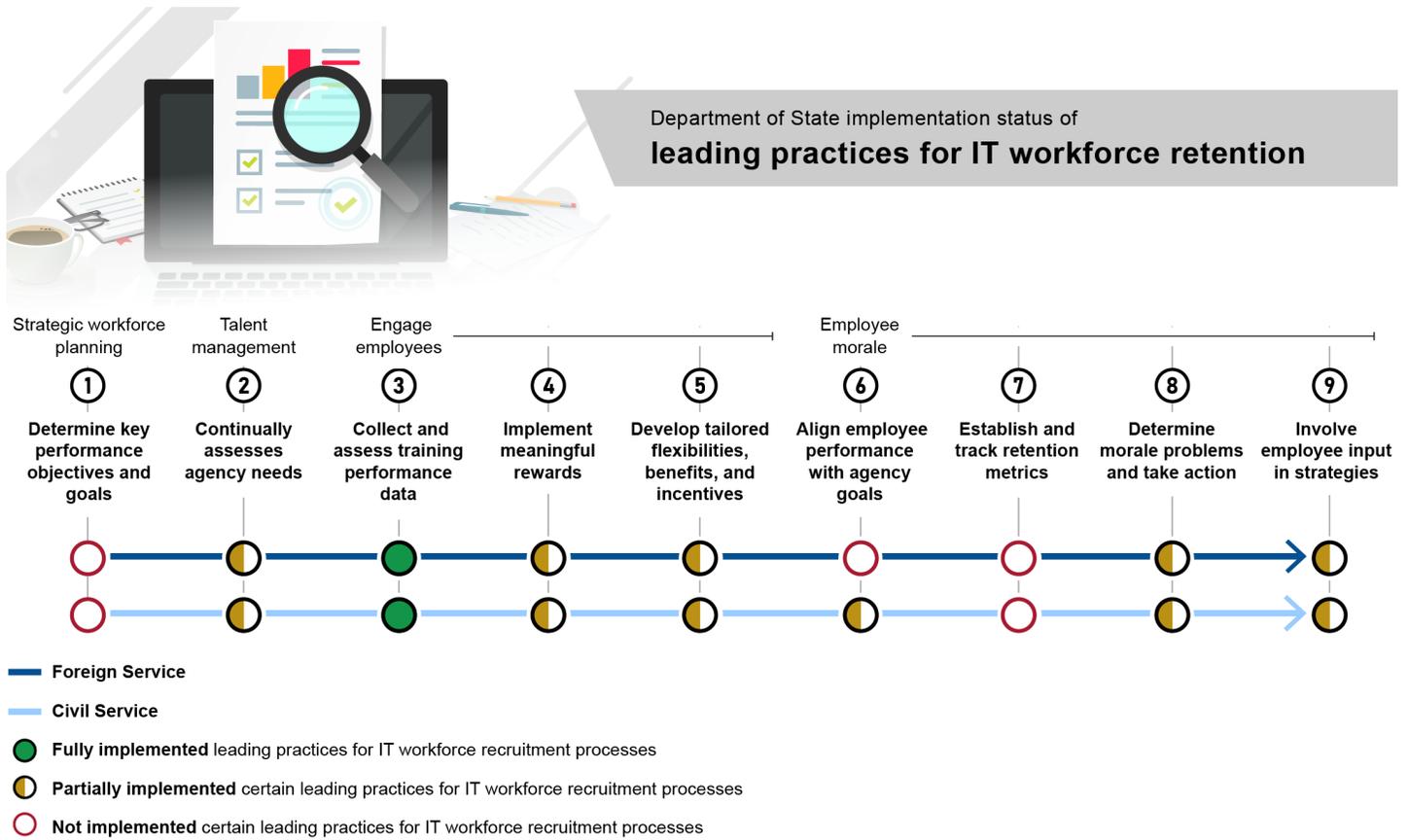
workforce are responsible for hiring practices and Foreign Service has a centralized hiring process.

Not having up-to-date strategic workforce planning tools, documentation, and action plans, will likely hinder State's ability to address current and future IT competencies and staffing needs for the Foreign Service and Civil Service. Further, without updated tools, the department will likely not be able to monitor its progress in addressing competencies and vacancies. Additionally, without establishing and tracking metrics on the effectiveness of the recruitment program and hiring process, State may find it challenging to determine if its recruitment program and hiring process are successful. Also, without posting IT position announcements year-round, potential Foreign Service and Civil Service IT workforce applicants may be less able to identify the State positions for which they are qualified. Moreover, without a documented strategy to clearly communicate how to leverage the use of hiring flexibilities and recruitment incentives, it may be more challenging for State to be able to fill vacancies for its open IT positions.

State Had Fully or Partially Implemented Most, but Not All, of the Selected Retention Leading Practices

State's Foreign Service and Civil Service had fully or partially implemented several of the selected retention leading practices for its IT workforce, but several remained unimplemented. Figure 3 shows State's Foreign Service and Civil Service implementation of the nine selected retention leading practices for IT personnel. Table 3 follows the figure and summarizes GAO's assessment of State's implementation of each of the practices.

Figure 3: The Department of State’s Implementation of Selected Leading Practices for the Retention of IT Personnel



Source: GAO analysis of State documentation; images: vladwel/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-22-105932

Table 3: GAO’s Assessment of the Department of State’s Implementation of Selected Leading Practices for the Retention of its IT Workforce

Workforce Area	Selected Retention Leading Practice	GAO Evaluation	GAO Assessment of the Foreign Service and Civil Service
Strategic workforce planning	1. Use data to determine key performance objectives and goals that enable the agency to evaluate the successes of its human capital approaches.	Foreign Service ○ Civil Service ○	Foreign Service and Civil Service IT staff in the Information Resource Management (IRM) and Global Talent Management (GTM) bureaus stated that the department did not collect information on the successes of State’s human capital approaches. Additionally, State officials in IRM and GTM could not provide documentation on the successes of the department’s human capital approaches because the officials said that such documentation does not exist.
Talent management	2. Management continually assesses the knowledge, skills, and ability needs of the agency so that the agency is able to obtain a workforce that has the required knowledge, skills, and abilities to achieve organizational goals.	Foreign Service ● Civil Service ●	State officials in GTM and IRM used the domestic staffing model (DSM) and overseas staffing model (OSM) as the primary tools to assess the Foreign Service and Civil Service IT workforce’s needs. GTM, in partnership with IRM, Foreign Service Institute (FSI) and other partner bureaus, has continued to discuss areas of improvement for assessing competencies of the IT workforce. However, while State officials in GTM and IRM used the DSM and OSM as the tools to assess the knowledge, skills, and ability needs of the department, State officials in GTM and IRM indicated that these tools are not always updated regularly, and had not been updated since 2018. State officials stated that the models are usually updated every 2 years. Further, while State had commissioned competency studies for the Foreign Service and Civil Service, the Foreign Service competency study had not been updated with information since March 2016 and the Civil Service study had not been updated with information since July 2017.
Engage employees	3. Collect and assess performance data (including qualitative or quantitative measures, as appropriate) to ensure that training is connected to improving individual and agency performance.	Foreign Service ● Civil Service ●	FSI handled training for both the Foreign Service and Civil Service workforce. FSI officials noted that they circulated follow-up surveys after courses to determine the performance of the classes. FSI officials stated that, based on feedback from the surveys, they continuously improve the curriculum through modifying the existing content, adding new content, or expanding accessibility to the content. As of spring 2021, examples of curriculum improvement included expanding access to training course materials to allow employees to use course materials on the job, and dividing a course into two separate courses for managers and executives.
	4. Implement meaningful rewards programs and provide incentives to motivate and reinforce expected levels of performance and desired conduct, including training and credentialing as appropriate.	Foreign Service ● Civil Service ●	State offered one substantial incentive program, the Skills Incentive Program (SIP), which provided a 10 or 15 percent pay incentive if an IT employee in the Foreign Service and Civil Service completed specific IT certificates. Starting in September 2020, State also implemented a Cyber SIP, which provides a 25 percent bonus to employees for attaining certain cybersecurity certifications. However, State did not provide information on how the Department measures the SIP or demonstrate whether it reinforces the expected levels of performance and desired conduct of the program.

Workforce Area	Selected Retention Leading Practice	GAO Evaluation	GAO Assessment of the Foreign Service and Civil Service
	5. Develop a tailored approach to the use of available flexibilities, benefits, and incentives by taking advantage of those flexibilities that are appropriate for their particular organization and its mission accomplishment and tailoring benefits to employees' needs.	Foreign Service ● Civil Service ●	State used SIP, Cyber SIP, and the experiential training program as the primary incentives for all Foreign Service and Civil Service direct hire IT personnel. The SIP and Cyber SIP programs required all direct hire IT employees participating in the program to obtain specific certifications to receive the benefit. State offered other benefits, such as the student loan repayment program, and the Foreign Service offered flexibilities and benefits for employees moving and living overseas. However, State did not provide data on how it is tailoring such incentives for its Foreign Service and Civil Service employees' needs.
Employee morale ^a	6. Align individual employee performance expectations with agency goals so that individuals understand the connection between their daily activities and their organization's success.	Foreign Service ○ Civil Service ●	<p>Foreign Service officials at overseas posts stated that IT employee expectations were not clearly aligned with agency goals. For example, Foreign Service IT staff stated that they were often placed in charge of the mailroom at posts, or were placed in charge of supervising the diplomatic pouch.^b State did not have any comprehensive data on IT employee morale, and State Foreign Service officials said they were unaware of any IT employee morale surveys done by the Foreign Service.</p> <p>Officials in the Civil Service at the Consular Affairs bureau, provided documentation on a survey conducted to obtain employee feedback on a proposed reorganization of the Office of Consular Systems and Technology (CST). The survey found that the majority of respondents were connected to CST's mission and many employees felt that they had the ability to be successful. However, respondents also had more negative opinions on the strategic focus and quality of work. State officials in GTM and IRM used the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) to obtain employee morale feedback. Additionally, based on interviews with State officials in GTM and IRM, the department does not break this information down to the IT occupational level for the regional and domestic bureaus in the Foreign Service and Civil Service, respectively.</p>
	7. Establish and track metrics of success for improving employee morale, and report to agency leadership on progress improving morale.	Foreign Service ○ Civil Service ○	Foreign Service and Civil Service officials stated that the department had not developed metrics of success for improving IT employee morale. State officials in GTM and IRM indicated that the department does not collect data on employee morale programs. They also indicated that individual bureaus track some morale data; however, apart from Consular Affairs, State did not provide data from those bureaus. Additionally, many bureaus have indicated that they do not have any IT employee morale data outside of the FEVS data, which is not broken down to the occupational level, such as for the IT workforce.

Workforce Area	Selected Retention Leading Practice	GAO Evaluation	GAO Assessment of the Foreign Service and Civil Service
8.	Determine root causes of employee morale problems by analyzing employee survey results using techniques such as comparing demographic groups, benchmarking against similar organizations, and linking root cause findings to action plans. Develop and implement action plans to improve employee morale.	Foreign Service ● Civil Service ○	<p>Both the Foreign Service and Civil service have access to data from the FEVS that gives the bureaus access to employee morale data. However, State officials from GTM and IRM stated that the department only provides the bureaus with data that is not broken down to the IT occupational level, and that bureaus must request access to any occupational level data themselves. Additionally, the GTM had commissioned a survey that is similar to the FEVS for the Locally Employed staff at posts. However, this survey is also not targeted to the IT workforce.</p> <p>For the Civil Service, Consular Affairs officials stated that, as part of an IT reorganization, the bureau commissioned an employee morale survey to determine causes of employee morale problems. However, other bureau officials stated that they do not conduct any employee morale surveys for IT staff in their bureaus. State IT employees in the Civil Service and Foreign Service indicated that IT staffing vacancies have resulted in low morale among the IT workforce. Three bureaus indicated that they did not have any employee morale data outside of the FEVS data.</p>
9.	Involve employees and other stakeholders on a periodic basis in developing and implementing future workforce strategies and explicitly address and use that input.	Foreign Service ● Civil Service ○	<p>State involved Foreign Service and Civil Service employees by collecting their perceptions of the employee's work experiences, agency, and leadership through the use of the FEVS. Consular Affairs officials also stated that the bureau involved its employees and created an Employee Advisory Group to obtain feedback on employee morale. However, State did not provide information on how other bureaus used survey data to develop and implement future workforce strategies for the IT workforce. According to State officials in GTM, the department as a whole does not collect specific information for IT staff. The department also leaves all decision-making on IT morale to the individual bureaus.</p>

Legend: ● Fully implemented = State documentation demonstrated all aspects of the applicable leading practice;

● Partially implemented = State documentation demonstrated some, but not all, aspects of the applicable leading practice;

○ Not implemented = State officials did not provide any documentation, or if documentation was provided, it did not demonstrate any aspect of the applicable leading practice.

Source: GAO analysis of State Foreign Service and Civil Service data and documentation. | GAO-22-105932.

^aFor the purposes of this report, we define employee morale as being characterized by job satisfaction and employee engagement.

^bA diplomatic pouch is any sealed package primarily used for transporting official State Department documents. A classified diplomatic pouch is required to be supervised at all stages of transport by an American citizen with a Top Secret security clearance.

State officials in GTM and IRM provided various reasons for not fully implementing the selected retention leading practices. The department did not collect information on the successes of State's human capital approaches and therefore did not use data to determine key performance objectives and goals, implement meaningful incentives, and tailor the use of available incentives. Further, IRM and GTM officials said that such

documentation does not exist. State officials in GTM and IRM stated that documentation on the metrics of success for improving IT employee morale was not available and they did not track such metrics.

As for the need for management to continually assess the knowledge, skills, and ability needs of the agency, GTM and IRM officials stated the department's overseas staffing model and domestic staffing model had not been updated because of State leadership changes and the 2021 change in the presidential administration, among other factors. GTM officials reported that these and other factors made the current cycle an atypical one. Additionally, GTM and IRM officials acknowledged the need for an updated competency study by planning a competency review of the IT workforce in the beginning of fiscal year 2023 and updating its IT strategic plans and related documents in fiscal year 2024.

Additionally, regarding the need to align individual employee performance expectations with agency goals, determine root causes of employee morale problems by analyzing employee survey results, and involve employees and other stakeholders in implementing future workforce strategies, GTM and IRM officials stated that they provided the bureaus with morale data from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, but the data were not targeted to the IT workforce. They added that bureaus have to request access to any occupational level data themselves to track employee morale data for the IT workforce. According to IRM and GTM officials, bureau-level leadership was responsible for IT employee morale and actions and for making the decisions about developing or implementing action plans.

Without documented retention metrics, State leadership will likely not have the information necessary to address IT employee morale issues and determine if its programs to improve such issues are working. Further, without obtaining and tracking employee morale data to identify and address these issues in its IT workforce human capital goals, State may experience more difficulties retaining critical IT staff with the key skills and abilities to meet the department's mission and respond to evolving IT threats.

State Addressed Some IT Workforce Challenges, but Did Not Evaluate the Effectiveness of Those Actions

GTM and IRM officials, Civil Service IT staff at multiple bureaus and Foreign Service IT staff at multiple overseas posts cited a number of challenges in recruiting and retaining the department's IT workforce.³³ Specifically, our analysis showed that the challenges most commonly cited by IT staff and officials related to five areas of recruiting for IT candidates and five areas related to retaining its IT workforce. (One recruiting challenge and two retention challenges are discussed in GAO-22-104233SU but are not included in this report because State deemed the information to be sensitive but unclassified. Additionally, these challenges are not included in the IT recruitment and retention challenges depicted in figures 4 and 5.) State described actions, both underway and planned, to address some of the challenges. However, the department has not monitored and evaluated those actions to determine whether they have been effective in addressing the IT workforce recruitment and retention challenges. See appendix II for a detailed discussion of the recruitment and retention challenges, and any actions State had taken to address them.

State Addressed Several, but Not All, Challenges in Recruiting IT Staff with Critical Skills

GTM and IRM officials, and Civil Service and Foreign Service IT staff in our review, cited a number of challenges the department faces in recruiting its IT workforce. Figure 4 shows those four areas.

Figure 4: IT Workforce Recruitment Challenges Identified at the Department of State

IT recruitment challenges identified at the Department of State



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-22-105932

GTM and IRM officials and both Civil Service and Foreign Service IT staff at bureaus and overseas posts further explained these four IT recruitment

³³During our interviews with State IT staff and officials, a number of recruitment and retention challenges were identified; some of the same challenges were discussed in State documents.

challenges. Specifically, State officials, IT staff, and State documentation noted:

- State's marketing and recruitment strategies focused on reaching a small portion of the population and the general public did not have an awareness of State's mission and the IT employment opportunities that were available. Foreign Service IT staff at multiple posts noted that job opportunities are generally only learned about through other State employees. By narrowly focusing its outreach and recruitment strategies, the department may not reach all segments of job seekers and individuals with cyber talent who, historically, would not have sought out government careers.
- Job announcements were unclear and did not fully reflect the benefits State offered its employees, particularly the education and housing allowances available for Foreign Service positions. In addition, according to Foreign Service IT staff at multiple posts, candidates are required to have specialized skills and experience. However, when staff got to their posts they were performing basic IT tasks and other non-IT tasks such as transporting the diplomatic pouch. Unclear job announcements can cause confusion for applicants, delay hiring, and serve as poor recruiting tools.
- State offered low starting salaries and the department did not offer recruiting bonuses or pay incentives, such as extra pay for IT certifications, which other federal agencies and the private sector offer experienced IT candidates. As a result, the department's employment offers may not be competitive until it maximizes the use of its pay incentives.
- State had lengthy hiring and clearance processes that could take up to 2 years. Therefore, qualified candidates either did not apply for IT jobs or found other jobs while they were waiting to be brought on board. As a result, applicants may be dissuaded from State IT jobs due to the lengthy process involved in attaining them.

As mentioned previously, State had taken some steps to address the recruitment challenges it faced with its IT workforce.

- In response to the **narrow focus of the marketing and recruitment strategies**, GTM and IRM officials said State expanded recruiting efforts to include military installations and local government, and used online job platforms, virtual career fairs, and other sources to recruit IT talent. Those officials said State is also investing in paid advertising targeting IT professionals.

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- With regard to the **lack of detailed information in IT-related job announcements**, State's *Integrated Action Plan Developed to Reduce Persistent Overseas Vacancies* indicated the department had revised its Foreign Service job announcements to highlight the total compensation package, to help attract experienced IT professionals.³⁴ GTM officials said they are continually aligning Information Management (IM) Specialist vacancy announcements to the State *IT Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2019-2022* and the future skills needed by the IT workforce.³⁵
 - To address the **low entry-level pay and no recruiting incentives** for IT candidates, GTM officials said in 2020, the Director General approved an IRM request to hire Foreign Service Specialist candidates at the next highest grade if they have specific qualifications or experience. In addition, GTM officials said the salary range advertised in the Foreign Service vacancy announcements was adjusted in 2021 to better reflect starting salaries for those employees.³⁶ According to GTM and IRM officials, State does not offer pay incentives to new IT hires who hold IT certifications since the department offered the incentive as a retention mechanism.
 - With respect to the **long hiring and security clearance process**, according to GTM officials, the department entered into an agreement with the Department of Defense's Finance and Accounting Service to speed up the Civil Service hiring process. In addition, GTM and IRM officials said a State pilot program had reduced the security clearance processing time for Civil Service positions from about 55 days down to 12 days, as of April 2021. Further, officials said the department is using shared certificates for IT hiring, so a vacancy announcement could be used by multiple bureaus to make multiple hires from the same certificate.³⁷

³⁴An integrated action plan for reducing persistent vacancies was developed at State in response to the recommendation in [GAO-19-220: Integrated Action Plan Could Enhance Efforts to Reduce Persistent Overseas Foreign Service Vacancies](#).

³⁵U.S. Department of State, *IT Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2019–2022*, (Washington, D.C.: March 2019).

³⁶Prior to 2020, the salary range in the Foreign Service job announcements was from the Foreign Service base schedule pay table. The salary range that is currently in use is from the overseas comparability pay salary table and the Washington D.C. locality pay table.

³⁷The department develops a generic IT job announcement that includes typical duties so the certificate can be used to fill multiple vacancies across the bureaus instead of each bureau developing its own job certificate.

See appendix II for a detailed discussion of the recruitment challenges and some of the actions State had taken to address each.

State Partially Addressed Challenges to Retaining High Quality IT Staff

GTM and IRM officials and both Civil Service IT staff at multiple bureaus and Foreign Service IT staff at multiple overseas posts in our review cited a number of challenges the department has faced retaining its IT workforce. Figure 5 shows the three areas.

Figure 5: IT Workforce Retention Challenges Identified at the Department of State

IT retention challenges identified at the Department of State

Inaccuracy of position descriptions and performance of non-IT related work

Low entry-level pay raises and limited retention incentives

Limited promotion possibilities

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-22-105932

GTM and IRM officials and both Civil Service and Foreign Service IT staff who work in bureaus and overseas posts in our review further explained these three IT retention challenges. Specifically, State officials, IT staff, and State documentation noted:

- State offered low pay and few retention incentives. For example, IT staff at multiple bureaus and posts said the level of pay for the skills and experience required for the department's IT positions were not competitive with the private sector and the department offered few financial incentives for IT staff. As a result, the department may struggle to retain its IT staff until it provides current employees more competitive compensation through pay mechanisms such as special pay rates and retention incentives.
- State's position descriptions did not accurately reflect actual IT job responsibilities. For example, Foreign Service IT staff said the position descriptions did not accurately reflect the amount of time they were required to perform administrative work, such as the time required to manage the mailroom. Further, IT staff at multiple bureaus and posts said they were responsible for filling multiple roles. As a result, the department may find it challenging to retain IT staff if the position descriptions do not accurately describe the IT skills and abilities needed to perform the job.

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- State had limited promotion opportunities for senior level and management positions. For example, Civil Service IT staff at multiple bureaus said there are few management positions available to advance their career and Foreign Service IT staff at multiple posts said there was a very small percentage of people who were promoted to senior level positions. As a result, the department may face a situation where the IT staff would seek advancement opportunities outside of the department due to the limited career mobility and promotion opportunities.

As mentioned previously, State had taken some actions to address the IT workforce retention challenges it faced.

- In response to the **low entry-level pay raises and limited retention incentives**, according to GTM and IRM officials, State uses its skills incentive programs and student loan repayment programs as a way to retain its IT workforce. Those officials said the department made revisions to the SIP programs, such as allowing IT staff appointed to limited term positions to participate in SIP, and had a Cyber SIP pilot program underway, focused on cybersecurity certifications.³⁸ In addition, GTM officials said current Foreign Service IM Specialist employees at the FP-05 grade would be administratively promoted to the next highest level, the FP-04 grade if they met certain qualifications and experience requirements.
- To contend with **inaccurate position descriptions that did not accurately reflect actual IT job responsibilities**, according to GTM officials, the bureau was conducting a study of the Foreign Service's domestic IT positions, to be completed in 2022, to develop new Foreign Service domestic IT position classification criteria and standard position description statements for those positions. Further, GTM officials said the department had been working to update the position descriptions for its IT workforce and verifying cyber roles associated with those positions. In addition, the *Foreign Service IT Competency Study* recommended that the department scale back Foreign Service IT responsibility for non-IT functions.³⁹ According to the 2020 update on the *Foreign Service IT Competency Study*, IRM

³⁸The Skills Incentive Program (SIP) provides a 10 or 15 percent pay incentive if an IT employee in the Foreign Service and Civil Service completes specific IT certificates. The Cyber SIP is targeted toward cybersecurity professionals, who get a 25 percent pay incentive to obtain and maintain specific cyber credentials.

³⁹Department of State, *Foreign Service IT Competency Study*, DS662T1 (Nov. 2016).

had analyzed the impact of the non-IT related work on Foreign Service IT personnel and drafted a decision memo for IRM leadership.

- With regard to **limited promotions**, according to State workforce and strategic plans and officials from GTM and IRM, the department is now offering various career development opportunities to assist employees with their career progression. For example, the Professional Development Program for Foreign Service IRM Specialists provided a framework for career progression and the qualifications that IT staff needed to be considered for promotion into the Senior Foreign Service. The IRM Executive Development Program is a long-term training and leadership program for Civil Service and Foreign Service IT professionals to mentor the next generation of IRM leadership.

See appendix II for a detailed discussion of the retention challenges, and any actions State had taken to address each.

State Did Not Determine the Effectiveness of Its Actions to Address IT Workforce Challenges

While State had taken some steps to address its IT workforce challenges, through various IT recruitment and retention activities, the department had not determined the effectiveness of those actions. Specifically, State had not evaluated the effectiveness of its efforts to address those challenges because the department did not consistently collect the IT recruitment and retention, and workforce data necessary for developing a monitoring plan. Monitoring and evaluation of the department's efforts to achieve its workforce planning and strategic goals are critical to effective workforce planning.

State Had Not Determined the Effectiveness of Recruitment and Retention Activities and Lacked a Plan to Evaluate Its Progress

State's *Program and Project Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation Policy* emphasizes that bureaus and independent offices must maintain a monitoring plan that documents all of the performance indicators, baselines, milestones, and targets for each indicator.⁴⁰ According to that policy, monitoring plans should involve regular, ongoing data collection against key indicators or milestones to determine what is happening, whether implementation is on track or producing the desired results, and if changes need to be made.

According to the evaluation policy and principles for effective workforce planning, evaluations should be carried out to analyze program and process performance and outcomes and inform decision-makers about

⁴⁰State, *Department of State Program and Project Design, Monitoring, and, Evaluation Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2017).

the effectiveness of the department's IT workforce recruitment and retention activities and processes.

State had developed workforce and strategic planning documents intended to address some of the IT workforce challenges it faces. However, those documents did not consistently include performance indicators, targets, and goals that the department could use to monitor its progress toward meeting its IT human capital goals. The documents did not describe how State would monitor and evaluate the progress or effectiveness of its IT recruitment and retention actions in addressing the challenges it faces. Specifically:

- State's *Five-Year Workforce Plan Fiscal Years 2019-2023* describes the department's overall workforce planning, including hiring, training, retention, and employee development plans.⁴¹ The plan outlines actions to address some of the workforce recruitment and retention challenges the plan had identified, including actions related to the IT workforce. However, the workforce plan did not include performance indicators, such as milestones or specific goals, which the department could use to monitor its progress or determine the effectiveness of its recruitment and retention actions.
- State's *IT Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2019-2022* identified a number of talent management initiatives the department is undertaking to build the IT workforce and included specific actions with associated target dates.⁴² For example, by the second quarter of fiscal year 2019 the department would clarify the job responsibilities and requirements needed by IT personnel to support the cloud environment. However, the strategic plan did not contain performance indicators, such as milestones or specific goals, to gauge and evaluate the department's success toward meeting the human capital goals outlined in the plan. In addition, this and other target completion dates have passed and State officials in GTM and IRM were not able to provide an updated status on those actions or revised target dates.
- GTM officials said they have a dedicated evaluation unit that conducts regular program evaluations of GTM programs, and that they gauge overall progress on improving the talent pool by evaluating individual recruitment events against year-on-year numbers of Foreign Service

⁴¹U.S. Department of State, *Five-Year Workforce Plan Fiscal Years 2019–2023*, (Washington, D.C.: February 2020).

⁴²U.S. Department of State, *IT Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2019–2022*, (Washington, D.C.: March 2019).

applicants that make it to the evaluation panel. However, officials said they have not completed a comprehensive evaluation of their recruitment activities.

- GTM and IRM officials said there had been no overall evaluation of the experiential training, fellowship, re-employed retiree, and temporary duty programs to determine the extent to which these programs have been effective in addressing the department's attrition and understaffing challenges.⁴³
- IRM officials said the professional associate program is popular overseas. However, officials said benchmarks and performance metrics had not been developed for that program and they had not evaluated the effectiveness of the program in addressing IT staffing gaps.

Without a monitoring and evaluation plan to measure the department's progress in achieving its IT workforce human capital goals or how IT workforce recruitment and retention activities contribute to the department's mission, State will not be able to determine the effectiveness of its actions. Monitoring and evaluating its actions would help management to be fully informed about the effectiveness of, or make improvements to the actions the department is taking to address the IT workforce challenges it faces.

State Did Not Consistently Collect IT Workforce Recruitment and Retention Data

State's *Program and Project Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation Policy* emphasizes the importance of retrieving quality data—valid, precise, timely, consistent, and accurate—which is necessary for providing central oversight and evaluating program performance against expected results.⁴⁴ In addition, according to the evaluation policy, bureaus and independent offices should develop a methodology and frequency for collecting data, and periodically perform an assessment of the data's quality to confirm the data reported meets the department's data quality standards.

However, State had not consistently collected accurate data on its IT workforce recruitment and retention activities. Nor were the collected data timely and easily accessible so they could be used to establish and maintain a monitoring and evaluation plan. In addition, as we previously

⁴³For the purposes of this report, attrition includes resignations, retirements, terminations, and other separations of full-time, non-temporary permanent employees from the Department of State for any reason.

⁴⁴State, *Department of State Program and Project Design, Monitoring, and, Evaluation Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2017).

mentioned, State does not collect data on the effectiveness of its recruitment program, hiring process, or on employee morale programs. Specifically:

- An outreach and recruitment plan on State’s IT workforce stated the department does not have consistent historical data on its outreach and recruitment actions to determine their effectiveness in recruiting the IT workforce.⁴⁵ According to that plan, the department needs to determine how and when to collect current and future recruitment data and establish a framework for how data is captured, reviewed, and stored for easy access, in order to improve future analysis of the department’s recruitment efforts.
- GTM officials said they have historical information on recruiting events and applicant data in their recruitment database and regularly collected data and established metrics on staffing levels and onboarding times for Civil Service and Foreign Service staff. However, officials said they are not able to track applicants from recruitment prospect to new hire. According to officials, State continues to seek appropriate options for an end-to-end automated applicant tracking system—to track individual talent from recruitment prospect, to applicant, to qualified candidate, to new hire—that will enable improved evaluation of the effectiveness of recruitment activities.

Without readily accessible, accurate, and timely data on State’s IT workforce, including recruitment and retention programs, activities, and hiring processes, management would not be able to monitor and evaluate whether the IT workforce recruitment and retention actions are working as intended and contributing to the achievement of State’s human capital goals for the IT workforce. In addition, without data on the effectiveness of the department’s IT recruitment and retention programs—including programs that address employee morale and IT hiring processes—State will likely not be able to evaluate the department’s progress and determine whether it had been successful in meeting IT workforce needs and is improving employee morale.

Conclusions

State has taken steps toward implementing numerous recruitment and retention leading practices. These practices are essential for, among other things, ensuring that agencies have the talent, skills, and experience mix they need to execute their missions. Of 15 recruitment

⁴⁵State, Bureau of Information Resource Management (IRM) Strategic Workforce Planning (SWP) Office, *Outreach and Recruitment Plan - 2019-2020* (Washington, D.C.: December 2020).

and retention practices we evaluated, State fully implemented one, partially implemented 11, and had not implemented three. Fully implementing these workforce planning and management practices would enable State to understand the competency and staffing needs of its current IT workforce and meet both current and future IT staffing needs.

Recruiting and retaining a quality IT workforce are critical to accomplishing State's mission. While State took some actions to address its IT workforce challenges, the department has not monitored and evaluated those actions to determine whether they have been effective in addressing the IT workforce recruitment and retention challenges. The department continues to face workforce challenges such as IT staff concerns about low pay and limited incentives and promotions. Unless State takes steps to overcome those and related issues, recruiting and retaining IT professionals with the skills to provide excellent mission support will remain a challenge. In addition, because State has not evaluated the effectiveness of its recruitment and retention activities, the department is unable to determine its progress toward addressing its IT workforce challenges. Establishing and implementing a monitoring and evaluation plan would help State to determine its progress toward addressing these challenges and could further improve State's IT recruiting and retention.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following 16 recommendations to the Department of State:

The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to ensure that the IT workforce planning processes and documents in development are completed and updated regularly for the Civil Service. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to ensure that the IT workforce planning processes and documents in development are completed and updated regularly for the Foreign Service. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to update State's domestic competency and staffing monitoring tools and incorporate the results of these tools in updated workforce planning documents. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to update State's overseas competency and staffing

monitoring tools, incorporating the results of these tools in updated workforce planning documents. (Recommendation 4)

The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to develop a plan, including performance indicators, baselines, milestones, and targets, to monitor the progress of the department's IT recruitment programs and processes. (Recommendation 5)

The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to ensure that relevant data related to IT recruitment activities are accurate and available to facilitate decision-making and enable the department to monitor and evaluate its performance in meeting its IT human capital goals. (Recommendation 6)

The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to consider expanding the number of Foreign Service IT positions that are available to external applicants year-round. (Recommendation 7)

The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to consider expanding the number of Civil Service IT positions that are available to external applicants year-round. (Recommendation 8)

The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to create and document a strategy for using hiring flexibilities and recruitment incentives for IT recruiting. (Recommendation 9)

The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to develop a plan, including performance indicators, baselines, milestones, and targets, to monitor the progress of the department's IT retention programs and processes. (Recommendation 10)

The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to ensure that relevant data related to IT retention activities are accurate and available to facilitate decision-making and enable the department to monitor and evaluate its performance in meeting its IT human capital goals. (Recommendation 11)

The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to obtain and track data related to employee morale issues for IT professionals in order to evaluate State's progress toward meeting its human capital goals. (Recommendation 12)

The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to create and document a strategy on implementing meaningful rewards programs and on providing incentives to motivate and reinforce expected levels of performance and desired conduct in the IT workforce. (Recommendation 13)

The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to create and document a strategy to develop a tailored approach to the use of available flexibilities, benefits, and incentives and tailoring benefits to current IT employees' needs for retention. (Recommendation 14)

The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to obtain and track data on aligning Foreign Service IT employee performance expectations with agency goals to facilitate decision-making and enable the department to monitor and evaluate its performance in meeting its IT human capital goals. (Recommendation 15)

The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to obtain and track data on aligning Civil Service IT employee performance expectations with agency goals to facilitate decision-making and enable the department to monitor and evaluate its performance in meeting its IT human capital goals. (Recommendation 16)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of State for its review and comment. In its written comments, reproduced in appendix III, the department concurred with 15 of our recommendations and did not concur with one (recommendation 7). State also provided technical comments on a sensitive version of this report, which we incorporated as appropriate.

State described the steps planned or under way to address the 15 recommendations. For example, the department stated that it was in the process of drafting an IT strategic workforce plan for the Civil Service and Foreign Service that it expects to be completed by the first quarter of fiscal year 2023. The department also plans to design and implement a Foreign Service Applicant Tracking System to determine the effectiveness of the department's recruitment efforts in the Foreign

Service. Additionally, the department created a retention unit to develop a comprehensive department-wide retention strategy and plans to implement an IT Skills Incentive Program to improve retention and career development. In developing its retention strategy, it will be important that the department document how it will measure IT Skills Incentive Program results and demonstrate whether the program reinforces the expected levels of performance and desired conduct for the IT workforce.

Further, State concurred with our two recommendations to update the department's domestic and overseas competency and staffing monitoring tools. Specifically, the department stated it will update the domestic and overseas competency studies in fiscal year 2023. However, the department's response also noted that State did not use the Overseas Staffing Model or the Domestic Staffing Model for competency assessments and that these should not be referenced as tools to assess the Foreign Service IT workforce's knowledge, skills, and ability needs. According to State, it plans to update its IT strategic workforce plan in fiscal year 2023 with information from the updated domestic and overseas competency studies. Although State IT officials told us that both models were used to assess staffing needs, we recognize that the models are only one part of a larger set of competency and staffing monitoring tools available for the department's use. We updated this report to reflect these comments.

State did not concur with our recommendation to consider expanding the number of Foreign Service IT positions that are available to external applicants year-round (recommendation 7). The department stated that the IM Specialist position is part of the Gateway program, which has a year-round, 24/7, application process. It further stated that the IM Technical Specialist position is not part of the Gateway program and the job announcements are only posted when there are vacancies. The department noted that both the program and the applicant pool is much smaller for the IM Technical Specialist position.

As we previously noted, State has experienced long-standing challenges with vacancies in its overall Foreign Service workforce. In a prior report, we stated that State's data showed persistent Foreign Service vacancies at overseas posts since 2008. The overseas posts with State's highest foreign policy priorities had the highest percentages of vacant Foreign Service positions. In addition, the vacancies were in regions that were considered high security risks and that could threaten U.S. foreign policy interests. Given historic vacancies in the Foreign Service IT workforce, it

would be important for State to assess again the need and criticality of the IM Technical Specialist position.

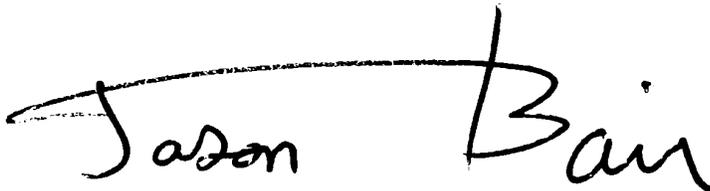
Further, we noted that State employees told us that job opportunities are generally only learned about through other State employees, and that the department may not reach all segments of job seekers and individuals with cyber talent who, historically, would not have sought out government careers. Therefore, we continue to believe that our recommendation for State to consider expanding the number of Foreign Service IT positions that are available to external applicants year-round is valid. This would help to ensure that State can fill vacancies in its entire Foreign Service IT workforce.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of State, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, our primary point of contact is David Hinchman at (214) 777-5719 or hinchmand@gao.gov. You may also contact Jason Bair at (202) 512-6881 or bairj@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.



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Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Our objectives were to examine to what extent State has (1) identified vacancies in its IT workforce since January 2017 and the impact of any such vacancies;¹ (2) implemented recruitment and retention processes that are consistent with applicable leading practices; and (3) identified IT workforce recruitment and retention challenges and evaluated the effectiveness of its actions to address these challenges.

This report is a public version of a sensitive report that we issued in April 2022.² State deemed some of the information in our April report to be sensitive, which must be protected from public disclosure. Therefore, this report omits our evaluation of objective (1) and some related sensitive information in objectives (2) and (3). Nevertheless, the report is based on the same methodology as the sensitive report.

To address these three objectives, our scope of work included a selection of six State overseas posts³ at geographic regional bureaus,⁴ and five functional bureaus.⁵

We selected State officials from State's six regional bureaus to interview. We also conducted interviews with IT staff at six overseas posts. To select a nongeneralizable sample of overseas posts for interviews, we analyzed staffing data for all State overseas posts and categorized them as having a large, medium, or small number of IT Foreign Service

¹For the purposes of this report, we will refer to both "staffing gaps" and "vacancies" as "vacancies" unless otherwise stated.

²GAO, *State Department: Additional Actions Needed to Address IT Workforce Challenges*, GAO-22-104233SU (Washington, D.C.: April 26, 2022).

³For the purposes of this report, we use the term "overseas posts" to collectively refer to U.S. embassies, consulates general, consulates, branch offices, and missions other than embassies. We remotely conducted interviews with State officials from six overseas posts. State officials requested we not identify these overseas posts due to sensitivity concerns.

⁴Regional bureaus oversee U.S. foreign policy for a given region of the world. The six regional bureaus are the: Bureau of African Affairs, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, and Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs.

⁵Functional bureaus have responsibility for different critical operations and aspects of administration or focus on specific issues and are responsible for foreign policy areas which affect all regions and countries. The five functional bureaus in our review were: Consular Affairs, Diplomatic Security, Foreign Service Institute (FSI), Global Talent Management (GTM), and Information Resource Management (IRM).

specialist positions.⁶ We then selected two posts from each of those categories, taking into consideration four additional factors:

1. We chose a mix of posts with different levels of IT Foreign Service specialist position vacancies, with those levels identified as being either mostly staffed (75 percent or higher), partially staffed (around 50 percent), and under staffed (under 50 percent).
2. We chose at least one post from each of State's different geographic overseas regions.⁷
3. We chose posts with a State-defined higher relative importance of overseas posts to economic, national security, or other foreign policy interest.
4. We also took into account posts with additional considerations, such as locations specifically identified by regional bureaus as having experienced IT staffing challenges, and whether the post was operational.⁸

After selecting the posts using the above factors, we coordinated with State overseas posts who identified multiple Foreign Service IT managers and IT specialists, where available, for us to interview.⁹ From that list of

⁶According to State staffing data, the number of IT staff positions at posts range from one position to 60 positions. We categorized the post as a large post if it had 30-60 IT Foreign Service staff, a medium post if it had 10-29 IT Foreign Service staff, and a small post if it had 1-9 IT Foreign Service staff.

⁷State divides overseas posts into six different regions: African, East Asian and Pacific, European and Eurasian, Near Eastern, South and Central Asian, and Western Hemisphere, but State officials stated that they combined the Near Eastern / South and Central Asian regions for management purposes.

⁸Our selections were designed to obtain a diverse mix of State officials and staff perspectives at overseas posts regarding the impact of any staffing gaps on State's IT environment, challenges in recruitment and retention in that workforce, and the effectiveness of reported actions to address those challenges.

⁹State's Foreign Service represents the interests of the United States in relation to foreign countries and international organizations, and responds to the needs of U.S. citizens in other countries. Members of the Foreign Service can be sent to any embassy, consulate, or diplomatic mission anywhere in the world to serve U.S. diplomatic needs. While Foreign Service employees travel far and frequently, generally rotating every 2 to 3 years, Civil Service employees remain stateside, primarily serving in Washington, D.C. Civil Service employees are involved in every area of the department, from human rights to narcotics control to trade to environmental issues. Some are the domestic counterparts to consular officers abroad, issuing passports and assisting U.S. citizens overseas.

staff, we interviewed IT staff with varying areas of expertise at each of the six overseas posts.

To select State functional bureau IT staff for interviews, we analyzed IT staffing data from the functional bureaus. Specifically, we identified IT managers and specialists who (1) were employed by one of the four functional bureaus (together those bureaus represented a majority of IT positions at State);¹⁰ (2) were in the 2210 occupational series (because this series accounts for approximately 88 percent of all functional bureau IT staff); and (3) had one of the four common IT job titles across the bureaus.¹¹ We then coordinated with State functional bureaus, who identified multiple Civil Service IT managers and IT specialists that met these criteria for us to interview.

To examine State's recruitment and retention processes, we first identified topic areas associated with human capital management based on our review of IT workforce planning and management practices identified in Office of Personnel Management guidance and GAO's prior work. Among these topic areas, we then selected five areas that were of particular importance to successful workforce planning: (1) strategic workforce planning, (2) talent acquisition, (3) talent management, (4) engaging employees, and (5) employee morale.

We then analyzed these reports and selected 15 leading practices applicable to the topic area: recruitment and retention practices for the IT workforce.¹² The 15 selected practices were foundational practices that, in our professional judgment and based on previous published GAO work, were of particular importance to successful workforce planning and management.

We reviewed State workforce documentation on recruitment and retention efforts including State's practices, policies and procedures, strategic plans, and staffing models applicable to its IT workforce. We compared

¹⁰The four functional bureaus were Consular Affairs, Diplomatic Security, Global Talent Management (GTM), and Information Resource Management (IRM).

¹¹We determined these four IT job titles were the most common by analyzing a list of State IT staff job titles and determined these titles had the largest number of staff for each title. The four most common IT job titles included the IT project managers, software developers, system testing and evaluation specialists, or technical support specialists.

¹²To select those recruitment and retention leading practices, we reviewed 17 prior GAO and OPM reports on recruiting and retention efforts, employee morale and strategic planning.

State's workforce-related documentation to federal requirements and workforce planning specific to selected IT recruitment and retention leading practices to describe the current state of the department's overall workforce planning program and compared how its program aligns with federal requirements and standards on recruitment and retention (i.e., GAO IT workforce planning framework, OPM's government-wide workforce planning model, and other leading practices) to identify any programmatic deficiencies in State's IT recruitment and retention process.

The comparison allowed us to determine the extent to which State demonstrated a commitment to recruit, develop, and retain competent individuals. We also determined that the control environment, control activities, and information and communication components of internal control were significant to this objective. Control activities were designed to achieve objectives and implemented through policies, and quality information was communicated to achieve the department's objectives. We determined whether State's Foreign Service and, separately, Civil Service had fully implemented, partially implemented, or not implemented each of the 15 applicable selected leading practices.¹³ We provided these leading practices and our assessment to State officials for their review and incorporated their comments in our assessment, as appropriate.

To examine State's IT workforce recruitment and retention challenges and the effectiveness of its actions, we assessed State's IT workforce recruitment and retention challenges and the extent to which State has evaluated the effectiveness of its actions to address those challenges by reviewing and analyzing State documentation among others. Specifically, we reviewed our prior work on State's workforce, State documents to determine what workforce challenges the department had encountered

¹³*Fully implemented* = State documentation demonstrated all aspects of the applicable leading practice; *partially implemented* = State documentation demonstrated some, but not all, aspects of the applicable leading practice; *not implemented* = State officials did not provide any documentation, or if documentation was provided, it did not demonstrate any aspect of the applicable leading practice.

and what actions, if any, it had implemented or started to implement to address those challenges.¹⁴

We developed a list of IT workforce challenges identified by most of the Civil Service and Foreign Service IT staff during our interviews as well as a list of actions taken. We determined the extent to which State had evaluated the effectiveness of its actions by comparing them to federal guidelines, models, standards, and practices for strategic workforce planning and methods for measuring workforce performance. These federal guidelines, models, and standards include State's evaluation policy, as well as those published by OPM and others.¹⁵ We also compared State's actions to practices we identified in previous GAO publications.¹⁶ We also interviewed relevant State Department officials to determine the challenges the department encountered in recruiting and retaining its IT workforce, reported actions taken, if any, to address those challenges, and their effectiveness in addressing those challenges. Specifically, we held semi-structured interviews with State Department officials and Civil Service and Foreign Service IT staff to obtain their

¹⁴Prior work we reviewed included: GAO, *Information Technology: Agencies Need to Fully Implement Key Workforce Planning Activities*, [GAO-20-129](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 30, 2019); GAO, *Department of State: Integrated Action Plan Could Enhance Efforts to Reduce Persistent Overseas Foreign Service Vacancies*, [GAO-19-220](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 6, 2019); GAO, *Department of State: Foreign Service Midlevel Staffing Gaps Persist Despite Significant Increases in Hiring*, [GAO-12-721](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jun. 14, 2012); GAO, *Department of State: Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts*, [GAO-09-874](#), (Washington, D.C.: Sep. 17, 2009); State, Office of Inspector General, *Inspector General Statement on the Department of State's Major Management and Performance Challenges—2018*, OIG-EX-19-01, (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 27, 2018); State, Office of Inspector General, *Review of the Effects of the Department of State Hiring Freeze*, ISP-I-19-23 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 9, 2019); State, Office of Inspector General, *Management Assistance Report: Continued Deficiencies in Performance of Information Systems Security Officer Responsibilities at Overseas Posts*, ISP-21-07 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 2020).

¹⁵Federal requirements, standards, and practices we reviewed include: Office of Personnel Management, *OPM's Workforce Planning Model*, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/human-capital-framework/reference-materials/strategic-alignment/workforceplanning.pdf>; State, *Department of State Program and Project Design, Monitoring, and, Evaluation Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2017); Department of Homeland Security, *Cybersecurity Workforce Development Toolkit: How to Build a Strong Cybersecurity Workforce*, (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2016); Office of Management and Budget, *Federal Cybersecurity Workforce Strategy*, M-16-15 (Washington, D.C.: Jul. 12, 2016).

¹⁶GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014) and *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, [GAO-04-39](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

views on the challenges the department faced in recruiting and retaining its IT workforce.

We selected a nonprobability sample of Civil Service IT staff in the 2210 occupational series, who were in the most common IT position titles, and Foreign Service Specialist staff in the area of information management across four bureaus. While these staff interviews are illustrative, they cannot be used to make generalizable statements about challenges identified by all IT staff or to all State Department bureaus. In addition, we reviewed documents provided by the State Department, our prior work on the department's workforce, and the Department of State Office of Inspector General reports to identify additional challenges not identified through our interviews.

To develop a list of IT workforce challenges, we compiled a list of challenges identified by a majority of department officials and IT staff and common themes within each challenge area. We also determined that the control environment, control activities, information and communication, and monitoring components of internal control were significant to this objective. We determined the extent to which State had established an internal control environment to achieve its objectives, demonstrated a commitment to recruit, develop, and retain competent individuals, evaluated their performance, and held individuals accountable for their internal control responsibilities.

To identify actions State has taken to address its IT workforce recruitment and retention challenges, we interviewed State Department officials, reviewed State department documents, and other department information on initiatives that were underway that could help address the challenges that were identified. We determined the extent to which State designed control activities to achieve objectives, respond to risks, and implemented control activities through policy. We then compared those initiatives to the list of challenges we developed to determine which actions most appropriately addressed each challenge(s). We developed a table of IT workforce challenges, initiatives, and the status of each initiative. We provided State Department officials with the table we developed to confirm or add to the list of challenges and the associated initiatives we identified. In addition, we asked officials to verify the status of each initiative.

We assessed the State Department's efforts to determine the effectiveness of their actions in addressing the IT workforce challenges it faces. We reviewed documentation on each of the initiatives identified in

the table and compared them to key factors identified in the Department of State's *Program and Project Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation Policy* and in the *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*.¹⁷ We provided these IT workforce challenges and actions to State officials for their review and incorporated their comments in our assessment, as appropriate.

We determined the extent to which State used and communicated quality information to achieve its objectives, conducted monitoring activities to monitor internal controls, evaluated the results of their actions, and took corrective action to address any deficiencies. More specifically, we assessed whether State had established an internal control process to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of its actions in addressing its IT workforce challenges.

We also determined that the control activities component of internal control was significant to this objective, along with the underlying principles that management should define objectives in specific and measurable terms in order to identify risks, design the appropriate types of control activities to achieve objectives and respond to risks, implement control activities in policy, and periodically review those control activities.

We conducted this performance audit from March 2020 to July 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

¹⁷State, *Department of State Program and Project Design, Monitoring, and, Evaluation Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2017) and [GAO-14-704G](#).

Appendix II: IT Workforce Challenges and State Actions to Address Them

State faces a number of challenges to recruiting and retaining an IT workforce with the skill sets it needs to fulfill its mission. State officials, IT Civil Service staff from the five functional bureaus and IT Foreign Service staff from the six overseas posts described some actions they have planned, or are underway, to help address some of those workforce challenges.

Table 4 shows the recruiting challenges we identified and State's actions to address some of the challenges.

Table 4: GAO's Assessment of State's IT Workforce Recruiting Challenges and State's Action to Address the Challenges

Recruiting Challenge	Recruiting Challenge Details	State's Actions to Address the Challenges
Narrow focus of marketing and recruitment strategies	Civil Service IT staff at one bureau and Foreign Service IT staff at multiple overseas posts we interviewed said State could improve its marketing and recruitment strategy and broaden the scope of its efforts to recruit for its IT positions. Foreign Service IT staff said the general public and eligible job applicants do not have an awareness of the State Department, what the department does, or the additional benefits it offers its Foreign Service employees, that offset the low entry salaries. ^a Civil Service IT staff in our review said State needed to expand the recruiting efforts beyond its current target groups and advertise outside of USAJobs.gov. Further, according to the State <i>Five-Year Workforce Plan Fiscal Years 2019-2023</i> , State's recruitment strategy targeted advertising and outreach mainly to under-represented groups such as minorities. ^b	According to Global Talent Management (GTM) and Information Resource Management (IRM) officials, State had expanded its recruiting efforts to include military installations and local government and used non-traditional recruiting avenues such as online job platforms, virtual career fairs, and other sources to recruit IT talent. According to those officials, they advertised and recruited for IT positions on an ongoing basis and invested in paid advertising targeting IT professionals. GTM and IRM officials said the department is increasing brand awareness of its technology positions targeting IT candidates, specifically for Foreign Service specialist positions. Engaging in strategic recruitment and awareness campaigns and enhancing outreach efforts to reach all segments of job seekers may allow State to pursue individuals with cyber talent who, historically, would not have sought out government careers.
Lack of detailed information in job announcements	GTM and IRM officials and Foreign Service IT staff at multiple posts in our review said Foreign Service job announcements did not clearly describe the additional benefits included in the compensation package, such as education and housing allowances, for the department's Foreign Service positions. Further, according to Foreign Service IT staff at multiple posts job announcements required candidates to have specialized skills and experience, however, when they got to their posts they were managing personnel, performing basic IT tasks, and doing administrative work, such as transporting the diplomatic pouch. ^c	The <i>Integrated Action Plan Developed to Reduce Persistent Overseas Vacancies</i> indicated the department had revised its Foreign Service job announcements to highlight the total compensation package, to help to attract experienced IT professionals. ^d In addition, according to GTM officials the department recently completed its scheduled 10-year comprehensive review and update of the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other essential requirements of the Foreign Service Information Management (IM) Specialist positions. GTM officials said they are continually aligning IM Specialist vacancy announcements to the State <i>IT Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2019-2022</i> and the future skills needed by the IT workforce. ^e Further, according to IRM officials, job announcements were updated prior to each job opening and had been modified to reflect the new minimum qualifications required of the IM Specialist workforce. Unclear job announcements could cause confusion for applicants, delay hiring, and serve as poor recruiting tools.

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Recruiting Challenge	Recruiting Challenge Details	State's Actions to Address the Challenges
Low entry-level pay, no recruiting bonus challenges	<p>GTM and IRM officials, Civil Service IT staff at most bureaus, and Foreign Service IT staff at most posts said State faced difficulty attracting IT professionals because the department is competing against the private sector and other agencies for the same candidates. According to officials and IT staff, the private sector and other federal agencies offer higher starting salaries and signing or recruitment bonuses to new hires. For example, IT staff at multiple bureaus and posts said candidates are required to have post-secondary education and experience that were not commensurate with the starting salary. A State compensation study evaluated the competitiveness of the department's total compensation (pay and benefits) for its Civil Service and Foreign Service IT workforce against the public and private sectors.^f According to the study, the total compensation (pay and benefits) for Civil Service IT staff was less than and Foreign Service IT staff was slightly more than their private sector counterparts.^g However, the study also noted the Foreign Service IT pay was lower than private-sector salaries. According to GTM and IRM officials, Civil Service IT staff at most bureaus, and Foreign Service IT staff at most posts in our review, State did not offer recruiting bonuses to bring in experienced applicants. In addition, GTM and IRM officials said the department does not offer pay incentives to new IT hires for IT certifications they already held.</p>	<p>According to GTM officials, in 2020 the Director General approved an IRM request for the department to hire Foreign Service IM Specialist candidates at the next highest level if they met certain qualifications and had previous experience. In addition, GTM officials said the salary range advertised in Foreign Service vacancy announcements was adjusted in 2021 to better reflect starting salaries for those employees.^h Further, GTM and IRM officials said State offered the pay incentive for IT certifications as a retention mechanism and to encourage IT staff to gain new IT and cyber skills. Officials said IT staff could acquire new certifications once they were on board and would be given a pay increase for those through State's Skills Incentive Program (SIP) and Cyber SIP retention programs.ⁱ Maximizing the use of existing pay flexibilities, such as recruiting bonuses and student loan repayments, could improve the competitiveness of the department's employment offers.</p>
Lengthy hiring and clearance process	<p>GTM and IRM officials, Civil Service IT staff at many bureaus, and Foreign Service IT staff at many posts in our review told us State's hiring process was time consuming and lengthy. Those officials and staff said candidates who met the technical requirements were often discouraged by the length of the hiring and security clearance processes, which can take up to 2 years. Officials and staff told us, potential candidates were not applying for jobs because they did not want to wait to go through State's lengthy process, or applicants found jobs elsewhere while they were waiting to get their security clearance. As a result, applicants may be dissuaded from public service jobs due to the lengthy process involved in attaining their security clearance.</p>	<p>According to GTM officials, in 2019 State entered into an agreement with the Department of Defense's Finance and Accounting Service to help speed up the Civil Service hiring process. In addition, GTM and IRM officials said the department implemented a pilot program in May 2020 to streamline the security clearance process for Civil Service positions bringing the processing time from about 55 days down to 12 days. Officials said the program would be adapted for the Foreign Service in the future. Further, GTM officials said the department is using shared certificates for IT hiring, so a vacancy announcement could be used by multiple bureaus to make multiple hires from the same certificate.^j GTM and IRM officials also said they introduced an on-demand online gateway aptitude testing for IM Specialist candidates in April 2019 allowing applicants to be evaluated anytime. According to officials, this ensures applicants met a fundamental qualification level before proceeding with review of resumes and other credentials. Improving the hiring and clearances processes would bring more applicants onboard more quickly to alleviate vacancies.</p>

Source: GAO analysis of State Foreign Service and Civil Service data and documentation. | GAO-22-105932.

^aState offers benefits such as housing and schooling allowances.

^bU.S. Department of State, *Five-Year Workforce Plan Fiscal Years 2019–2023*, (Washington, D.C.: February 2020).

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^cA diplomatic pouch is any sealed package primarily used for transporting official State Department documents. A classified diplomatic pouch is required to be supervised at all stages of transport by an American citizen with a top-secret security clearance.

^dAn integrated action plan for reducing persistent vacancies was developed at State in response to the recommendation in [GAO-19-220: Integrated Action Plan Could Enhance Efforts to Reduce Persistent Overseas Foreign Service Vacancies](#).

^eU.S. Department of State, *IT Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2019–2022*, (Washington, D.C.: March 2019).

^fU.S. Department of State, *LMI Department of State Domestic IT Competency Study*, internal document (June 2019); *Department of State Foreign Service IT Competency Study*, internal document (November 2016).

^gThe study did note that customer support jobs in the private sector were included in the Foreign Service study comparison. As a result, those positions may have lowered the estimated compensation of private sector IT positions which were used in the comparison.

^hPrior to 2021, the salary range in the Foreign Service job announcements was from the Foreign Service base schedule pay table. The salary range that is currently in use is from the overseas comparability pay salary table and the Washington D.C. locality pay table.

ⁱThe Skills Incentive Program (SIP) provides a 10 or 15 percent pay incentive if an IT employee in the Foreign Service and Civil Service completes specific IT certificates. The Cyber SIP is targeted toward cybersecurity professionals, who get a 25 percent pay incentive to obtain and maintain specific cyber credentials.

^jThe department develops a generic IT job announcement that includes typical duties so the certificate can be used to fill multiple vacancies across the bureaus instead of each bureau developing its own job certificate.

Table 5 shows the retention challenges we identified and State’s actions to address the challenge.

Table 5: GAO’s Assessment of State’s IT Workforce Retention Challenges and State’s Action to Address the Challenges

Retention Challenge	Retention Challenge Details	State’s Actions to Address the Challenges
Low entry-level pay raises and limited retention incentives	According to Global Talent Management (GTM) and Information Resource Management (IRM) officials, Civil Service IT staff at most of the bureaus, and Foreign Service IT staff at most posts we reviewed, the level of pay for the skills and experience required for the department’s IT positions were not competitive with the private sector and the department offered low pay and few financial incentives for IT staff. GTM and IRM officials said State had two main programs used to retain IT staff, the Skills Incentive Program (SIP) and student loan repayment program. ^a According to information provided by State, approximately 40 percent of IT staff were enrolled in SIP and some staff were not eligible for the student loan repayment program.	According to GTM and IRM officials, the department made revisions to the SIP program, such as allowing IT staff appointed to limited term positions to participate in SIP. Officials said State is piloting a Cyber SIP program, focused on cybersecurity certifications, which offers a higher pay incentive than the SIP program. ^b According to many of the Civil Service and Foreign Service IT staff we spoke with, and a survey from IRM, the incentives from the SIP program were the reason some IT staff stayed with the department. In addition, GTM officials said current Foreign Service Information Management (IM) Specialist employees at the FP-05 grade would be administratively promoted to the next highest level, the FP-04 grade, if they met certain qualifications and experience requirements. By using pay incentives such as special pay rates, incentives, and student loan repayments, State could provide cost effective ways to provide additional compensation to current employees, which can support the department’s retention efforts.

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Retention Challenge	Retention Challenge Details	State's Actions to Address the Challenges
Inaccuracy of position descriptions and performing non-IT related work	GTM officials, Civil Service IT staff at multiple bureaus, and Foreign Service IT staff at multiple posts in our review said that position descriptions did not accurately reflect actual IT job responsibilities. Specifically, Civil Service and Foreign Service IT staff told us employees were responsible for managing multiple projects and filling multiple roles because of the heavy workload. For example, Foreign Service IT staff said position descriptions did not accurately reflect the amount of time they were required to perform administrative work, such as managing the mailroom and performing diplomatic pouch duties, which reduced the amount of time they could spend on mission-critical IT activities. ^c GTM and IRM officials told us it is often difficult to get the position descriptions to accurately reflect the responsibilities of the job.	According to GTM officials, the bureau was conducting a study of the Foreign Service's domestic IT positions, to be completed in 2022, to develop new Foreign Service domestic IT position classification criteria and standard position description statements for those positions. Further, GTM officials said the department had been working to update the position descriptions for its IT workforce and verifying cyber roles associated with those positions. In addition, the <i>Foreign Service IT Competency Study</i> recommended that the department scale back Foreign Service IT responsibility for non-IT functions. ^d According to the 2020 update on the <i>Foreign Service IT Competency Study</i> , IRM had analyzed the impact of the non-IT related work on Foreign Service IT personnel and drafted a decision memo for IRM leadership to determine a way forward. Inaccurate position descriptions and related pay determinations make it challenging to retain IT staff and could hamper the department's efforts to fill positions with the right employees.
Limited promotion possibilities	Civil Service IT staff at multiple bureaus and Foreign Service IT staff at multiple posts we spoke to said promotion opportunities were limited and there were few management and senior level positions available to advance their career. Specifically, Foreign Service IT staff said there was a very small percentage of IT staff being promoted into senior level positions, so staff remained at the same level for long periods of time. According to the State <i>Five-Year Workforce Plan Fiscal Years 2019-2023</i> , about 3 percent of the Foreign Service specialist workforce is in the Senior Foreign Service and most specialist groups have few if any senior positions. ^e In addition, under the current "up or out" promotion system at State, Foreign Service employees were limited in the number of years they could remain at each grade and those not promoted within that time must leave the department. ^f According to an IRM official, Civil Service IT staff at multiple bureaus in our review, and State's workforce plan, the majority of the Civil Service IT employees are at General Schedule Grade 13. Civil Service IT staff at many bureaus told us staff needed to move around the department or to other agencies for promotion opportunities. ^g Civil Service IT staff we interviewed said State needed to provide Civil Service employees a career path to be promoted to higher-level positions.	According to State's <i>Five-Year Workforce Plan Fiscal Years 2019-2023</i> , the long-term training and professional development opportunities the department provided to Civil Service and Foreign Service employees were important for advancing into the senior ranks. ^h Some of those development programs included the Professional Development Program for Foreign Service IRM Specialist, IRM's Executive Development Program, and the Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Program. ⁱ GTM officials said they were participating in a career initiative through the Federal Chief Information Officers Council to define cyber career pathways for its Civil Service IT staff. Offering career mobility, which includes opportunities for upward mobility, such as promotions, lateral mobility, and opportunities to rotate to different roles or projects, were important for retaining employees and reducing turnover.

Source: GAO analysis of State Foreign Service and Civil Service data and documentation. | GAO-22-105932.

^aThe Skills Incentive Program (SIP) provides a 10 or 15 percent pay incentive if an IT employee in the Foreign Service and Civil Service completes specific IT certificates.

^bThe Cyber SIP is targeted toward cybersecurity professionals, who get a 25 percent pay incentive to obtain and maintain specific cyber credentials.

^cA diplomatic pouch is any sealed package primarily used for transporting official State Department documents. A classified diplomatic pouch is required to be supervised at all stages of transport by an American citizen with a Top Secret security clearance.

^dDepartment of State, *Foreign Service IT Competency Study*, DS662T1 (Nov. 2016).

^eU.S. Department of State, *Five-Year Workforce Plan Fiscal Years 2019–2023*, (Washington, D.C.: February 2020).

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^fThe Foreign Service workforce career flows are managed by an “up or out” promotion system, which has time-in-grade and time-in-service rules that are described in the *Foreign Affairs Manual*.

^gIn fiscal year 2017, the largest number of State Civil Service employees are GS-13’s, followed by 1,841 GS-14s, and 992 GS-15s. Promotion generally becomes more competitive for the higher ranks. For example, in fiscal year 2017, 15 percent of GS-11 employees were promoted to GS-12, while 1 percent of GS-15 employees in fiscal year 2017 were promoted to the executive rank. See GAO, *State Department: Additional Steps Are Needed to Identify Potential Barriers to Diversity*, [GAO-20-237](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 21, 2021).

^hU.S. Department of State, *Five-Year Workforce Plan Fiscal Years 2019–2023*, (Washington, D.C.: February 2020).

ⁱThe Professional Development Program for Foreign Service IRM Specialist provides a framework for career progression and lists the requirements needed to be considered for promotion into the Senior Foreign Service; IRM’s Executive Development Program is a long term training and leadership program for Civil Service and Foreign Service IT professionals to mentor the next generation of IRM leadership; the Senior Executive Service Candidate Development program is a comprehensive, 2-year training and development program to help candidates develop the Executive Core Qualifications and prepare them for entry the Senior Executive Service.

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of State



United States Department of State
Comptroller
Washington, DC 20520

JUN 09 2022

Thomas Melito
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Mr. Melito:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "STATE DEPARTMENT: Additional Actions Needed to Address IT Workforce Challenges" GAO Job Code 105932.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "William B. Davisson".

William B. Davisson (Acting)

Enclosure:
As stated

cc: GAO – David Hinchman
GTM – Phillipe Lussier
IRM – Keith Jones
OIG - Norman Brown

Department of State Response to GAO Draft Report
STATE DEPARTMENT: Additional Actions Needed to Address IT
Workforce Challenges
(GAO-22-105932, GAO Code 105932)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the GAO draft report, “*State Department: Additional Actions Needed to Address IT Workforce Challenges.*” These comments respond to GAO’s recommendations for the Department of State, listed below.

Recommendation 1: The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to ensure that the IT workforce planning processes and documents in development are completed and updated regularly for the Civil Service.

Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. The Department is in the process of drafting an IT Strategic Workforce Plan for the Civil Service and Foreign Service with updated data with a target date of completion by the first quarter of FY 2023.

Recommendation 2: The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to ensure that the IT workforce planning processes and documents in development are completed and updated regularly for the Foreign Service.

Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. The Department is in the process of drafting an IT Strategic Workforce Plan for the Civil Service and Foreign Service with updated data with a target date of completion by the first quarter of FY 2023.

Recommendation 3: The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to update State’s domestic competency and staffing monitoring tools and incorporate the results of these tools in updated workforce planning documents.

Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. The Department plans to begin updating the domestic and overseas competency studies at the beginning of FY 2023. Recommendations derived from the updated competency

study will be incorporated into the following year's IT Strategic Workforce Plan and other workforce planning documents, as needed.

Additional comments: The Department does not use the Overseas Staffing Model (OSM) or the Domestic Staffing Model (DSM) for competency assessments and neither should be referenced as a tool the Department uses to assess the Foreign Service IT workforce's knowledge, skills, and ability needs.

Recommendation 4: The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to update State's overseas competency and staffing monitoring tools, incorporating the results of these tools in updated workforce planning documents.

Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. The Department plans to begin updating the domestic and overseas competency studies at the beginning of FY 2023. Recommendations derived from the updated competency study will be incorporated into the following year's IT Strategic Workforce Plan and other workforce planning documents, as needed.

Additional comments: The Department does not use the Overseas Staffing Model (OSM) or the Domestic Staffing Model (DSM) for competency assessments and neither should be referenced as a tool the Department uses to assess the Foreign Service IT workforce's knowledge, skills, and ability needs.

Recommendation 5: The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to develop a plan, including performance indicators, baselines, milestones, and targets, to monitor the progress of the department's IT recruitment programs and processes.

Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. The Department is currently working on designing and implementing a Foreign Service Applicant Tracking System that will allow us to determine the effectiveness of our recruitment efforts to attract an appropriate applicant pool in the required skill categories and track them throughout the hiring process. This is still in the very early stages of discussion but will help monitor our programs and processes. For Civil Service employees, the Department is developing an evaluation mechanism under the IT Hiring Plan to identify effective recruitment strategies for IT workers and replicate them throughout the Department's hiring offices.

Recommendation 6: The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to ensure that relevant data related to IT recruitment activities are accurate and available to facilitate decision-making and enable the department to monitor and evaluate its performance in meeting its IT human capital goals.

Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. The Department is currently working on designing and implementing a Foreign Service Applicant Tracking System that will allow us to determine the effectiveness of our applicant pool for skill categories and track them throughout the hiring process. This is still in the very early stages of discussion but will help to ensure that data related to IT recruitment activities are accurate and available to facilitate decision-making.

Recommendation 7: The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to consider expanding the number of Foreign Service IT positions that are available to external applicants year-round.

Response: The Department does not concur with this recommendation. The Information Management Specialist (IMS) is part of the electronic Gateway program and there is a year-round, 24/7 online application process. The Information Management Technical Specialist (IMTS) is not part of the Gateway program and job announcements are only posted when there are vacancies, since both the program and the applicant pool is much smaller. The Department advertises IMS and IMTS jobs on USAJOBS when we post a vacancy announcement.

Recommendation 8: The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to consider expanding the number of Civil Service IT positions that are available to external applicants year-round.

Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. The Department is working to develop an IT Hiring Plan that establishes a strategic approach for utilizing the various hiring mechanisms available to appoint individuals into IT positions throughout the Department. This includes Direct Hire Authorities, Non-Competitive Authorities, and promoting the sharing of certified highly qualified candidates across bureaus.

Recommendation 9: The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to create and document a strategy for using hiring flexibilities and recruitment incentives for IT recruiting.

Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. The Department already uses Direct Hire Authorities (DHAs) that are available for IT positions, such as the Government-wide IT Management (Information Security) for GS-9 and above; IT Cybersecurity Specialist for GS-12 through GS-15; and the Department specific 8-year time-limited DHA for IT Specialist positions up to GS-15. The Department is working on creating a recruitment incentive strategy for Civil Service IT professionals and expects to implement the strategy in FY 2023, subject to the availability of funding. Once approved, the Department plans to create recruitment incentives for Foreign Service IT positions.

Recommendation 10: The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to develop a plan, including performance indicators, baselines, milestones, and targets, to monitor the progress of the department's IT retention programs and processes.

Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. The Department created a Retention Unit to develop a comprehensive Department-wide retention strategy, including for IT professionals. Implementation of the strategy is expected in CY 2023.

Recommendation 11: The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to ensure that relevant data related to IT retention activities are accurate and available to facilitate decision-making and enable the department to monitor and evaluate its performance in meeting its IT human capital goals.

Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. The Department created a Retention Unit to develop a comprehensive Department-wide retention strategy, including for IT professionals. Implementation of the strategy is expected in CY 2023.

Recommendation 12: The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to obtain and track data related to employee morale issues for IT professionals in order to evaluate State's progress toward meeting its human capital goals.

Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. To develop the IT Strategic Workforce Plan, the Department included six questions in a survey to the

IT workforce related to employee morale. The results will be used as a baseline for tracking employee morale in the future.

Recommendation 13: The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to create and document a strategy on implementing meaningful rewards programs and on providing incentives to motivate and reinforce expected levels of performance and desired conduct in the IT workforce.

Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. The Bureau of Information Resource Management is implementing an IT Skills Incentive Program to improve retention and career development.

Recommendation 14: The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to create and document a strategy to develop a tailored approach to the use of available flexibilities, benefits, and incentives and tailoring benefits to current IT employees' needs for retention .

Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. The Department already uses Direct Hire Authorities (DHAs) that are available for IT positions, such as the Government-wide IT Management (Information Security) for GS-9 and above; IT Cybersecurity Specialist for GS-12 through GS-15; and the Department specific 8-year time-limited DHA for IT Specialist positions up to GS-15. The Department is working on creating a recruitment incentive strategy for Civil Service IT professionals and expects to implement the strategy in FY 2023, subject to the availability of funding. Once approved, the Department plans to create recruitment incentives for Foreign Service IT positions.

Recommendation 15: The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to obtain and track data on aligning Foreign Service IT employee performance expectations with agency goals to facilitate decision-making and enable the department to monitor and evaluate its performance in meeting its IT human capital goals.

Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. The Department is modernizing its performance evaluation applications for 2023, which may facilitate the ability to track this data in the future.

Recommendation 16: The Secretary of State should direct the Under Secretary for Management to obtain and track data on aligning Civil Service

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IT employee performance expectations with agency goals to facilitate decision-making and enable the department to monitor and evaluate its performance in meeting its IT human capital goals.

Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. The Department is modernizing its performance evaluation applications for 2023, which may facilitate the ability to track this data in the future.

Appendix IV: GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contacts

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