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## **2020 Federal Managers Survey: Results on Government Performance and Management Issues (GAO-21-537SP)**

### **Objectives, Scope, and Methodology**

Multiple laws related to federal government management and performance activities include provisions for us to review aspects of their implementation.<sup>1</sup> For example, the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA) includes provisions for us to periodically evaluate and make recommendations to improve implementation of the Act.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act) includes provisions for us to report on the use of evidence in the federal government and, if appropriate, make recommendations to improve agencies' capacity to build and use evidence.<sup>3</sup>

This product describes federal managers' reported perspectives on selected management and performance issues. To address this objective, we collected perspectives through our periodic survey of federal managers.

### Survey Development

Since 1997, we have periodically surveyed managers on various federal management and performance topics.<sup>4</sup> For the seventh iteration in 2020, we reviewed and revised the questionnaire we used for our past surveys.

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<sup>1</sup>We are reporting results from our *2020 Survey on Organizational Performance and Management Issues* in several products throughout 2021. We list these products on the [Related GAO Products](#) page. Each product identifies the particular statutory provision(s) to which it is responding.

<sup>2</sup>Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866 (2011). The acronym "GPRA" in the act's title refers to the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993. Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285 (1993).

<sup>3</sup>Pub. L. No. 115-435, 132 Stat. 5529 (2019).

<sup>4</sup>The [Related GAO Products](#) page identifies the products that analyzed and reported results from our past surveys in 1997, 2000, 2003, 2007, 2013, and 2017.

We updated and expanded the 2020 questionnaire based on changes in relevant federal statutes and guidance since our last survey in 2017 as well as our related past work.

- We revised existing survey sections on building and using performance information and program evaluations, and added a new section on additional types of evidence (data, research, and analysis), to reflect (1) new activities required by the Evidence Act and related guidance issued by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and (2) findings from our past work related to those types of evidence.<sup>5</sup>
- We added a new survey section on the availability and usefulness of federal spending data based on our work assessing implementation of the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act of 2014.<sup>6</sup>
- Given the changes in federal operations and working environments, we also added new survey sections about the continuity of operations and teleworking during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic based on relevant guidance and our past work.<sup>7</sup>

We took several steps to ensure that managers could understand and respond to the new and revised survey questions. Our staff—including subject matter experts, a survey specialist, and a research methodologist—reviewed the questions. We also conducted 18 pretests of the draft survey questionnaire with a small sample of managers from the survey population at four selected agencies.<sup>8</sup> Based on feedback from our staff and pretesters, we revised the wording of questions or added clarifying examples, as appropriate.

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<sup>5</sup>OMB, Circular No. A-11, pt 6 (June 2019); and *Phase 1 Implementation of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018: Learning Agendas, Personnel, and Planning Guidance*, Memorandum M-19-23 (Washington, D.C.: July 10, 2019). For our relevant past work, see the [Related GAO Products](#) page.

<sup>6</sup>Pub. L. No. 113-101, 128 Stat. 1146 (2014). For our related past work, see for example, GAO, *DATA Act: Quality of Data Submissions Has Improved but Further Action Is Needed to Disclose Known Data Limitations*, GAO-20-75 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 8, 2019), and *DATA Act: OMB, Treasury, and Agencies Need to Improve Completeness and Accuracy of Spending Data and Disclose Limitations*, GAO-18-138, (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 8, 2017).

<sup>7</sup>For relevant guidance, see for example, OMB, *Harnessing Technology to Support Mission Continuity*, Memorandum M-20-19 (Washington, D.C.: March 22, 2020), and Office of Personnel Management, *Coronavirus Disease 2019: Additional Guidance*, Memorandum CPM 2020-05 (Washington, D.C.: March 7, 2020). For our relevant past work, see for example, GAO, *Influenza Pandemic: Agencies Report Progress in Plans to Protect Federal Workers but Oversight Could Be Improved*, GAO-12-748 (Washington, D.C.: July 25, 2012), and *Emergency Preparedness: Agencies Need Coordinated Guidance on Incorporating Telework into Emergency and Continuity Planning*, GAO-11-628 (Washington, D.C.: July 22, 2011).

<sup>8</sup>The four agencies were the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the National Science Foundation. We selected them to reflect a range of characteristics. These included agency size, as indicated by the number of employees; and the extent to which managers reported using performance information and having evaluations of their programs in our last survey in 2017. This selection procedure helped us identify managers with a range of perspectives on the

Most of the questions in our 2020 survey were closed-ended. Depending on the particular question, respondents could choose one or more response categories or rate the strength of their perception on a five-point extent scale ranging from “no extent” to “very great extent.” On most questions, respondents also had an option of choosing the response category “no basis to judge/not applicable.” A few questions had other options, such as “yes,” “no,” or “do not know,” or a three-point familiarity scale (“not familiar,” “somewhat familiar,” and “very familiar”).

### Survey Population and Sample Selection

We identified the population of managers and selected our sample in line with practices and procedures we used in our past surveys. We identified the overall population of managers at the 24 major federal agencies (see Table 1).<sup>9</sup>

**Table 1: 24 Major Federal Agencies Included in GAO’s 2020 Survey of Federal Managers**

Department of Agriculture	Department of Transportation
Department of Commerce	Department of the Treasury
Department of Defense	Department of Veterans Affairs
Department of Education	Agency for International Development
Department of Energy	Environmental Protection Agency
Department of Health and Human Services	General Services Administration
Department of Homeland Security	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
Department of Housing and Urban Development	National Science Foundation
Department of the Interior	Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Department of Justice	Office of Personnel Management
Department of Labor	Small Business Administration
Department of State	Social Security Administration

Source: 31 U.S.C. § 901(b) | GAO-21-537SP

We defined managers as career civil service employees; specifically, management levels covered by general schedule (GS) or equivalent schedules at levels comparable to GS-13 through GS-15 and career Senior Executive Service (SES) or equivalent. We identified a total population of 150,447 officials based on information from (1) the Office of Personnel

availability and use of different types of evidence. These selections also helped identify managers that had different experiences responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>9</sup>The 24 agencies are those identified in the Chief Financial Officers (CFO) Act of 1990, as amended; generally the largest federal agencies. 31 U.S.C. § 901(b).

Management's (OPM) Enterprise Human Resources Integration (EHRI) database as of March 2019, which was the most recent data available at the time and (2) the Department of State's (State) database on Foreign Service Officers (FSO), who are not included in OPM's EHRI database.

From these databases, we selected a random sample of 4,601 individuals. We selected a larger sample than in past surveys to address a few potential issues. First, we were uncertain about the effect that administering a survey during the COVID-19 pandemic would have in managers' ability to provide timely responses. Second, we anticipated that a portion of individuals selected to be included in our sample may have no longer been in scope for various reasons (e.g., they retired), because the data upon which our selections were based were more than one year old.

We stratified the sample by agency and by whether the manager or supervisor was a member of the SES. Stratifying the sample in this way ensured that the population from which we sampled covered at least 86 percent of all mid- to upper-level managers and supervisors at the departments and agencies we surveyed.

Of the 4,601 managers selected for our 2020 survey, we found that 608 fell outside of our scope. This included individuals who

- were no longer employed by the agency (they had retired, separated, or otherwise left the agency);
- no longer met our definition of a manager; or
- were on extended leave for more than half of the survey administration period.

This reduced the size of our final sample to 3,993 managers.

To help determine the reliability and accuracy of the data elements used to draw our sample, we checked the data for reasonableness and the presence of any obvious or potential errors in accuracy and completeness. We also reviewed our past analyses of the reliability of the databases. We checked the names of the managers in our selected sample provided by OPM and State with contacts at each of the 24 surveyed agencies to verify these managers were still employed with the agency. We noted discrepancies when they occurred and excluded them from our population of interest, as applicable. Based on these procedures, we believe the data we used from the EHRI and State FSO databases are sufficiently reliable for the purpose of the survey.

### Survey Administration

We administered the survey from July 2020 through early December 2020. We emailed managers in the sample to notify them of the survey's availability on our website, and included instructions on how to access and complete the survey. We worked with OPM to obtain the names of the managers in our sample, except for those within selected subcomponents whose names were withheld from the EHRI database, generally due to the sensitive nature of their work. For that subset of managers, we worked with officials at relevant agencies to gain access to these individuals.<sup>10</sup> Between mid-July and mid-November 2020, we periodically emailed and called selected managers to encourage their participation in the survey and provide technical assistance, as appropriate.

Similarly, we worked with the Department of Justice (DOJ) to administer the survey to a subset of its managers who were involved in sensitive law enforcement work. We took steps to ensure that the subset of DOJ managers experienced a similar survey administration process as the rest of the sampled managers to the extent possible. We provided DOJ officials who administered the survey on our behalf with text for survey activation and reminder emails similar to ones we emailed to managers at other agencies. DOJ administered the survey to these managers and emailed them two reminders to complete the survey.

### Survey Results

We received usable questionnaires from 2,381 respondents, or 59.6 percent of the sample. After closing the survey, we conducted an analysis using results from the survey and our sampling frame to assess potential biases in whether managers responded.<sup>11</sup> The analysis found differences in an individual's tendency to respond to the survey based on the agency at which they work, whether they were a member of the SES, and their age.

Based on the analysis, we applied weights to survey responses to account for these biases and for the design of our sample, and ensure that estimates are generalizable. As a result, the

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<sup>10</sup>This subset of managers involved those at the U.S. Secret Service and Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau. We worked with officials at the Departments of Homeland Security and the Treasury, respectively, to obtain access to those individuals.

<sup>11</sup>OMB guidelines state that agencies should plan for a nonresponse bias analysis if the expected response rate is below 70 percent for any items used in a report. See OMB, *Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys* (Washington, D.C.: September 2006).

overall weighted response rate was 56 percent.<sup>12</sup> The weighted response rate at each agency ranged from 51 percent to 83 percent, except for the Department of Justice, which had a weighted response rate of 27 percent.<sup>13</sup> Results from agencies with low response rates, such as the Department of Justice, should be interpreted with caution because these estimates are subject to more uncertainty. In addition, all results are subject to some uncertainty, or sampling error. For instance, our data may be subject to bias from unmeasured sources for which we cannot control.

The results of our 2020 survey are generalizable to the population of managers across the 24 agencies, and at each agency included in the survey. We present those results as percentage estimates, aggregated to two different levels:

- *government-wide* estimates, which reflect the views of managers across the 24 agencies;<sup>14</sup> and
- *agency-level* estimates, which reflect the views of managers at individual agencies.

Because the selected managers were a stratified random probability sample, our sample is only one of a large number of samples that we might have drawn. Since each sample could have provided different estimates, we express our confidence in the precision of our particular sample's results as a 95 percent confidence interval. This is the interval that would contain the actual population value for 95 percent of the samples we could have drawn. For each survey question, we present the 95 percent confidence interval associated with each government-wide and agency-level percentage estimate.

In addition to sampling errors, the practical difficulties of conducting any survey may also introduce other types of errors, commonly referred to as nonsampling errors. For example, difficulties in how a particular question is interpreted, in the sources of information available to respondents, or in how the data were entered into a database or analyzed can introduce unwanted variability into the survey results.

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<sup>12</sup>The difference between the unweighted and weighted government-wide response rate in 2020 is due to higher response rates at small- to mid-sized agencies, and lower response rates at certain mid- to large-sized agencies. After accounting for this, the weighted government-wide response rate was lower than then the unweighted rate.

<sup>13</sup>Each agency's response rate is available as a part of its results webpage on GAO-21-537SP.

<sup>14</sup>We use the term "government-wide" to collectively refer to the 24 federal agencies covered by our survey.

With this survey, we took a number of steps to minimize these nonsampling errors. As noted earlier, our staff with subject matter expertise designed the questionnaire in collaboration with our survey specialist and methodologists, and we pretested new questions to ensure they were relevant and clearly stated. When we analyzed the data, an independent analyst on our staff verified the analysis programs to ensure the accuracy of the code and the appropriateness of the methods used for the computer-generated analysis. Since this was a web-based survey, respondents entered their answers directly into the electronic questionnaire, thereby eliminating the need to have the data keyed into a database, thus avoiding a source of data entry error.

We conducted the work upon which this supplement is based from October 2019 to July 2021 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.