



February 2023

FEDERAL WORKFORCE

OPM Advances
Efforts to Close
Government-wide
Skills Gaps but Needs
a Plan to Improve Its
Own Capacity

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105528](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Strategic human capital management, specifically the federal government's efforts to address government-wide and agency specific skills gaps, has been on GAO's High-Risk List since 2001. These gaps impede the government from achieving desired results. A skills gap may consist of an insufficient number of individuals, individuals without the appropriate skills, abilities, or behaviors to perform the work successfully; or both. OPM has identified skills gaps in government-wide occupations in fields such as human resources, cybersecurity, and acquisition.

OPM plays an important role in closing skills gaps and ensuring agencies have the necessary tools and resources. GAO was asked to review agencies' skills gaps-related challenges and OPM's efforts to close skills gaps. This report examines (1) federal human capital officers' perspectives on workforce challenges they face, and (2) OPM's efforts to close skills gaps government-wide and within its workforce since 2020.

GAO hosted a forum to obtain federal human capital officers' perspectives. GAO also analyzed relevant documents and interviewed OPM officials responsible for implementing strategic and human capital plans and managing risks.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OPM (1) establish an action plan to address its skills gaps, and (2) document and take other actions to address the risks its skills gaps pose to meeting its strategic objectives. OPM concurred with both recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105528](#). For more information, contact Alissa H. Czyz at (202) 512-6806 or CzyzA@gao.gov.

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FEDERAL WORKFORCE

OPM Advances Efforts to Close Government-wide Skills Gaps but Needs a Plan to Improve Its Own Capacity

What GAO Found

During a May 2022 GAO-hosted forum, federal human capital officers called 1) recruiting and hiring, and 2) workforce planning their agencies' top challenges for closing skills gaps. In addition, forum participants said that the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) could help them close skills gaps by providing additional workplace flexibilities and streamlining regulations and guidance to reduce administrative burden.

Since 2011, OPM has led efforts to close government-wide skills gaps. These efforts include working on the President's Management Agenda, improving collaboration with the Chief Human Capital Officers Council, and identifying strategies for closing the gaps in its strategic plan. However, in 2022, an independent workforce assessment found that OPM had its own skills gaps in key capabilities (see figure). According to the assessment and GAO's analysis, this could compromise OPM's ability to implement its strategic objectives related to closing government-wide skills gaps.

Figure 1: Examples of Skills Gaps Identified in the Assessment of OPM's Workforce



Source: OPM workforce assessment; IconicLibrary/Stock.Adobe.com. | [GAO-23-105528](#)

OPM officials told GAO they generally agreed with the assessment's findings and were addressing its own skills gaps. However, OPM has yet to develop an action plan that includes all elements directed by OPM guidance to manage this effort. GAO also found OPM did not list its skills gaps as a risk to implementing its strategic objectives, an essential element of enterprise risk management. Doing so would better position OPM to have the near- and long-term capacity to help other agencies close skills gaps across the federal government.

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Abbreviations

CHCO	Chief Human Capital Officer
GS	General Schedule
HCOP	Human Capital Operating Plan
HR	human resources
IIJA	Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act
NAPA	National Academy of Public Administration
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
PMA	President's Management Agenda
VHA	Veterans Health Administration

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February 27, 2023

The Honorable Jamie Raskin
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Accountability
House of Representatives

The Honorable Gerald E. Connolly
House of Representatives

A highly skilled federal workforce is critical to the nation’s ability to address complex social, economic, and security challenges. However, the federal government faces long-standing challenges in strategically managing its workforce. Skills gaps, both within federal agencies and across the federal workforce, pose a high risk to the nation because they impede the government from cost effectively serving the public and achieving desired results. A skills gap may consist of an insufficient number of individuals or individuals without the appropriate skills, abilities, or behaviors to successfully perform the work. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has previously identified skills gaps across the government in areas such as cybersecurity; human resources; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics occupations; and acquisition.¹ We have also found skills gaps in mission-critical occupations specific to certain agencies, such as nurses within the Veterans Health Administration and tax enforcement officials at the Internal Revenue Service.²

We first designated strategic human capital management as a high-risk area in 2001.³ In 2021, we reported that skills gaps caused by challenges such as an insufficient number of staff, inadequate workforce planning,

¹GAO, *High-Risk Series: Dedicated Leadership Needed to Address Limited Progress in Most High-Risk Areas*, [GAO-21-119SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2, 2021).

²GAO, *Internal Revenue Service: Strategic Human Capital Management is Needed to Address Serious Risks to IRS’s Mission*, [GAO-19-176](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 26, 2019); and *Veterans Health Administration: Management Attention Is Needed to Address Systemic, Long-standing Human Capital Challenges*, [GAO-17-30](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 23, 2016). A mission-critical occupation is one an agency considers core to carrying out its mission.

³GAO, *High-Risk Series: An Update*, [GAO-01-263](#) (Washington, D.C.: January 2001).

and a lack of training in critical skills contributed to our designating 22 of 35 other areas as high-risk at that time.⁴

Multiple stakeholders must coordinate their efforts to address skills gaps. For example, OPM, as the chief human resources agency and personnel policy manager for the federal government, plays an important role in ensuring agencies have the tools and resources needed to address government-wide skills gaps. Federal agencies can use those tools and resources to execute strategies for acquiring, developing, and retaining staff with necessary skills to achieve their mission and goals. OPM works with the Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCO) Council and serves as a key strategic human capital partner for federal agencies.

During the past several years, however, OPM has experienced significant challenges. In June 2018, the previous administration proposed reorganizing OPM by moving its responsibilities to General Services Administration and the Executive Office of the President.⁵ Ultimately, Congress effectively halted the proposed reorganization as part of the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act. This act required the administration to pause its efforts while the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) conducted a study on the future of OPM.⁶

In its study issued in March 2021, NAPA reported that although the proposed merger was no longer being pursued, staff turnover at OPM reduced the agency's capacity to carry out functions. It also created employee angst contributing to employee turnover, declining morale, and

⁴[GAO-21-119SP](#).

⁵We previously reported on the proposed reorganization of OPM and reform efforts in general. GAO, *Federal Management: Selected Reforms Could Be Strengthened By Following Additional Planning, Communication, and Leadership Practices*, [GAO-20-322](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 23, 2020); and *Government Reorganization: Issues to Consider in the Proposed Reorganization of the Office of Personnel Management*, [GAO-19-575T](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 21, 2019).

⁶National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, Pub. L. No. 116-92, tit. XI, § 1112, 133 Stat. 1198, 1601-1603 (2019). The law directed OPM to contract with NAPA to conduct a study to identify challenges associated with OPM's execution of its functions and make recommendations for addressing them. This included a cost-benefit analysis of proposed changes and the identification of statutory or regulatory changes needed to execute recommended actions, among other things. Approximately 6 months after the NAPA report, OPM was required to submit a report providing its views on the NAPA report and its recommendations for changes to its functions. OPM was also required to include a business case analysis associated with such changes and a proposal for legislative and regulatory action required to effect the changes.

trust issues while worry over the future of the agency affected recruitment.⁷ NAPA also found that lack of sustained leadership significantly affected OPM's internal operations. This, in turn, limited the agency's ability to address long-term human capital management challenges. We similarly downgraded our rating for OPM's leadership commitment from met to partially meet in our March 2021 High-Risk report in part because the agency did not have Senate-confirmed leadership and had been led by an acting director for nearly 2 years.⁸ Additionally, OPM did not hold regulation-required annual Human Capital Reviews. In June 2021, the Senate confirmed an OPM Director.

You asked us to review OPM's progress in addressing skills gaps government-wide and in its own workforce. This report (1) describes federal human capital officers' perspectives on top challenges their agencies face in addressing skills gaps and areas where OPM can provide additional support, and (2) assesses OPM's efforts to address skills gaps, both across the federal government and within its workforce, since 2020.

To address the first objective, in May 2022, we convened a forum with CHCO Council members, represented by their respective CHCOs, deputy CHCOs, or their designees (participants). Twenty-five of the 27 member agencies attended the forum.⁹ We conducted a poll and facilitated discussions on two primary questions. First, we asked participants about the top challenges their agencies face in addressing skills gaps. We provided them with options of common challenge areas we identified from our analysis of CFO Act agencies' strategic plans, budget justifications,

⁷National Academy of Public Administration, *Elevating Human Capital: Reframing the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's Leadership Imperative* (Washington, D.C.: March 2021).

⁸[GAO-21-119SP](#).

⁹The Office of Management and Budget and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs did not participate in forum discussions. Four OPM officials observed the forum discussions, including the Executive Director and Deputy Director of the CHCO Council.

and annual performance plans to help guide the discussion.¹⁰ Next, we asked participants about areas OPM should prioritize that would be most helpful for their agencies' efforts to address skills gaps, and included options we identified from our analysis of OPM's Fiscal Years 2022-2026 Strategic Plan.¹¹

We tabulated the polling results for each question. Forum participants agreed the results were among the top issues for their respective agency. We facilitated discussions with forum participants. We do not provide counts or otherwise quantify the number of forum participants agreeing to a skills gaps challenge or additional assistance from OPM. Since forum participants were generating and discussing ideas as part of a group discussion, the number of times a concept was (or was not) repeated does not necessarily indicate the level of consensus on that concept.

Throughout the report, the term "some participants" indicates that more than one participant made a statement supporting a particular point. Quotes used in this report are attributable to individual forum participants and are not generalizable to all participants. The text boxes referencing our prior work in this report are for illustrative purposes. They are not intended to fully reflect the status of agency efforts to address any related recommendations.

To address the second objective, we reviewed and analyzed OPM documents that described the agency's plans and actions for addressing its own skills gaps. These documents include its Fiscal Year 2022-2026 Strategic Plan, Fiscal Year 2023 Congressional Budget Justification, guidance to agencies to, among other things, implement their human capital strategies, and internal documents outlining the agency's process for monitoring strategic plan implementation. We reviewed an OPM-sponsored, third-party assessment of skills gaps in OPM's workforce. We interviewed OPM officials who determine the agency's response to the

¹⁰"CFO Act agencies" refers to the 24 agencies listed in the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-576 (1990) (codified as amended at 31 U.S.C. § 901(b)). Challenges included retention; hiring/recruitment; workforce planning/assess skills; diverse, equitable, inclusive, accessible for mission success; training, development, and reskilling; hybrid workplace/workplace flexibilities; engagement/collaboration; resources/tools for employee success; other/not sure; and no skills gaps at my agency. Participants could choose up to three responses.

¹¹U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Strategic Plan, Fiscal Years 2022-2026* (Washington, D.C.: March 2022).

assessment results. We also interviewed officials responsible for strategic planning and managing enterprise risk, among others. We compared this information to relevant elements of enterprise risk management.¹²

We conducted this performance audit from November 2021 to February 2023 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.

Background

Since 2001, we have designated strategic human capital management as a government-wide high-risk area. This is partially because of the need to address current and emerging skills gaps that are undermining agencies' abilities to meet their missions. We first identified human capital management as a high-risk area because of the significant challenges agencies faced in:

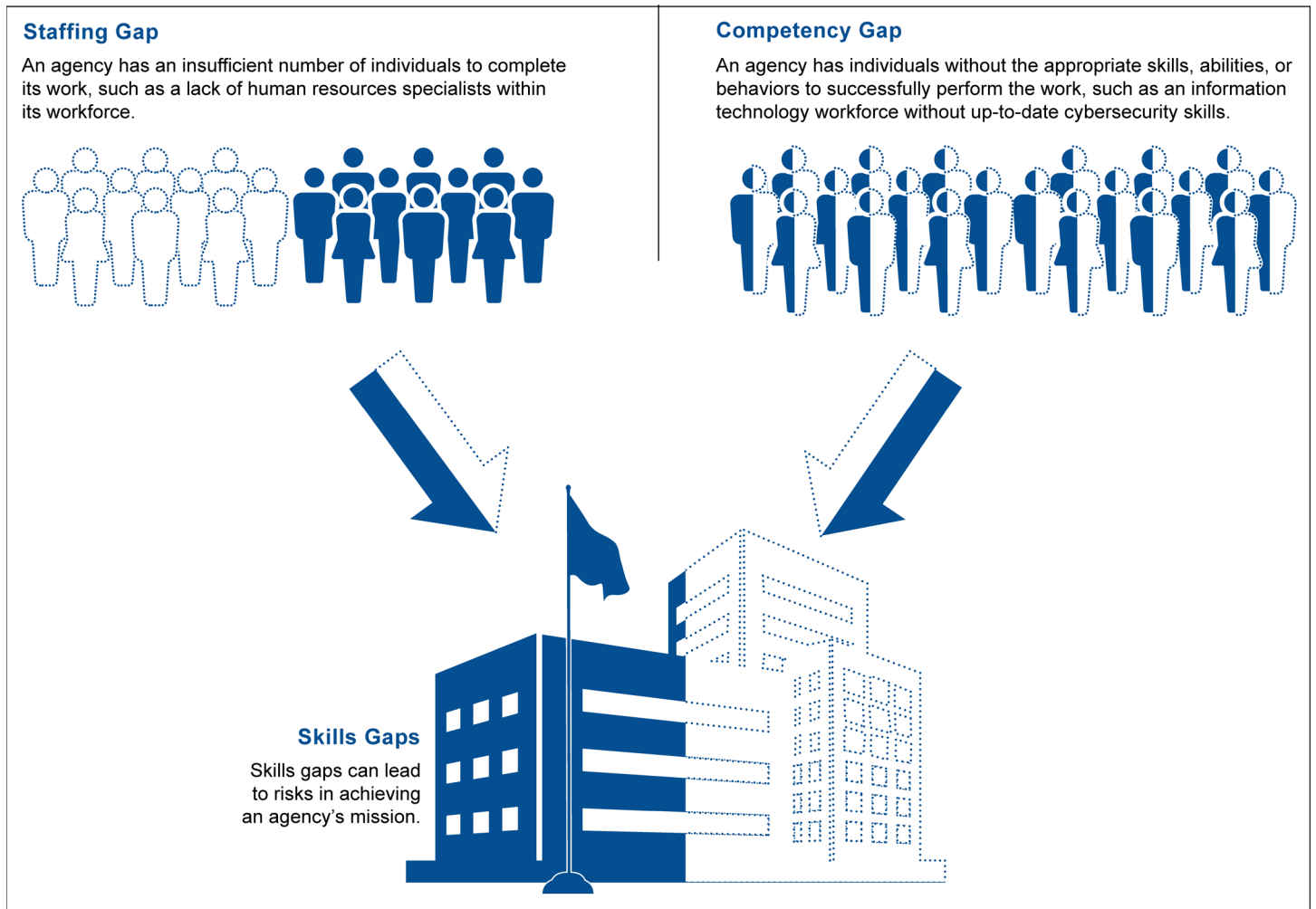
- developing leadership continuity and succession planning;
- acquiring and developing staff whose size, skills, and deployment met agency needs; and
- creating results-oriented organizational cultures.¹³

A skills gap may consist of (1) a "staffing gap," in which an agency has an insufficient number of individuals to complete its work; and/or (2) a "competency gap," in which an agency has individuals without the appropriate skills, abilities, or behaviors to successfully perform the work (see figure 1).

¹²GAO, *Enterprise Risk Management: Selected Agencies' Experiences Illustrate Good Practices in Managing Risk*, [GAO-17-63](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 1, 2016).

¹³[GAO-01-263](#).

Figure 1: Skills Gaps May Be a Result of Staffing and Competency Gaps



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105528

Our High-Priority Recommendations Related to Skills Gaps

OPM has taken steps to make progress in addressing our high-priority recommendations related to skills gaps. For example, we recently reported OPM gathered and tracked government-wide data on the use of Title 5 special payment authorities to recruit and retain certain employees, as we recommended in December 2017.¹⁴ OPM also obtained agencies' input on changes needed to improve the effectiveness of the authorities.

¹⁴GAO, *Federal Pay: Opportunities Exist to Enhance Strategic Use of Special Payments*, GAO-18-91 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 7, 2017).

OPM said it used this information to address staffing difficulties by, for example, proposing legislation in March 2022 to raise the limit on special payment rates in situations where the market pay for high-skilled positions is substantially higher than current pay limits.¹⁵

However, there remain other high priority recommendations related to addressing skills gaps where OPM needs to make progress.¹⁶ For example,

- In 2019, we found that federal agencies varied widely in their efforts to implement key information technology workforce planning activities that are critical to ensuring that agencies have the staff they need to support their missions.¹⁷ We recommended that OPM ensure it fully implements each of the eight key information technology workforce planning activities it did not fully implement. In March 2021, OPM reported that it had hired a Human Capital Strategist to develop an IT strategic workforce plan. However, as of March 2022, OPM had neither provided documentation of its competency requirements nor a time frame for completing the workforce plan.
- In 2016, we found that OPM and agencies do not analyze the effectiveness of hiring authorities, which can be used to fill critical skills gaps.¹⁸ We recommended that OPM use hiring authority data to determine whether opportunities exist to refine, consolidate, eliminate, or expand agency-specific authorities to other agencies. We also recommended that OPM implement changes where it is authorized, including seeking presidential authorization (as necessary) to do so. As of March 2022, OPM stated that it is reviewing different data sources to identify opportunities to streamline federal hiring

¹⁵GAO, *Priority Open Recommendations: Office of Personnel Management*, [GAO-22-105625](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 28, 2022).

¹⁶[GAO-22-105625](#).

¹⁷GAO, *Information Technology: Agencies Need to Fully Implement Key Workforce Planning Activities*, [GAO-20-129](#) (Washington, D.C., Oct. 30, 2019). The eight key information technology workforce planning activities are (1) establish and maintain a workforce planning process; (2) develop competency and staffing requirements; (3) assess competency and staffing needs regularly; (4) assess gaps in competencies and staffing; (5) develop strategies and plans to address gaps in competencies and staffing; (6) implement activities that address gaps; (7) monitor the agency's progress in addressing gaps; and (8) report to agency leadership on progress in addressing gaps.

¹⁸GAO, *Federal Hiring: OPM Needs to Improve Management and Oversight of Hiring Authorities*. [GAO-16-521](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 2, 2016).

regulations and improve guidance to agencies so it can better meet their talent acquisition needs.

- In 2014, we called attention to the ability of the General Schedule (GS) system—the federal government’s classification system for defining and organizing federal positions—to keep pace with the evolving nature of government work.¹⁹ We recommended that OPM use prior studies and lessons learned from demonstration projects and alternative systems to examine ways to make the GS system’s design and implementation more consistent with the attributes of a modern, effective classification system. In March 2022, OPM reported it continues to work with federal agencies by providing classification technical assistance and updating and establishing classification-related policy. However, OPM reported that it would need funding to establish a commission to review the GS system and develop any legislative proposals in response to this recommendation.

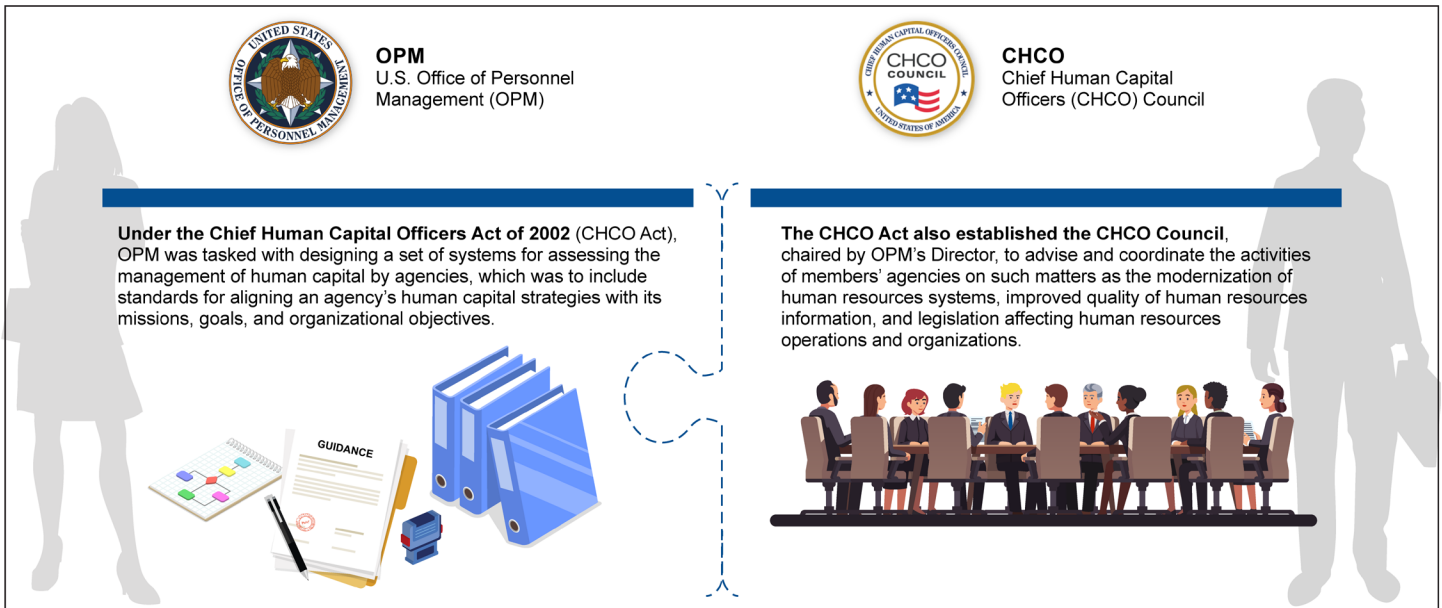
We have previously reported that effectively addressing skill gaps requires a multifaceted response from OPM and agencies.²⁰ Congress has given OPM a key role in helping agencies strategically manage their human capital, using the CHCO Council to advise and coordinate the activities of its member agencies (see figure 2).²¹ Each CHCO advises and assists its agency on human capital and human resource management issues, including selecting, developing, training, and managing a high-quality, productive workforce in accordance with merit system principles.

¹⁹GAO, *OPM Needs to Improve the Design, Management, and Oversight of the Federal Classification System*, [GAO-14-677](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 31, 2014).

²⁰GAO, *Federal Workforce: OPM and Agencies Need to Strengthen Efforts to Identify and Close Mission-Critical Skills Gaps*, [GAO-15-223](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 30, 2015); and *High-Risk Series: An Update*, [GAO-13-283](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 14, 2013).

²¹Chief Human Capital Officers Act of 2002. Pub. L. No. 107-296, tit. XIII, subtit. A, §§ 1301-1305, 116 Stat. 2135, 2287-2289 (2002).

Figure 2: Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCO) Act Tasked the Office of Personnel Management with Assessing Agencies' Human Capital Management and Established the CHCO Council



Source: GAO analysis of CHCO Act of 2002; and OPM and CHCO Council logos and Stock.Adobe.com. | GAO-23-105528

President's Management Agenda Prioritizes Federal Workforce Issues

In November 2021, the administration designated addressing federal workforce issues as one of its top priorities in the President's Management Agenda (PMA). The 2021 PMA is a multiyear effort that defines government-wide management priorities for all federal agencies to improve how the government operates and performs. The PMA's first priority is "Strengthening and Empowering the Federal Workforce," which is co-led by the OPM director. The priority includes strategies and performance metrics to help agencies attract, hire, develop, and empower talented individuals who are well suited and well prepared to face the challenges the government faces, both in the near and long term.²²

At the beginning of a new presidential term, each federal agency develops a strategic plan. This plan is to include information about how the agency's goals and objectives contribute to the federal government priority goals. It is also to include how those goals and objectives will be

²²The President's Management Council, *The Biden-Harris Management Agenda: Toward an Equitable, Effective, and Accountable Government that Delivers Results for All* (November 2021).

achieved. OPM’s Fiscal Years 2022-2026 Strategic Plan includes four goals that the agency states “articulate clear statements of what OPM aspires to achieve by executing its mission.”²³ The four goals are to:

1. position the federal government as a model employer;
2. transform OPM’s organizational capacity and capability to better serve as the leader in federal human capital management;
3. create a human-centered customer experience by putting the needs of OPM’s customers at the center of OPM’s workforce services, policy, and oversight; and
4. provide innovative and data-driven solutions to enable agencies to meet their missions.

Federal Human Capital Officers Identified Challenges and Opportunities for OPM to Help Address Skills Gaps in Their Agencies

Recruitment and Hiring and Workforce Planning Cited as Top Challenges

Recruiting and Hiring Challenges

Forum participants provided varied reasons as to why they identified (1) recruiting and hiring, and (2) workforce planning among the top challenges in addressing skills gaps at their respective agencies.²⁴

Agencies are addressing their skills gaps primarily through recruiting and hiring efforts. Forum participants cited increased competition with other sectors and agencies, budget uncertainty, and compensation differences

²³U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Strategic Plan, Fiscal Years 2022-2026* (Washington, D.C.: March 2022).

²⁴Other workforce-related challenges included: employee training and development; employee retention; providing technology, data and other resources to help employees do their jobs; establishing a hybrid workplace and leveraging workplace flexibilities; promoting efforts to be a diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible organization; and promoting employee engagement. For examples that describe these workforce-related challenges, see appendix II.

for similar positions among federal agencies as some of the barriers to recruiting and hiring.

GAO Example of Skill Gap from Competition with Other Agencies

In 2016, we reported that Veterans Health Administration (VHA) data showed that attrition of human resources (HR) staff results primarily from transfers to other federal agencies. Of the HR staff who left VHA in 2015, about 43.3 percent of HR specialists (155 employees) and 39.3 percent of HR assistants (70 employees) transferred to another federal agency. HR assistants most often cited issues with career advancement as their primary reason for leaving VHA. Specifically, VHA HR assistants cited a lack of advancement opportunities at VHA and better career opportunities elsewhere as their reasons for leaving.

Source: GAO, *Veterans Health Administration: Management Attention Is Needed to Address Systemic, Long-standing Human Capital Challenges*, [GAO-17-30](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 23, 2016). | GAO-23-105528

Competition with other sectors and agencies. Participants told us that a tight labor market and a limited pool of qualified applicants contributed to agencies struggling to compete for the same talent, with not only the private sector, but also with other federal agencies. Some participants identified human resources and cybersecurity as two skills where they have difficulty hiring against private- and federal-sector competition. Some stated that they also struggle in competing with state and local governments for specific skills, such as scientists, firefighters, and law enforcement staff.

One Participant's View on Competition for Hiring

"It is difficult to retain human resources (HR) specialists, because there is a shortage of HR specialists ... and the agency is effectively competing with the private sector and the whole of the federal government."

Source: Participant in the Chief Human Capital Officers Council Forum. | GAO-23-105528

GAO Example of How Budget Uncertainty Affects Agency Operations

In 2022, we reported that U.S. Department of Agriculture officials told us that continuing resolutions can cause hiring activities to slow down or pause. For example, the department's Office of Rural Development officials told us they may not extend new hire offers during a continuing resolution. This can affect training, strategic hiring plans, and program services.

Source: GAO, *Federal Budget: Selected Agencies and Programs Used Strategies to Manage Constraints of Continuing Resolutions*, [GAO-22-104701](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2022). | GAO-23-105528

Budget uncertainty. Participants said their agency is often unable to plan for or hire the number of employees to meet mission needs because of budget uncertainty under continuing resolutions. We have previously reported that continuing resolutions can cause hiring activities to slow down or pause. This, in turn, can affect strategic hiring plans and program services.²⁵

One Participant's View on Budget Uncertainty

"Hiring and recruitment discussions cannot be decoupled from discussions about the importance of a timely budget. An agency needs to receive its budget on time with the number of allocations they need. It is a constant hiring crisis because the agency cannot hire the needed number of employees to meet management expectations as well as customer expectations."

Source: Participant in the Chief Human Capital Officers Council Forum. | GAO-23-105528

²⁵GAO, *Federal Budget: Selected Agencies and Programs Used Strategies to Manage Constraints of Continuing Resolutions*, [GAO-22-104701](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2022).

GAO Example of Difference in Compensation Affecting Agency Competitiveness

In 2022, we reported that the Department of State offered low starting salaries. We also found that State 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.

Source: GAO, *State Department: Additional Actions Needed to Address IT Workforce Challenges*, [GAO-22-105932](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2022). | GAO-23-105528

Differences in compensation for similar positions. Some agencies have independent authority to administratively determine the rates of pay for some or all of their employees at rates that are higher than those generally available under the GS system. Some participants said the higher pay rates at certain agencies caused imbalances between the “haves and have nots” and contributed to staff poaching among agencies. Some participants stated they would prefer salary levels be set internally across the federal government to prevent this. These participants said this is particularly a problem with data analysts and information technology scientists as they are in high demand across the government. We previously reported that federal agencies have faced challenges in hiring, managing and retaining staff with digital service skills.²⁶

One Participant's View on Compensation for Similar Positions in the Federal Government

“There should not be a situation when one agency becomes much more attractive than another due to imbalances in pay and related issues.”

Source: Participant in the Chief Human Capital Officers Council Forum. | GAO-23-105528

²⁶[GAO-20-129](#).

Workforce Planning Challenges

GAO Example of Challenges Agency Faces with Workforce Planning

In 2022, we reported that the Coast Guard had not developed a strategic workforce plan for its cyberspace workforce. By assessing and determining the cyberspace staffing levels it needs, the Coast Guard can fully understand the resources it requires, including those to protect its information systems and data from threats. Without having such a plan—that includes strategies and implementing activities to address all cyberspace competency and staffing needs—the Coast Guard will likely miss opportunities to recruit for difficult-to-fill cyberspace positions. This problem has worsened in recent years. We recommended a strategic workforce plan be established for its cyberspace workforce that includes strategies and implementing activities to address all competency and staffing needs.

Source: GAO, *Coast Guard: Workforce Planning Actions Needed to Address Growing Cyberspace Mission Demands*, GAO-22-105208 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2022). | GAO-23-105528

Workforce planning focuses on developing long-term strategies for acquiring, developing, and retaining an organization's total workforce (including full- and part-time federal staff and contractors) to meet the needs of the future. Some participants agreed that their workforce planning challenges arose from a lack of tools and resources, such as reliable data, to conduct workforce planning. In 2021, we found that a lack of workforce planning by certain agencies contributed to skills gaps in high-risk areas such as the management of oil and gas resources, personnel security clearances, and environmental liabilities.²⁷

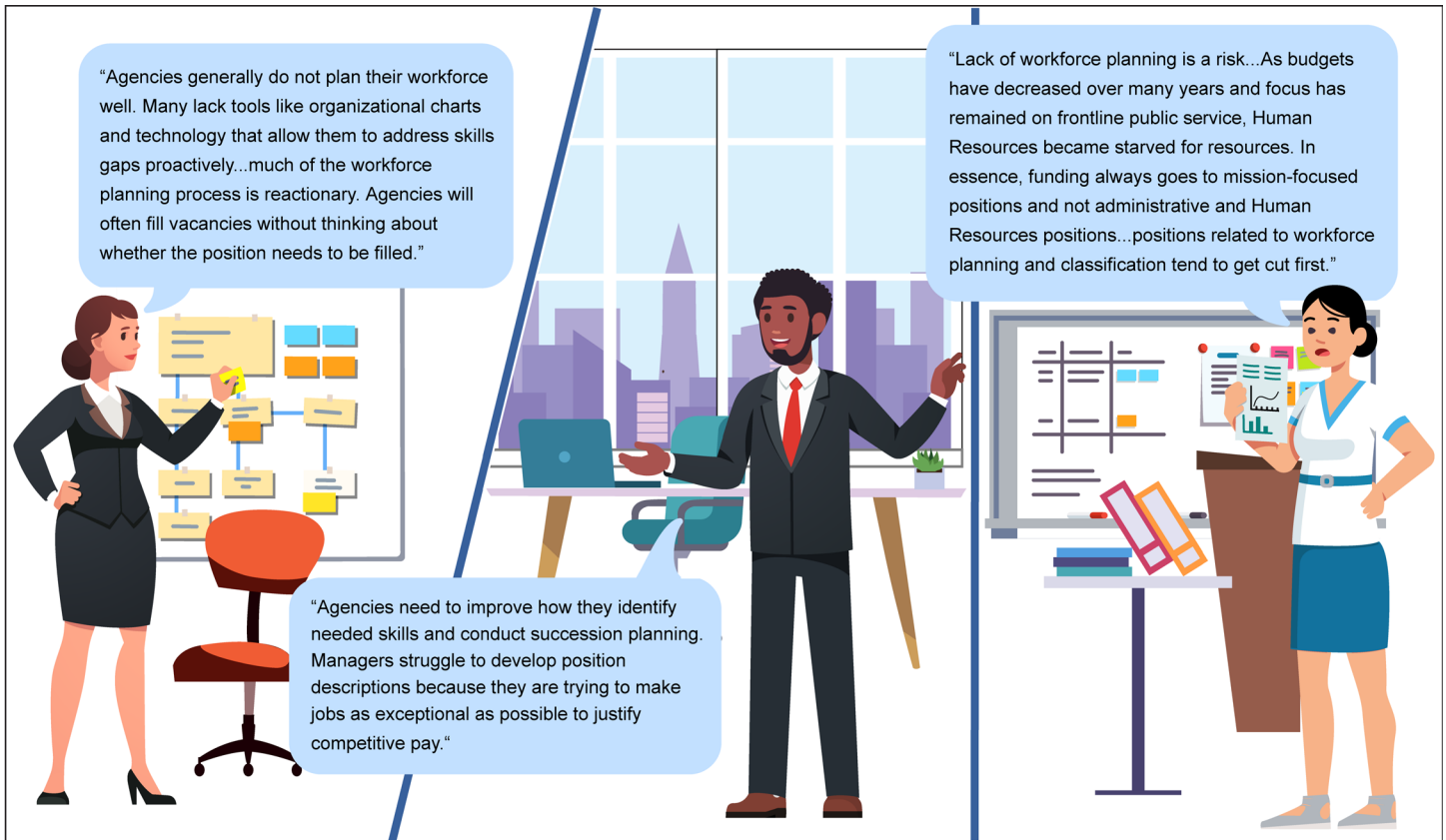
Participants said the challenges often arise because their agencies may lack

- human resources personnel with necessary skills and experience to conduct workforce planning and consistently monitor and evaluate associated outcomes;
- data needed to anticipate when employees will leave their positions and will need to be replaced; and
- consideration of whether a vacant position needed to be filled or what skills would be needed in the future to do that job effectively when making hiring decisions.

Figure 3 illustrates some of the examples of workforce planning challenges participants discussed during the forum.

²⁷GAO-21-119SP.

Figure 3: Examples of Federal Human Capital Officers' Views on Workforce Planning Challenges



Source: GAO summary of CHCO Forum participant statements; IconicLibrary/Stock.Adobe.com. | GAO-23-105528

Federal Human Capital Officers Said OPM Can Help Address Skills Gaps by Providing Workforce Flexibilities and Streamlining Regulations and Guidance

Our analysis of OPM's Fiscal Years 2022-2026 Strategic Plan found that OPM is planning to take action and has strategies in a number of areas that could help agencies address government-wide and agency-specific skills gaps.²⁸ These actions include:

- addressing barriers to equity in workforce functions including recruiting, hiring, promotion, and retention;
- providing agencies with human capital tools, guidance and services;
- establishing the government as a model employer in areas such as workplace and pay flexibilities;

²⁸U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Strategic Plan, Fiscal Years 2022-2026* (Washington, D.C.: March 2022).

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- timely and proactive policy leadership, including increased engagement with the CHCO Council;
 - delegating low risk authorities to agencies;
 - modifying oversight to focus on government-wide, systemic issues;
 - identifying key human capital practices through research; and
 - streamlining regulations and guidance to reduce agency burden.²⁹

We polled forum participants on which of OPM's focus areas would be most useful for helping their agency close skills gaps. Participants' top focus areas were (1) establishing the government as a model employer in areas such as workplace and pay flexibilities; and (2) streamlining regulations and guidance to reduce administrative burden.

Establishing the government as a model employer in areas such as workplace and pay flexibilities. An essential element to acquiring, developing, and retaining high-quality federal employees is agencies' effective use of workplace and pay flexibilities.³⁰ These flexibilities represent the policies and practices that an agency has the authority to implement in managing its workforce. Examples of workplace flexibilities include options for telework, flexible work hours, and remote work. Pay flexibilities can include special rates of pay and setting pay above the minimum rate for newly appointed employees based on their superior qualifications or a special agency need.³¹ Flexibilities can also include special hiring authorities agencies can use to hire staff more quickly.

Some participants said their agencies limited use of workplace and pay flexibilities put them at a recruiting and hiring disadvantage over private sector and other government agencies that offer these flexibilities.

²⁹For more details on OPM's planned actions that can help agencies address skills gaps, see appendix III.

³⁰GAO, *Human Capital: Effective Use of Flexibilities Can Assist Agencies in Managing Their Workforces*, [GAO-03-2](#), (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 6, 2002).

³¹An agency head may request, and OPM may, in consultation with the Office of Management and Budget, grant authority to fix the rate of basic pay for one or more positions at a higher rate than would otherwise be payable for the position. According to OPM, the position under consideration must require an extremely high level of expertise in a scientific, technical, professional, or administrative field that is critical to the successful accomplishment of an important agency mission. 5 U.S.C. § 5377; 5 C.F.R. § 535.103; U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Critical Position Pay Authority*, OPM CPM 2014-12 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 8, 2014).

Participants noted that the federal government should promote flexibilities available to potential employees. For example, OPM recently issued telework and remote work guidance. It encourages agencies to leverage these workplace flexibilities for suitable positions as tools to help attract, recruit, and retain the best possible workforce.³² We previously reported that according to Department of Homeland Security officials, remote work opportunities may increase an agency's ability to recruit new employees. They added that agencies are considering expanding remote work based on their experiences with telework during the COVID-19 pandemic.³³

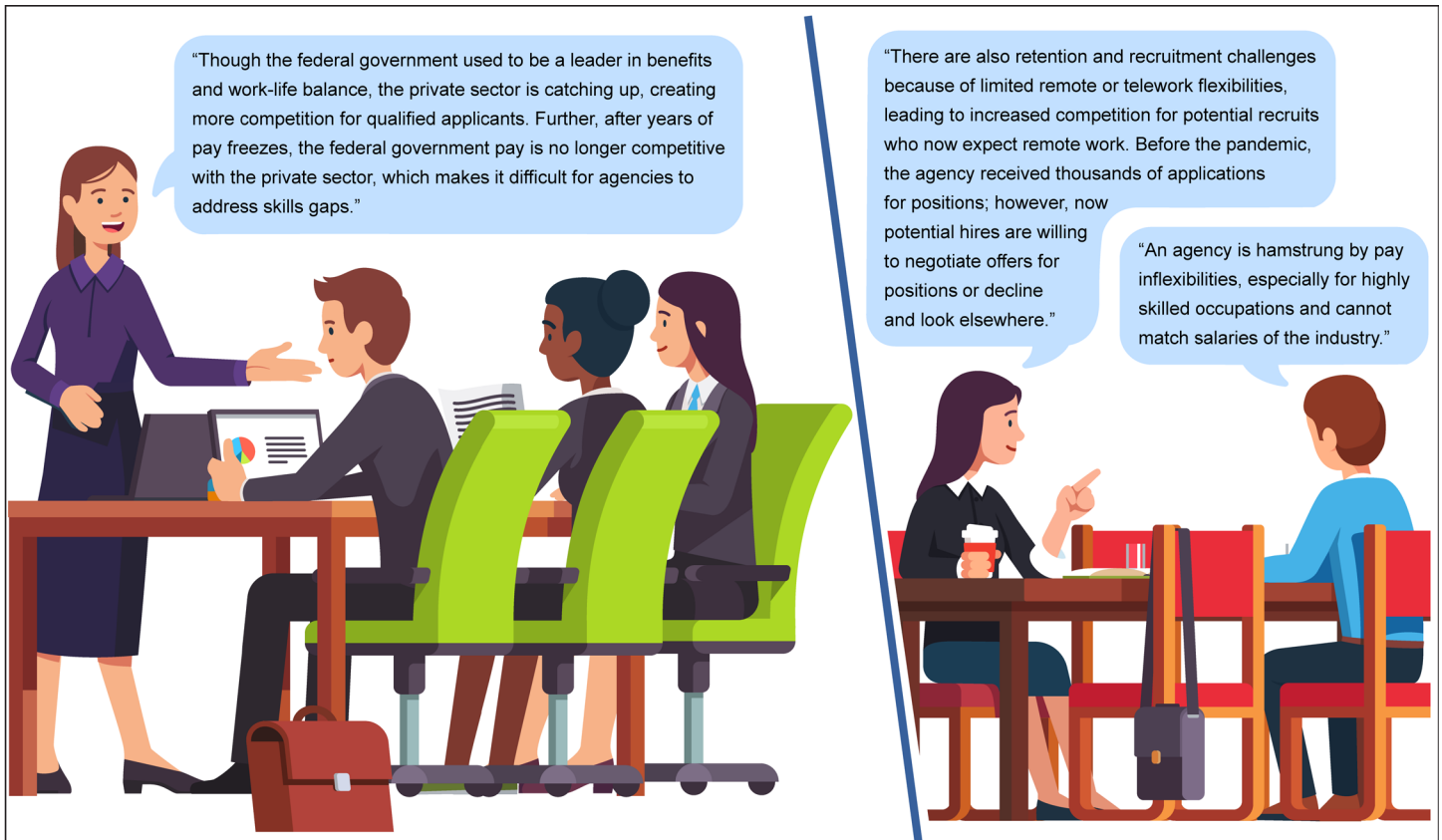
Forum participants also said that a barrier to hiring highly skilled workers was related to pay and what they described as the rigid nature of the GS pay framework. We previously reported that the GS system has not kept pace with the changing government workforce. In addition, the work of the federal government has become more highly skilled and specialized than the classification system was designed to address.³⁴ Figure 4 illustrates some of the participants' views about workforce and pay flexibilities as discussed during the forum.

³²U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *2021 Guide to Telework and Remote Work in the Federal Government: Leveraging Telework and Remote Work in the Federal Government to Better Meet Our Human Capital Needs and Improve Mission Delivery* (Nov. 12, 2021).

³³GAO, *COVID-19: Federal Telework Increased during the Pandemic, but More Reliable Data Are Needed to Support Oversight*, [GAO-22-104282](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 8, 2022).

³⁴[GAO-14-677](#).

Figure 4: Examples of Participants' Views on Workforce and Pay Flexibilities



Source: GAO summary of CHCO Forum participant statements; IconicLibrary/Stock.Adobe.com. | GAO-23-105528

Streamlining regulations and guidance to reduce administrative burden. Participants said administrative burden could be relieved if OPM streamlined regulations and reporting requirements in a number of areas.

Forum participants said OPM could help streamline hiring regulations, for example, stating the process is too burdensome to meet an agency's urgent hiring needs. We have previously reported that federal managers had complained that federal hiring procedures, particularly those associated with competitive examining, were rigid and complex.³⁵ These managers often expressed the need for more flexibility from the hiring authority guiding the competitive hiring process. Traditionally, this process

³⁵[GAO-16-521](#).

has been based on a “one-size-fits-all approach” with uniform rules across government set forth in Title 5.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, OPM established an expedited direct hiring authority, known as Schedule A, for certain agencies to fill vacancies when a critical hiring need or severe shortage of candidates existed. For example, agencies stated that the process reduced the time to hire and would like to have that direct hiring authority extended. On June 27, 2022, OPM extended this Schedule A direct hiring authority until March 1, 2023.³⁶

Participants also identified areas where OPM could help reduce administrative burden. For example, participants described compiling reports about their mission-critical occupations that OPM requires annually as an activity they do not perceive as contributing to tangible results. According to the participants, limited human resources staff time could be better spent assisting with strategic workforce planning rather than focused on compliance-related reporting.

OPM is Taking Steps to Try to Address Skills Gaps Government-wide but Its Own Workforce Has Skills Gaps that Put These Efforts at Risk

As discussed earlier, OPM has taken some actions in previous years to help agencies address their skills gaps. Since 2020, OPM began leading multiple, more recent efforts to address skills gaps across government, such as working to implement the President’s Management Agenda, improving collaboration on federal workforce issues through the CHCO Council, and establishing specific actions needed to close skills gaps in its strategic plan.

President’s Management Agenda (PMA). The PMA priority on strengthening and empowering the federal workforce includes strategies that relate to the government’s ability to address skills gaps (e.g., to attract and hire the most qualified employees, who reflect the diversity of the country, in the right roles across the federal government). The PMA designated the OPM Director as one of the leaders for this priority area and other OPM officials as leaders for implementing related strategies.

In July and November 2022, the administration posted quarterly updates for this PMA Priority on Performance.gov, reflecting progress OPM has made. For example, OPM issued Skills-Based Hiring Guidance to CHCOs

³⁶U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Memorandum on Extension of the Coronavirus COVID-19 Schedule A Hiring Authority* (Washington, D.C.: June 27, 2022).

in support of Executive Order 13932, *Modernizing and Reforming the Assessment and Hiring of Federal Job Candidates*.³⁷ According to OPM's memorandum accompanying the guidance, it will help to increase agencies' use of competency-based assessments of job candidates (e.g., obtaining input from subject matter experts on needed competencies) in lieu of relying on education to determine a candidate's qualification for a federal job.³⁸ OPM also added a feature to USAJobs.gov—its central website for posting federal job openings—to identify positions eligible for remote work to allow agencies to advertise for those positions and enhance the applicant search experience.

OPM will also be collecting data for one of the success metrics for this priority. The metric is an increase in the percentage of agencies meeting projected mission-critical occupation hiring and staffing targets. Performance.gov states this is a new measure being developed and agencies are to “create robust projections for selected mission-critical occupations and report progress toward filling those gaps.”³⁹ The goal of collecting this information, according to Performance.gov, is to highlight areas of needed support to compete for talent.⁴⁰ In a November 2022 memorandum to agencies, OPM and its priority area co-leads provided guidance for submitting data on annual hiring targets and fiscal year 2023 data on actual hires. The memorandum states OPM will be piloting an effort to obtain related data in future years without data calls. This would require agencies to submit only hiring targets each year and validate data OPM obtained.

Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCO) Council. We have previously reported on the critical leadership role that agency CHCOs and the CHCO Council can play in addressing government-wide issues such as skills gaps.⁴¹ We found, following a period in 2020 where OPM and the

³⁷Exec. Order. No. 13932, *Modernizing and Reforming the Assessment and Hiring of Federal Job Candidates*, 85 Fed. Reg. 39457 (July 1, 2020).

³⁸U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Memorandum for Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies: Guidance Release - E.O. 13932; Modernizing and Reforming the Assessment and Hiring of Federal Job Candidates* (Washington, D.C.: May 19, 2022).

³⁹<https://www.performance.gov/pma/workforce/>. Accessed June 14, 2022.

⁴⁰<https://www.performance.gov/pma/workforce/>. Accessed December 14, 2022.

⁴¹For example, see GAO, *Human Capital: Strategies to Help Agencies Meet Their Missions in an Era of Highly Constrained Resources*, [GAO-14-168](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 7, 2014).

CHCO Council did not formally meet, that OPM took steps to re-engage with the CHCO Council.⁴² For example, OPM

- resumed full stewardship of the CHCO Council in July 2021, which OPM stated will elevate the voices of CHCOs and help connect OPM's government-wide human capital policy efforts with agency-level human capital managers;⁴³
- established an executive steering committee responsible for advising CHCO Council leadership on the council's strategic direction and priorities and fostering the relationship between OPM and the council.⁴⁴ For 2022, the CHCO Council established four priorities, including one to build capabilities among the federal human resources workforce;⁴⁵
- held monthly meetings beginning in January 2021 and later began holding "Personnel Policy Office Hours" where OPM seeks input on upcoming guidance or shares updates with CHCOs;
- convened multiple working groups beginning in 2021 to address skills gaps-related issues, including preparing for the future of work (e.g., enhanced telework and remote work);
- held a day-long forum for CHCO Council members and key OPM and Office of Management and Budget leaders to establish a vision for the future of the federal workforce and how to build the human resources workforce necessary to achieve that future state; and
- administered surveys to CHCO Council members in December 2021 and October 2022 to seek perspectives on topics such as OPM's policy timeliness and ways the agency could reduce administrative

⁴²U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Chief Human Capital Officers Council 2021 Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: March 2022). As part of the proposed merger of some OPM functions with the General Services Administration, the leadership and administration of the CHCO Council was divided between the two agencies in 2019. For most of 2020, the CHCO Council did not formally meet and its staff and budget were reduced.

⁴³U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Chief Human Capital Officers Council 2021 Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: March 2022).

⁴⁴The Executive Committee was established as a Standing Committee in the CHCO Council in the CHCO Council charter. U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCO) Council Charter, Effective December 14, 2021*.

⁴⁵The CHCO Council's other three priorities in 2022 are (1) inform human capital policy development, (2) improve human capital data collection and use, and (3) foster strategic partnerships to elevate human capital.

burden on agencies. OPM officials told us this annual survey would measure improvement over time.

OPM Strategic Plan. As previously stated, we found OPM's Fiscal Years 2022-2026 Strategic Plan includes objectives that would help address government-wide skills gaps.⁴⁶ Specifically, 11 of OPM's 20 strategic objectives include efforts to help agencies address skills gaps-related challenges in areas such as recruiting, hiring, retention and training and improve OPM's leadership of federal human capital issues. See appendix III for a full list of the strategic objectives related to addressing skills gaps.

As of August 2022, OPM had begun implementing its strategic plan. For example, OPM helped agencies take steps to address human resource challenges in response to the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA).⁴⁷ OPM officials told us they anticipated that agencies would need to increase the human resource staff at their agencies to hire the staff needed to implement the IIJA (e.g., grant managers and HR specialists). In response, OPM posted a cross-government announcement for human resource professionals and developed a 90-day training program for these new staff. OPM also published a guidebook and list of hiring authorities intended as references of resources for agency leaders, hiring managers, and human resource professionals.⁴⁸

OPM Closing Skills Gaps Initiative. OPM reported in October 2022 that it is continuing efforts to address our High-Risk area of Strategic Human Capital Management through its Closing Skills Gaps Initiative.⁴⁹ Specifically, it plans to continue working with agency-specific and government-wide action teams to address mission-critical occupations identified as high risk in agencies and government-wide. For example, OPM reported that, beginning in January 2021, it trained action teams on conducting root cause analysis, developed action plans, identified metrics and targets, and reported progress. Through 2025, OPM plans to monitor

⁴⁶U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2022-2026* (Washington, D.C.: March 2022).

⁴⁷Pub. L. No. 117-58, 135 Stat. 429 (2021). The IIJA provided new funding for infrastructure projects, such as for passenger and freight rail, water infrastructure, public transit, and roads.

⁴⁸U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Talent Surge Playbook for Rebuilding the Federal Workforce* (Washington, D.C.: December 2021).

⁴⁹U.S. Office of Personnel Management. *Closing Skills Gaps Initiative Closeout Report 2016-2020* (Washington, D.C.: October 2022).

and evaluate agencies' progress through efforts such as the HRStat⁵⁰ community of practice and annual Human Capital Reviews.⁵¹ OPM also tasked agencies with identifying agency-specific skills gaps they will target through 2025.

In October 2022, OPM reported that through this initiative, there were indicators of progress in closing certain agency-specific skills gaps. For example, the Department of Energy reported improved retention rates among nuclear engineers. In addition, the Department of Housing and Urban Development reported an increase in applicant quality for clerical and administrative specialists.

The report also included actions OPM and agencies took to address skills gaps among five high-risk, government-wide mission-critical occupations—acquisitions, auditor, cybersecurity, economist, and human resources. The report stated acquisition, human resources, and cybersecurity are mission-critical occupations that need a continued government-wide focus to close skills gaps. The report stated that while OPM no longer considers economists to be a government-wide mission-critical occupation, agencies with financial economists should continue efforts to close skills gaps. According to OPM officials, many agencies lack a significant number of economist positions, thus, a continued government-wide focus on closing related gaps is unnecessary.

The report also states auditors are no longer a government-wide occupation at high risk for skills gaps, in part because OPM revised related classification standards. According to OPM officials, the original auditor classification standards did not distinguish between financial and

⁵⁰HRStat is a strategic human capital performance evaluation process that identifies, measures, and analyzes human capital data to inform the effect of an agency's human capital management on organizational results with the intent to improve human capital outcomes. HRStat can help agency officials monitor their progress toward addressing important human capital efforts, such as closing skills gaps. See 5 C.F.R. §§ 250.202, .207.

⁵¹We previously reported that annual Human Capital Reviews allow agencies to discuss human capital management issues, including recruiting and hiring, with OPM. GAO, *Federal Hiring: OPM Should Collect and Share COVID-19 Lessons Learned to Inform Hiring during Future Emergencies*, [GAO-22-104297](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 25, 2021). In our 2021 High-Risk update, a pause in OPM's Human Capital Reviews contributed to our findings that OPM's leadership commitment to addressing this High-Risk area decreased. We also reported that, by reinstating these regulatory-required reviews, OPM would provide agencies more structure and accountability for progress on closing skills gaps. [GAO-21-119SP](#). According to OPM officials, the agency will resume its annual Human Capital Reviews in spring 2023.

performance auditors. This resulted in agencies sometimes hiring staff without necessary skills or interest to do the work and subsequently quitting. OPM officials told us after they revised the classification standards for auditors, retention rates for the occupation improved. In December 2022, we requested documentation from OPM that shows auditors are no longer at risk for government-wide skills gaps. However, the data OPM provided did not include retention rates after 2019 and therefore we were unable to verify whether they had improved.

OPM Lacks a Plan to Address Skills Gaps in Its Own Workforce and Efforts to Manage Related Risks Could Be Enhanced

An independent assessment of OPM's workforce completed in March 2022 found OPM had skills gaps that could compromise the agency's ability to implement its strategic plan. OPM officials told us they contracted for this assessment in November 2020 amid concerns about the agency's workforce capacity. Specifically, OPM sought to identify:

- existing capabilities among the workforce, what capabilities will be required to implement its strategic plan, and any skills gaps;
- risks those skills gaps pose to mission requirements of individual offices and to the implementation of OPM's strategic plan; and
- actions OPM could take to respond to future needs and agency mission.

The results of the assessment and related National Academy of Public Administration findings reinforced the need for the agency to address its workforce capacity, according to OPM officials. Specifically, the workforce assessment found OPM had skills gaps—both staffing needs and capability gaps among existing staff—across the agency in areas such as project management, organizational performance, leadership development, and data analytics (see figure 5).

Figure 5: Examples of Skills Gaps Identified in the March 2022 Assessment of the Office of Personnel Management’s Workforce



Source: Office of Personnel Management (OPM) workforce assessment; IconicLibrary/Stock.Adobe.com. | GAO-23-105528

As a result, the assessment determined that OPM faces a significant risk of being unable to implement nine of the 11 strategic objectives that we determined would help agencies address government-wide skills gaps (see appendix III). This included “implementing policies and initiatives that embrace the future of work...with respect to hiring, talent development, competitive pay, benefits, and workplace flexibilities.” OPM officials told us they generally agreed with the assessment’s findings and were addressing them. For example, one of OPM’s strategic objectives is aimed at training and hiring staff within OPM. Agency officials told us they established a Strategic Hiring Committee to support this objective in summer 2022. The committee, comprised of agency leadership, focuses on hiring to fill critical skill needs.

However, we found that OPM has not developed an action plan to address its skills gaps. OPM’s Workforce Planning guidance states that once agencies have determined what gaps exist between the current and projected workforce needs, the agency should develop an action plan. Specifically, that plan should include strategies to close gaps, plans to implement the strategies, and measures for assessing strategic progress. These strategies could include such things as recruiting, training or retraining, restructuring organizations, contracting out, succession planning, or technological enhancements.⁵²

OPM officials told us the agency’s Human Capital Operating Plan (HCOP) would document its plan to address the skills gaps identified in the workforce assessment. OPM issued a memorandum accompanying HCOP guidance stating agencies, including OPM, were to complete and submit their respective HCOPs to OPM’s government-wide policy office for review by June 2022.⁵³ In November 2022, OPM officials told us that they submitted OPM’s HCOP to its government-wide policy office. An official from the policy office stated that its feedback on OPM’s draft HCOP was forthcoming and that it would request an updated HCOP in spring 2023.⁵⁴

We reviewed the draft HCOP and found it did not explicitly describe all of the agency-specific skill and competency gaps that must be closed using agency selected human capital strategies, per OPM guidance.⁵⁵ We also found that OPM did not clearly define performance goals and measures related to closing its skills gaps. For example, the HCOP lists “mission-critical occupations hired” as a performance measure, but neither defines its mission-critical occupations nor establishes a related hiring goal. Until OPM develops an action plan—whether as part of its HCOP or a separate effort—the agency lacks important information to guide its efforts to

⁵²U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Workforce Planning Guide*. (Washington, D.C.: November 2022).

⁵³U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Memorandum for Chief Human Capital Officers: Human Capital Operating Plan (HCOP) Guidance for Fiscal Years 2022-2026* (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 20, 2021).

⁵⁴Specifically, the official from OPM’s policy office stated that it requests updated HCOPs from agencies—which includes OPM’s own HR office—prior to the spring 2023 human capital reviews.

⁵⁵U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Human Capital Operating Plan (HCOP) Guidance Fiscal Years 2022-2026*. (Washington D.C.: December 2021).

implement, measure, and monitor its activities aimed at closing its skills gaps.

Further, OPM officials told us that they consider skills gaps an enterprise risk (i.e., a risk that spans the agency). Officials provided multiple examples of how these risks affected current operations. For example, officials told us:

- They had been without a Chief Learning Officer for several months and had vacancies in this office. As a result, they delayed some employee training initiatives.
- A lack of resources contributed to delays in their efforts to develop a comprehensive talent planning strategy that identifies existing skill gaps needed to support the strategic plan and talent acquisition strategies.
- If the agency did not increase its data analysis capabilities in fiscal years 2023 and 2024, they would have difficulty conducting oversight and compliance activities.⁵⁶

We have previously reported that when managing enterprise risks, it is essential that agencies document a comprehensive list of risks to their goals and objectives, select risk responses (e.g., mitigation strategies or trade-offs in light of the risk), and monitor how risks are changing and if responses are successful.⁵⁷ We found that OPM followed these practices for some enterprise risks as part of its quarterly process for monitoring strategic plan implementation. For example, OPM officials responsible for one strategic objective documented that there is a risk to agencies' ability to implement OPM's human capital guidance (i.e., a goal of that objective) if hiring managers and human resources staff at other federal agencies fail to collaborate. Officials also selected risk responses for these identified risks. According to OPM's internal guidance, officials then monitor risk responses by updating the status of responses quarterly and discussing related challenges at strategic plan implementation meetings.

⁵⁶OPM's Merit Systems Accountability and Compliance Office reviews other federal agencies' compliance with merit system principles and government-wide human capital regulations. According to officials, part of this work involves analyzing agency human capital data. As such, gaps in data analysis capabilities may prohibit OPM from fulfilling this mission. OPM officials told us that data analysts in this office may also contribute to OPM's efforts to address skills gaps government-wide, such as by providing input on new policies based on recent trends.

⁵⁷[GAO-17-63](#).

While OPM's workforce assessment identified risks to the agency's strategic goals and objectives because of skills gaps in its workforce, we found OPM did not document skills gaps as a part of its list of risks to strategic objectives. This happened, in part, because when OPM originally tasked leaders with assembling a comprehensive list of risks to their strategic objectives, its workforce assessment was incomplete. OPM officials told us they have since discussed skills gaps related to certain strategic objectives on an ad hoc basis, but did not routinely discuss skills gaps risks at quarterly strategic plan implementation meetings. OPM's internal guidance for managing risks states strategic objective leaders should update risks as needed. However, the agency did not have documentation to show that the risks skills gaps pose to strategic objectives have since been incorporated into its process for monitoring strategic plan implementation or into other risk management processes.

Without documenting a comprehensive list of risks that includes those posed by skills gaps identified in the workforce assessment, OPM officials may lack the information needed to select appropriate risk responses, monitor how risks are changing, and determine if risk mitigation strategies are successful or need reconsideration. Managing the risks skills gaps pose to its strategic goals and objectives would help ensure OPM makes informed trade-off decisions among its activities if, for example, it cannot hire or train the number of staff it determines are necessary for meeting its strategic objectives.

Conclusions

OPM has taken a number of important steps to address the complex challenge of closing skills gaps in the federal government. These steps include increasing leadership commitment by co-leading as a priority area strengthening the federal workforce, developing a strategic plan that includes a number of key actions and strategies, and reinvigorating the CHCO Council. This can play a pivotal role in coordinating the response to skills gaps across the government.

Notwithstanding these efforts, a recent workforce assessment found OPM has internal skills gaps across the agency and lacks the workforce capacity to implement some of its strategic objectives. OPM guidance directs agencies to develop an action plan to guide efforts to close their skills gaps. However, OPM's draft plan lacks key information, such as a list of the its mission-critical occupations, which occupations have skills gaps, and how it will measure progress toward closing skills gaps within its own workforce. Further, it can take time for hiring and training efforts to yield long-term results in closing skills gaps. In the interim, OPM must manage the risks skills gaps in its workforce pose to its mission, such as

by making trade-off decisions in light of resource limitations. Skills gaps continue to pose risks to OPM's ability to meet its strategic goals—including helping federal agencies address their own workforce capacity issues. Until OPM documents risks to its strategic objectives posed by skills gaps and identifies risk responses, OPM may not be making fully informed budgetary, operational, and other trade-off decisions or best positioning itself to have the near- and long-term capacity to help other agencies close skills gaps across the federal government.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following two recommendations to OPM:

The Director of OPM should establish an action plan to address OPM's skills gaps identified in the workforce assessment, either as an update to its HCOP or a separate effort. (Recommendation 1)

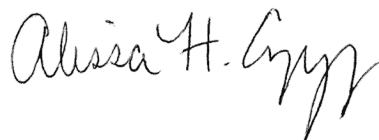
The Director of OPM should document, select risk responses for, and monitor progress addressing the risks OPM's skills gaps pose to achieving its strategic objectives, either as part of the process for monitoring strategic plan implementation or through other risk management processes. (Recommendation 2)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to OPM for review. OPM provided comments, which are reproduced in appendix IV. In its written comments, OPM concurred with both of our recommendations and stated actions it plans to take to address them. OPM also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies to the appropriate congressional committees and the Director of the Office of Personnel Management. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staffs have any questions about this report, please contact Alissa Czyz at (202) 512-6806 or czyza@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of our report. Key contributors to this report are listed in appendix V.



Alissa H. Czyz
Director, Strategic Issues

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Our objectives in this report were to (1) describe perspectives of federal human capital officers on top challenges their agencies face in addressing skills gaps and areas where the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) can provide additional resources; and (2) assess OPM's efforts to address skills gaps, both within its workforce and across the federal government, since 2020. We selected 2020, in part, because it allowed us to identify OPM's efforts to address skills gaps since our last update to the Strategic Human Capital Management high-risk area.¹

To obtain perspectives on the top challenges in addressing skills gaps at federal agencies and additional actions needed to close those gaps, both from Congress and OPM, we convened a 2-hour forum of the federal chief human capital officers (CHCO) or their designees (participants) from agencies of the CHCO Council. Twenty-five of the 27 CHCO Council members participated in the forum.² The Office of Management and Budget and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs did not send a CHCO, Deputy CHCO, or designee to the forum.

To help guide the forum discussion, we asked participants to respond to two poll questions:

1. What are the top challenges affecting your agency's ability to address skills gaps?
2. Which of these OPM focus areas will be most helpful for your agency to close skills gaps?

We shared the questions and response options with participants prior to the forum so they could prepare their responses. We used a poll to ask participants to select their top three responses. To develop response options for the first question, prior to the forum, we reviewed agencies' most recent strategic plans, where available, summarized key themes related to strengthening their workforce, and identified areas of frequent

¹GAO, *High-Risk Series: Dedicated Leadership Needed to Address Limited Progress in Most High-Risk Areas*, [GAO-21-119SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2, 2021).

²The CHCO Council is comprised of the 24 agencies identified in the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-576 (1990) (codified as amended at 31 U.S.C. § 901(b)), plus representatives from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Office of Management and Budget, and the Small Agency Human Resources Council. Four OPM officials observed the forum discussions, including the Executive Director and Deputy Director of the CHCO Council.

themes.³ To develop response options for the second question, we reviewed OPM's Fiscal Year 2022-2026 Strategic Plan.⁴ From that material, we identified strategic objectives that relate to agencies' ability to close skills gaps and summarized the focus of these related objectives.

Prior to the forum, we randomly assigned participants to one of the three breakout groups, each consisting of up to nine agencies.⁵ After responding to the poll questions, we tabulated the polling results for each question. Forum participants agreed the results were among the top issues for their respective agency. We then created three breakout rooms for facilitated discussions. Forum participants in each breakout session discussed the previously identified top three skills gaps challenges and the top three areas of focus for OPM in more detail. Upon completion of the facilitated discussion, all participants reconvened in the main forum discussion room. A representative from each group then reported a summary of key discussion points to the larger group.

We documented forum discussions with assistance from the note-takers assigned to each of the three breakout sessions. We reviewed and analyzed notes from the forum breakout sessions using a systematic content analysis to identify themes and subthemes based on participants' statements during the forum. An analyst initially coded the records of the three breakout sessions and identified the generalized themes and subthemes. A second analyst reviewed the initial coding independently and validated the coding. Then both analysts reconciled any discrepancies by agreeing on the coding of the associated statement by a participant. We also used this approach to identify top themes from the forum discussions related to assessing OPM's role in providing assistance to mitigate the challenges.

³We gathered information from agencies' strategic plans because agency strategic plans should align with administration priorities. The first priority in the President's Management Agenda, published in November 2021, is "Strengthening the Federal Workforce." Therefore, agencies included related sections in their strategic plans. While this priority is broader than skills gaps, it encompasses many of the challenges we have previously reported contribute to skills gaps across the government.

⁴U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Strategic Plan, Fiscal Years 2022-2026* (Washington, D.C.: March 2022).

⁵The Office of Management and Budget, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs did not send a CHCO, Deputy CHCO, or designee to the forum and one of the breakout rooms had eight participants.

We do not provide counts or otherwise quantify the number of forum participants agreeing to a skills gaps challenge or additional assistance from OPM. Since forum participants were generating and discussing ideas as part of a group discussion, the number of times a concept was (or was not) repeated does not necessarily indicate the level of consensus on that concept. Throughout the report, the term “some participants” generally indicates that more than one participant made a statement supporting a general point, and the views by others in support of the point were relatively uniform.

For additional perspectives on strategies addressing skills gaps challenges, we also reviewed related reports and other background information. The text boxes referencing our prior work in this report are for illustrative purposes. They are not intended to fully reflect the status of agency efforts to address any related recommendations.

To assess OPM’s efforts to address skills gaps within its workforce and across the federal government since 2020, we reviewed documents outlining its plans, such as OPM’s Fiscal Year 2022-2026 Strategic Plan, OPM’s Fiscal year 2023 Congressional Budget Justification, the President’s Management Agenda, and documents on the CHCO Council website. We assessed the extent to which OPM’s strategic plan includes efforts to address skills gaps across the federal government and reviewed documentation related to OPM’s process for monitoring strategic plan implementation. We also reviewed questions included in OPM’s annual survey of CHCO Council members. We interviewed OPM officials responsible for strategic planning, budget development, and implementing parts of OPM’s strategic plan we found include efforts to address skills gaps across the government.

We also reviewed results of an OPM-sponsored, third-party assessment of skills gaps within OPM’s workforce. We interviewed officials responsible for managing the assessment and determining OPM’s response to the assessment findings. We also interviewed OPM officials responsible for workforce planning and compared OPM’s responses, stated plans, and the draft Human Capital Operating Plan against related OPM guidance.⁶ We then interviewed officials responsible for risk management at OPM, reviewed internal documentation, and compared

⁶U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Workforce Planning Guide*. (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2022); and *Human Capital Operating Plan (HCOP) Guidance Fiscal Years 2022-2026*. (Washington D.C.: Dec. 2011).

OPM's efforts against elements we have reported are essential for enterprise risk management.⁷

We conducted this performance audit from November 2021 to February 2023 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.

⁷GAO, *Enterprise Risk Management: Selected Agencies' Experiences Illustrate Good Practices in Managing Risk*, [GAO-17-63](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 1, 2016).

Appendix II: Skills Gaps-Related Statements Identified in Workforce Priority Areas in Agencies' Strategic Plans

Table 1: Skills Gaps-Related Statements Identified in Workforce Priority Areas in Agencies' Strategic Plans^a

Workforce Priority Area	Examples from Agencies' Documents
Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility for mission success	Department of the Treasury: Treasury's efforts to become a more diverse and inclusive organization will aid in fostering creativity, innovation, productivity, and higher levels of employee engagement.
Engagement/collaboration ^b	<p>Department of Health and Human Services: [We will] facilitate regular engagement between hiring managers, human resources professionals, leaders, and other stakeholders, and support collaborations with public, private, and academic sectors to advance opportunities to recruit, support, and train an ethnically, socially, and experientially diverse workforce.</p> <p>Department of Housing and Urban Development: The department recognizes an inclusive culture, supportive of employee engagement, is essential to supporting its workforce to bring their full selves to work. Fostering such a culture will allow all employees to be heard, share fresh ideas, and provide unique perspectives. This is critical to employees' well-being, sense of purpose, and motivation for enhancing the department's performance and mission success.</p>
Hiring/recruiting	<p>Department of Agriculture (hiring): Strategically utilize existing youth and workforce development programs such as Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers, Public Land Corps, Land Grant University Partnerships, and other special hiring authorities as diverse talent pipelines to meet increasing talent demands.</p> <p>National Aeronautics and Space Administration (recruiting): [We will] engage, inspire, and attract future generations of explorers and building a diverse future science, technology, engineering, and mathematics workforce through a broad set of programs, projects, internship opportunities, activities, and products that connect students to the administration's mission, work, and people, whether in-person or virtually.</p>
Hybrid workplace/workplace flexibilities	Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development: [We will] leverage best practices from the public and private sectors to expand workplace flexibilities and virtual work options, better promoting work-life balance, and supporting continued resilience among the workforces.
Resources/tools for employee success	Social Security Administration: We will provide agency managers with the tools and resources to enhance their skills and competencies, optimize organizational performance, address current and future workforce needs, and attract the talent we need to achieve our business goals.
Retention	Department of Health and Human Services: [We will] leverage incentives and flexibilities to enhance the department's competitiveness in the job market, and develop mechanisms to the ...retention of a high-caliber and qualified workforce.
Training, development, reskilling	Department of Transportation: Provide a variety of professional development opportunities for all grade levels through mentoring, coaching, and formal development programs.
Workforce planning/assess skills	Department of Education: Complete and implement competency models to close employees' job competency gaps. Specifically, (1) draft, validate, and implement competency models, including career maps and training plans; (2) conduct a competency assessment to measure and assess gap closures; (3) prioritize learning and developmental opportunities and share best practices for closing competency gaps; and (4) continue the linkage between employee performance plans and agency strategic goals and objectives.

Source: GAO analysis of agency documents. | GAO-23-105528

^aTo inform discussion at our May 2022 forum of federal human capital officers, we reviewed agencies' strategic plans or other available documents outlining workforce priorities. Table 1 includes skills gaps-related themes that were the top eight most frequently-mentioned among those documents.

^bWe previously reported that, according to the Office of Personnel Management, engaged employees are more productive and less likely to leave. Agencies can better ensure their workforces are engaged by managing employee performance, involving employees in decisions, and developing employees. GAO, *Federal Workforce: Key Talent Management Strategies for Agencies to Better Meet Their Missions*, GAO-19-181 (Washington, D.C., Apr. 29, 2019).

Appendix III: Office of Personnel Management Strategic Objectives Related to Closing Skills Gaps across the Federal Government

We reviewed the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Fiscal Year 2022-26 Strategic Plan and determined that 11 of OPM's strategic objectives include efforts that would help address skills gaps across the federal government. Table 2 lists these 11 objectives and examples of strategies related to closing skills gaps.

Table 2: Strategic Objectives in the Office of Personnel Management's Fiscal Year 2022-2026 Strategic Plan That Could Help Address Skills Gaps Government-wide

Strategic Objective	Explanation of How Objectives Relate to Addressing Skills Gaps Government-wide
1.1: Achieve a federal workforce that is drawn from the diversity of America, exhibited at all levels of government, by supporting agencies in fostering diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible workplaces.	The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) plans to support agencies by ensuring that existing policies and practices eliminate potential barriers to equity and developing plans to eliminate barriers within OPM's authority in areas including: recruitment, hiring, promotion, retention, and professional development programs. Barriers in these areas could contribute to skills gaps at agencies.
1.2: Develop a government-wide vision and strategy and implement policies and initiatives that embrace the future of work and position the federal government as a model employer with respect to hiring, talent development, competitive pay, benefits, and workplace flexibilities.	OPM plans to support agencies by providing human capital tools, guidance, and services; develop a strategy for how the federal government can be a model employer; and advance human capital policies to support the longer-term future of work. Doing so may aid recruitment and retention efforts across the federal government.
1.3: Build the skills of the federal workforce through hiring and training. By fiscal year (FY) 2026, increase the government-wide percentage of respondents who agree that their work unit has the job-relevant knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish organizational goals by 4 points.	Hiring and training are two ways agencies can address skills gaps. OPM provides a number of strategies for this objective, such as implementing improvements to the competitive hiring process, including adopting new selection rules, and expanding training offerings for human resource staff and leaders.
2.2: Improve OPM's relationships and standing as the human capital management thought leader. By FY 2026, increase the percent of Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCO) who strongly agree that OPM treats them as a strategic partner by 23 percentage points.	OPM is the primary agency responsible for government-wide human capital regulations and guidance and chair of the CHCO Council. OPM aims to re-affirm its role, in part, by increasing engagement with the CHCO Council, through which it discusses challenges that affect skills gaps.
3.2: Create a personalized USAJOBS experience to help applicants find relevant opportunities.	USAJOBS.gov is a website managed by OPM that serves as the central website for posting federal job openings. As such, improvements to the website that promote faster hiring of the right candidates may help agencies close skills gaps. One of OPM's strategies for this objective is to conduct end-to-end user research on the applicant experience to drive development priorities.
3.3: Create a seamless customer and intermediary experience across OPM's policy, service, and oversight functions. By FY 2026, increase the average score for helpfulness of OPM human capital services in achieving human capital objectives to 4.5 out of 5.	Agencies rely on OPM for human capital policy and guidance; technical assistance, and approval to use certain flexibilities (e.g., higher pay to recruit for in-demand skills), among other functions. Through OPM's strategies to improve customer service to agencies (e.g., collaborating across programs to develop and issue policy and provide guidance and services in a timely manner), agencies may be able to address challenges, including those that affect skills gaps, more efficiently.

**Appendix III: Office of Personnel Management
Strategic Objectives Related to Closing Skills
Gaps across the Federal Government**

Strategic Objective	Explanation of How Objectives Relate to Addressing Skills Gaps Government-wide
4.2: Increase focus on government-wide policy work by shifting more low-risk delegations of authorities to agencies.	As mentioned above, OPM engages in transactions with agencies such as providing approval to use special pay authorities. By delegating some authorities to agencies, agency officials may be able to spend more time addressing government-wide and agency-specific skills gaps, as opposed to transactional approvals.
4.3: Expand the quality and use of OPM's federal human capital data. By FY 2026, increase the percentage of CHCO survey respondents who agree that OPM provides agencies with high-quality workforce data and information to be used in decision-making by 20 percentage points.	OPM's strategies for this objective include expanding the accessibility of human capital data analytics through reports, tools, and services that support agencies' decision-making for talent needs. As a result, strategies for this objective may better enable agencies to understand skills gaps trends and the effectiveness of efforts to close skills gaps.
4.4: Improve OPM's ability to provide strategic human capital management leadership to agencies through expansion of innovation, pilots, and identification of leading practices across government. By FY 2026, provide federal agencies with 25 leading practices.	Through this objective, OPM plans to, in part, identify key human capital strategies and successful practices that support improvements across the human capital management lifecycle, which may include creating or amending policy and developing or amending guidance. Such improvements may help to close skills gaps government-wide.
4.5: Revamp OPM's policy-making approach to be proactive, timely, systematic, and inclusive. By FY 2026, increase the percent of CHCOs who agree that OPM's policy approach is responsive to agency needs by 8 percentage points.	When OPM collaborates with agencies, OPM can better understand and address agency priorities and challenges in its policy-making, such as those related to addressing skills gaps raised by CHCOs in this report. This objective includes strategies such as obtaining input on policy development from agencies and building relationships with agency leaders to understand talent priorities and concerns (e.g., emerging skills gaps).
4.6: Streamline federal human capital regulations and guidance to reduce administrative burden and promote innovation while upholding merit system principles. By FY 2026, improve CHCO agreement that human capital policy changes resulted in less administrative burden to agencies by 8 percentage points.	OPM's human capital regulations and guidance include various requirements for agencies related to skills gaps (e.g., conducting analyses on the root causes of an agency's skills gaps). Through this objective, OPM aims to review agencies' use of federal human capital regulations and guidance to identify high-level strategic changes to streamline and simplify human capital management.

Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Strategic Plan. | GAO-23-105528

Appendix IV: Comments from the Office of Personnel Management



OPM
Human Resources

UNITED STATES OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT
Washington, DC 20415

February 10, 2023

Ms. Alissa Czyz
Acting Director, Strategic Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Czyz,

Thank you for providing us the opportunity to respond to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) draft report, OPM Advances Efforts to Close Government-wide Skills Gaps but Needs a Plan to Improve Its Own Capacity, GAO-23-105528, February 2023.

Responses to your recommendations are provided below. In addition, technical comments are attached.

Recommendation #1: The Director of OPM should establish an action plan to address its skills gaps identified in the workforce assessment, either as an update to its HCOP or a separate effort.

Management Response: Management concurs with this recommendation.

In the Spring of 2023, OPM will be conducting a Human Capital Review (HCR) with OPM Human Resources (OPM HR). Based on the HCR discussion, OPM will develop and implement an action plan to address our agency specific skills and competency gaps via selected human capital strategies. We will leverage a cross-agency working group of senior leadership to ensure that the interests of all stakeholders are considered and that the necessary resources are available to implement the action plan. The OPM Workforce Planning Guide (November 2022) will be used as a resource to develop the action plan. As noted in the GAO draft report, OPM is already engaged in multiple activities to address skills gaps. However, many activities were not mentioned in the report.

Over the past several years, in particular FY2022 and FY2023, OPM has targeted critical resources to OPM HR to not only rebuild this department but augment it with critical positions and skills. For example, during FY2022, OPM HR established and fully staffed a Workforce and Talent Strategies Team (“Talent Team”), which is responsible for strategic recruitment, strategic workforce planning, and special hiring programs for early career and underrepresented talent. This team is launching OPM’s first student intern cohort program with approximately 35 student interns scheduled to report in May 2023. These interns will explicitly address skill gaps identified across the agency. In addition, OPM HR is

[OPM.GOV](https://www.opm.gov)

[USAJOBS.GOV](https://www.usajobs.gov)

**Appendix IV: Comments from the Office of
Personnel Management**

Ms. Czyz

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recruiting for a personnel psychologist to enhance the quality of assessments, supporting the hiring of candidates who possess critical competencies and skills needed by OPM. With the hiring of the personnel psychologist, OPM HR will expand the use of the Subject Matter Expert Qualifications Assessment (SMEQA) process to improve the quality of candidate assessment. Additional measures taken by OPM HR to reduce skills gaps include increased use of shared certificates, enabling several high-quality selections; expansion of the use of non-competitive hiring authorities to quickly reach entry-level and early career talent; and more frequent remote work eligible positions, facilitating recruitment for difficult to fill positions that represent staffing gaps.

Finally, at the beginning of FY2023, OPM re-established the Strategic Hiring Committee (“SHC”), consisting of senior leadership who meet biweekly to review and determine whether to approve Agency hiring requests, including backfills. SHC reviews are done through a strategic workforce lens, considering skills gaps and budget. All program offices were required to provide the SHC with staffing plans identifying skills gaps identified in a third-party assessment at the beginning of this fiscal year and all hiring requests to the SHC must specify the skills gaps program office needs to close.

Recommendation #2: The Director of OPM should document, select risk responses for, and monitor progress addressing the risks skills gaps pose to achieving strategic objectives, either as part of the process for monitoring strategic plan implementation or through other risk management processes.

Management Response: Management concurs with this recommendation. OPM will include significant skills gap risks within the agency in OPM’s enterprise risk register, along with mitigating controls/strategies to address those risks. These risks and strategies will be monitored and addressed through OPM’s Risk Management Council. Further, OPM will add strategic objective risks related to skills gaps to the risk registers on the dashboards used to monitor strategic plan implementation.

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to this draft report. If you have any questions regarding our response, please contact Mr. Mark Lambert, Associate Director, Merit System Accountability & Compliance, (202) 606-2980, Mark.Lambert@opm.gov.

Sincerely,



Carmen E. Garcia
Chief Human Capital Officer
HR Director
OPM Human Resources

Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Alissa H. Czyz at (202) 512-6806 or czyza@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, key contributors to this report were Shea Bader (Assistant Director), Dewi Djunaidy (Analyst in Charge), Melanie Magnotto, and Ulyana Panchishin. In addition, Crystal Bernard, Karen Cassidy, Denise Cook, David Dornisch, Robert Gebhart, Steven Lozano, Robert Robinson, Andrew Stavisky, and Peter Verchinski, made significant contributions to this report.

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