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STATE DEPARTMENT

Targets for Hiring, Filling Vacancies Overseas Being Met, but Gaps Remain in Hard-to-Learn Languages



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Highlights of [GAO-04-139](#), a report to congressional requesters

STATE DEPARTMENT

Targets for Hiring, Filling Vacancies Overseas Being Met, but Gaps Remain in Hard-to-Learn Languages

Why GAO Did This Study

During the 1990s, the State Department lost more people than it hired. The resultant shortfalls in the number and skills of Foreign Service officers have endangered U.S. diplomatic readiness. Furthermore, recent studies, including several by GAO, have questioned whether State's recruitment system identifies people with the appropriate skills and whether State is assigning officers with specialized skills, such as the ability to speak a difficult language, to positions where they can be utilized.

GAO was asked to review State's processes for determining the number and skills of junior officers the department needs and to determine whether it is hiring and assigning officers with the general skills to carry out foreign policy overseas. GAO was also asked to examine the challenges State still needs to address, especially regarding officers' foreign language skills.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that the Secretary of State collect and maintain data on the effectiveness of the department's efforts to address continuing gaps in officers with proficiency in certain hard-to-learn languages. State generally agreed with our findings and observations, but did not completely address our recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-139.

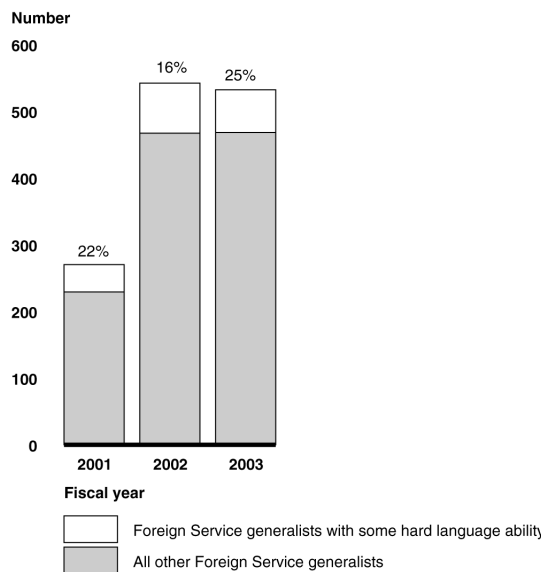
To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4268 or fordj@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

State used critical elements of workforce planning to identify the number of junior officers it needs to hire within the next 5 to 10 years. State implemented key elements of workforce planning, including setting strategic direction and goals, identifying gaps in its workforce, and developing strategies to address these gaps. State's analysis showed that it had a deficit of 386 positions, mainly at the mid level, and in 2001, State launched a \$197 million plan to address the gaps. State has met its 2002 to 2003 hiring targets for junior officers and is filling overseas positions with junior officers with the general skills and competencies required to do their job well. However, State officials said it will take up to 10 years to hire and promote junior officers in sufficient numbers to significantly decrease the shortage of mid-level officers.

While State is able to fill overseas positions with junior officers who have the necessary general skills, the department continues to face challenges filling the gaps in staff with proficiency in certain hard-to-learn languages, such as Arabic and Chinese. State has implemented a plan to target applicants who speak these difficult languages. However, this plan does not include numeric goals, and State has collected limited data to assess the effectiveness of its efforts. Other challenges include new officers' public diplomacy skills and training in this area, increased supervisory and on-the-job requirements when State assigns junior officers to positions above their experience level, and the impact of rotational assignments on junior officers' performance and managers' time.

New Hires with Ability in Certain Languages as a Percentage of New Foreign Service Officers



Source: GAO analysis of State Department data.

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Abbreviations

AFSERS	Automated Foreign Service Examination and Registry System
BEX	Board of Examiners
DRI	Diplomatic Readiness Initiative
FSI	Foreign Service Institute
GEMS	Global Employment Management System
MRV	machine-readable visa
STMS	Student Training Management System

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United States General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

November 19, 2003

The Honorable Christopher Shays
Chairman, Subcommittee on National Security,
Emerging Threats, and International Relations
Committee on Government Reform
House of Representatives

The Honorable Vic Snyder
House of Representatives

In 2001 the Department of State launched a 3-year, \$197.5 million initiative to recruit, hire, train, and deploy the right people to carry out U.S. foreign policy. Under the initiative, State plans to hire more than 600 new Foreign Service officers above attrition—the department’s largest expansion in years. The initiative was designed to address several problems, including shortfalls in the number and skills of Foreign Service officers at the mid level that the department said endanger U.S. diplomatic readiness.¹ During the 1990s, State lost more people than it hired due to budget cuts. Furthermore, recent studies, including several conducted by GAO,² have questioned whether the State Department’s recruitment system identifies people with the appropriate skills and whether the assignment process places officers with specialized skills, such as the ability to speak a difficult language, in positions where they can be utilized.

To determine whether the State Department is hiring the right people and assigning them to jobs where they can fully use their skills, you asked us to review State’s system for recruiting and assigning new Foreign Service officers. In this report we (1) discuss State’s processes for determining the number and skills of junior officers it needs during the next 5 to 10 years and whether it is hiring and assigning officers with the general skills to

¹State defines diplomatic readiness as its “ability to get the right people in the right place at the right time with the right skills to carry out America’s foreign policy.”

²U.S. General Accounting Office, *Foreign Languages: Human Capital Approach Needed to Correct Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls*, [GAO-02-375](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 31, 2002); and U.S. General Accounting Office, *State Department: Staffing Shortfalls and Ineffective Assignment System Compromise Diplomatic Readiness at Hardship Posts*, [GAO-02-626](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 18, 2002).

meet the needs of overseas posts³ and (2) examine the challenges State still needs to address, especially regarding officers' foreign language skills.

To conduct our review, we examined planning documents and information related to State's processes for recruiting and assigning Foreign Service officers. We met with officials from State's Office of Career Development and Assignments; the Office of Recruitment, Examination, and Employment; the Foreign Service Institute; and the Diplomatic Readiness Task Force. In addition, we met with officials in all of State's regional bureaus and in the Bureau of Consular Affairs. We also conducted fieldwork in Mexico City and Moscow and interviewed selected officials from five U.S. embassies in Africa; this work included interviews with junior Foreign Service officers. We chose Mexico City and Moscow for our fieldwork because of the large number of junior officers assigned to those posts. We chose the embassies in Africa to obtain the opinions of Foreign Service officers at small and hard-to-fill posts. For further information on our scope and methodology, see appendix I.

Results in Brief

State used critical elements of workforce planning to identify the number of junior officers it needs to hire within the next 5 to 10 years and is hiring and assigning officers overseas with the general skills, such as oral and written communication, to do the job. State implemented key elements of workforce planning, including setting strategic direction and goals, identifying gaps in its workforce, and developing strategies to address these gaps. In determining the skills it needs, State's 2001 analysis—which focused on five career tracks⁴—showed that it needed 386 new positions, mainly at the mid level. State determined it needed to hire and train about 623 new Foreign Service officers above attrition through fiscal year 2004 to address the shortages and have sufficient staff for other purposes, such as to allow employees to seamlessly rotate in and out of positions abroad and to support necessary training in languages and other areas. In 2001, State began implementing a plan to address these shortfalls and has met its 2002 to 2003 targets for hiring junior officers in all five of its career tracks.

³This report covers Foreign Service generalists, who are officers hired for broad-based skills to perform many types of jobs, rather than Foreign Service specialists hired for a specific job.

⁴The five career tracks are management, consular, economic, political, and public diplomacy.

However, based on its projected attrition and hiring, State anticipates that it will take up to 10 years to hire and promote junior officers in sufficient numbers to eliminate the shortage of mid-level officers in the various career tracks. Nearly every official with whom GAO spoke said that State was hiring and filling overseas positions with new Foreign Service junior officers with the general skills and competencies⁵ required to do their jobs well.

State continues to face challenges filling the gaps in staff with proficiency in certain hard-to-learn languages,⁶ as well as challenges in several other areas. State officials at headquarters and overseas have stated that the department does not have enough Foreign Service officers with hard language skills, which has adversely affected State operations. State is currently seeking sufficient staff to support training in languages as needed. In addition, it has implemented a plan to target applicants for hiring who speak certain languages to increase the number of hard language speakers. However, this plan does not include numeric goals, and State has collected limited data to assess the effectiveness of its efforts. Several overseas post officials and new officers at the U.S. embassy in Moscow told us they were concerned that some junior officers lack sufficient training in languages considered hard to learn, thus hindering their ability to do their jobs effectively. State is now increasing the amount of language training to junior officers studying hard-to-learn languages. Other concerns regarding new Foreign Service officers included their lack of public diplomacy experience and insufficient training in this area, increased supervisory and on-the job requirements when State assigns junior officers to positions above their experience level, and rotational assignments that do not give participants enough time to learn their jobs and thus burden managers. To address some of these concerns, State has extended the length of public diplomacy training and is reviewing the practice of rotational assignments.

⁵By general skills and competencies we mean the 13 job dimensions, such as written and oral communication, information integration and analysis, initiative, and leadership that State has identified as important for Foreign Service officers to do their jobs.

⁶The State Department pays incentives to encourage people to pursue the difficult languages that are used in posts that tend to have hard-to-fill positions. All of the “incentive” languages fall into one of two categories that State refers to as “hard and superhard” languages. Among those incentive languages we looked at were Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, Japanese, Korean, Russian, and Cantonese Chinese. This report refers to those languages as “hard” languages.

This report recommends that the Secretary of State collect and maintain data on the effectiveness of State's efforts to address language gaps. State should use these data to, among other things, report on filling such gaps through its outreach efforts to recruit more junior officers with hard language skills and its pilot programs to increase their training in these languages. State should also explore additional opportunities to maximize assignment of junior officers with skills in these languages to overseas posts where they can use these languages. In commenting on a draft of this report, the State Department generally agreed with the report's findings and observations and said that it is already addressing the first part of our recommendation. However, we do not believe that State is addressing this issue, because the data that State collects do not show the number of individuals it hires as a direct result of its outreach efforts. State did not completely address the second part of our recommendation, but stated that our approach, which focused on six specific languages, was too narrow. We disagree with State's assessment. We focused on the six languages because of their strategic importance and findings from previous GAO reports that found that lack of staff with skills in some of these languages has hindered diplomatic readiness.

Background

The State Department advances U.S. national interests through diplomatic relations with 163 countries at 263 posts worldwide. About 5,900 Foreign Service generalists stationed overseas and at State headquarters perform much of this work. To become a Foreign Service officer, an individual must be an American citizen between 20 and 59 years old on the date of the written examination; pass a written and oral examination; be able to obtain security and medical clearances; and be available for worldwide assignment, including in Washington, D.C.

State recruits and hires candidates by administering a written and oral exam to individuals interested in becoming Foreign Service officers. The general skills identified by the department and the exams, which test for those skills, were validated during a 1997 to 1998 job analysis conducted by State employees and outside contractors. According to State officials and consultants, the results of the analysis should be valid for 10 years. In addition, State has updated the exam to reflect changing needs. For example, it added a section on management skills to the Foreign Service written exam to identify more candidates with knowledge useful in this career track. Moreover, the Board of Examiners reviews the exam annually, as required by the Foreign Service Act.

The written exam tests for knowledge of 36 topics such as world historical events, geography, basic economic principles and statistics, and basic management principles. Applicants registering for the written exam can self-declare foreign languages spoken and must select a career track or cone. There are five from which to choose: management, consular, economic, political, and public diplomacy. The oral exam assesses a candidate for 13 general skills or competencies: written communication, oral communication, information integration and analysis, planning and organizing, judgment, resourcefulness, initiative and leadership, working with others, experience and motivation, composure, objectivity and integrity, cultural adaptability, and quantitative analysis. State does not test for language proficiency as a requirement for employment. Table 1 shows the number of applicants taking and passing the written and oral exams in fiscal years 2001 through 2003.

Table 1: Number of Applicants Taking and Passing the Written and Oral Exams in Fiscal Years 2001, 2002, and 2003

Year	Number of applicants who took written exam	Number who passed written exam	Number of applicants who took oral exam	Number who passed oral exam
2001	12,912	3,871	1,668	727
2002	31,442	9,258	6,295	1,547
2003	20,342	3,274	N.A.	N.A.

Source: Department of State.

After a candidate passes both the written and oral exams, he or she is placed on a register of eligible hires and will remain there for up to 18 months or until being placed in an initial training, or A-100, class, according to State officials. There are five separate registers, one for each career track or cone, which rank candidates according to their scores on the oral assessment. To increase the chances that candidates on the register who have language skills are hired, a passing score on an optional telephonic assessment of a candidate's foreign language skills will add points to the individual's final score. Each register has a minimum cutoff point, which dictates an immediate conditional offer of employment to those candidates who receive that score on their oral exam. The cutoff points for receiving an immediate conditional offer vary according to each register. Registers with more candidates interested in serving in that career track have higher cutoff points.

Each A-100 class consists of between 45 and 90 junior Foreign Service officers who will be assigned as entry-level Foreign Service personnel in overseas or domestic posts. During training, junior officers are required to bid on a list of available jobs from which State's Entry Level Division will assign them to an overseas post. The officers receive language and job-specific training after they receive their assignments.

State Uses Critical Elements of Workforce Planning and Is Hiring and Assigning Officers Overseas with the Necessary General Skills

State used critical elements of workforce planning to identify Foreign Service officer staffing and skill gaps within the next 5 to 10 years. The department determined that it needed to hire 623 new Foreign Service generalists above attrition hiring; to accomplish this, in 2001 it developed a 3-year hiring plan. The department has met its hiring targets for fiscal years 2002 and 2003 and is ready to implement 2004 hiring pending congressional funding. However, officials we interviewed projected that it would take up to 10 years to hire and promote enough junior officers to eliminate the shortfalls at the mid level. Almost all officials we interviewed said State has hired and was in the process of filling overseas positions with very talented and capable junior officers with the general skills and competencies required to do their jobs well.

State Used Critical Elements of Workforce Planning

State used critical elements of workforce planning, which include (1) setting strategic direction, (2) analyzing the workforce to determine if staffing and skill gaps exist, (3) developing workforce strategies to fill the gaps, and (4) evaluating the strategies and making needed revisions to ensure that strategies work as intended. Involving various staff (from top to bottom) is important across all the critical elements. (See fig. 1.)

Figure 1: Critical Elements of Workforce Planning



Source: GAO.

State Has Set Strategic Direction

Before developing a workforce plan, an agency first needs to set strategic direction and program goals. State has done this by implementing a strategic plan, which contains 12 strategic goals and 44 performance goals. Overseas posts participate in the planning process by developing mission program plans that link their resource (including staffing) requests to the strategic goals. The overseas posts submit their plans to the regional bureaus in Washington, D.C. After review and prioritization, the regional bureaus incorporate elements from the mission plans into bureau performance plans, based on policy priorities and initiatives that are relevant to the strategic and performance goals. State has developed an overseas staffing model, which it uses to determine staffing requirements and allocate personnel resources worldwide. The model is linked to State's strategic goals through the mission program planning process.

State Has Analyzed Its Workforce to Identify Gaps

In 2001, State analyzed its workforce to identify staffing and skill gaps in the Foreign Service. State's overseas staffing model served as the basis for the analysis, which is a key component of workforce planning. The staffing model, which State updates biennially, measures Foreign Service staffing needs overseas by the five career tracks or "cones." The model places posts into categories by size and the post's primary function and determines how many positions the post needs for each career track based on certain workload factors. For example, the model determines the number of administrative positions a post requires based on the number of Americans at the post and such factors as the level of service provided to each U.S. government agency at the post, the number of housing units, and the number of visitors.

To identify its Foreign Service staffing needs, State compared the number of officers it had in each career track with the total number of positions to be filled, including new overseas positions required according to post workload categories projected by the staffing model. State used these analyses in determining total staffing needs. State's analysis considered the level of experience needed for the officers by grade level.⁷

In 2001, State determined that it needed 623 new Foreign Service generalists to eliminate its mid-level Foreign Service staffing and skills shortfall. This number includes the 386 overseas positions identified by the overseas staffing model, as well as additional staff needed to manage crises; permit employees to step out of assignment rotation to receive training, including language training; allow employees to seamlessly rotate in and out of positions abroad; allow State to meet domestic responsibilities and fully staff the required details to other U.S. government agencies and offices; and provide employees with training in languages, leadership and management, and tradecraft, such as consular duties. This deficit affected all grade levels, with the majority at the mid level, according to State officials.

As of March 2003, State had a combined mid-level deficit of 353 officers in all career tracks. The deficits also included domestic positions, such as desk officers, that Foreign Service officers occupy when they are assigned

⁷The Foreign Service career system has six levels. An officer may be hired at FS 06, FS 05, or FS 04 depending on his or her level of work experience, and progress through FS 01. The Senior Foreign Service includes Minister Counselor (MC) and Counselor (OC). There is also the rank of Career Minister above the ranks listed in the Senior Foreign Service.

to headquarters. The largest deficit for these positions is in the public diplomacy career track, due mainly to deficits inherited from the U.S. Information Agency, which was folded into the State Department in 1999.

Table 2 shows the staffing deficits and surpluses for Foreign Service generalists by career track.

Table 2: Foreign Service Generalists' Surplus/Deficits across Career Tracks as of March 2003

Grade Level	Management	Consular	Economic	Political	Public diplomacy	Total surplus/deficit	Surplus/deficit by grade level
Senior Level	MC	-14	3	7	31	-14	13
	OC	-7	3	7	33	-12	24
	01	-10	34	25	75	-112	12
Mid Level	02	0	27	-2	39	-161	-97
	03	-41	-97	-63	-26	-29	-256
Junior Level	04 ^a	147	-395 ^b	85	53	70	-40
Total		75	-425	59	205	-258	-344

Source: Department of State.

^aFS 05 and FS 06 are training positions that are not counted against the deficit.

^bThis number is not a true deficit because junior officers in all career tracks perform consular work.

State Developed and Is Implementing Workforce Strategies to Fill the Gaps

In 2001, the Secretary of State launched the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative (DRI), a \$197.5 million plan to address the staffing and skills deficits to ensure diplomatic readiness. This initiative calls for hiring an additional 1,158 employees over attrition, including 623 Foreign Service generalists, between fiscal years 2002 and 2004.⁸ This hiring is in addition to the 852 staff needed to fill gaps created by attrition. State's plans call for the agency to continue hiring at least 200 officers above attrition through fiscal year 2005. To accomplish the increased hiring under the DRI, State is implementing an aggressive recruitment program that incorporates its traditional recruitment at campuses and job fairs with new methods, such as an interactive Web site. State's recruitment program is focused on addressing shortages in specific career tracks. For example, State is targeting business schools and other appropriate professional associations to recruit applicants with management skills.

⁸The DRI does not include additional consular positions.

State Has Some Mechanisms for Evaluating Its Plan

State officials described a few ways in which they evaluate and revise the agency's planning process. For example, Human Resources personnel said they frequently adjust the staffing model to ensure that its different components, such as the promotion, retirement, and attrition sections, accurately reflect the trends occurring in the Foreign Service. State also monitors its intake plans. A recruitment committee meets biweekly to review and adjust State's recruitment and training plans. As a result of these reviews, the committee may move hiring from one career track to another or increase training resources to accommodate the workload. The officials said State also conducts quarterly reviews of bureau staffing to take into account changing priorities.

Employee Involvement in Workforce Planning Varies

Involving employees at all levels and stakeholders in the workforce planning process is important to encourage support for and understanding of its outcomes. State's workforce planning process involves managers at all levels. For example, all 37 bureaus as well as all overseas posts provide input. Managers at all levels help determine staffing needs in parts of the organization for mission program plans and bureau performance plans that are then factored into the overall plans. Managers at all levels assist in data gathering as well as assessing and validating the overseas staffing model. Senior management, including the Deputy Secretary and the Undersecretary for Management, reviews all bureau performance plans at formal annual hearings. Budget and human resources analysts also review the bureau performance plans. Further, employees at varying levels serve on committees, such as the recruitment committee, involved in workforce planning. Other nonmanagement employees participate in State's workforce planning efforts, according to Bureau of Human Resources officials. For example, they said officers at all levels participated in the analysis done to validate Foreign Service skill needs, and junior and mid-level officers at the overseas posts provide data that are used to develop the mission program plans.

State Has Met Its Hiring Targets but Gaps in Mid-Level Officers Will Take up to 10 Years to Fill

State has met its hiring targets for fiscal years 2002 and 2003. (See table 3.)

Table 3: State Department Hiring Targets and Actual Hiring for Foreign Service Generalists, Fiscal Years 2002-2004

Fiscal year	2002	2003	Total actual hiring for both years	2004 (planned)	Total
Diplomatic Readiness Initiative	205	209	414	209	623
Attrition and MRV-funded hiring	262	259	521	331	852
Total hiring target	467	468	935	540	1,475
Actual hiring	467	468	935	N.A.	N.A.

Source: Department of State.

State has eliminated staffing deficits at the entry level in all five of its career tracks, according to officials in State's Office of Recruitment Examination and Employment. They said there is a sufficient number of candidates on the list of eligible hires to fill all junior officer positions coming vacant for fiscal year 2004.

Since 2002 State has hired at over twice the level of attrition. It plans to hire an additional 209 new Foreign Service generalists⁹ in fiscal year 2004 to provide a training "float" and to ensure that additional officers are available for crisis management. According to State, it must sustain the personnel "float" to ensure that training can continue at the appropriate levels. Most of these positions are new junior officers, who are hired at the entry level for their career tracks. State's plan is to eventually promote the junior officers to the mid level in sufficient numbers to eliminate the current deficit of 353 mid-level officers.

State anticipates that the mid-level gap will be eliminated within the next 9 to 10 years, based on its attrition and hiring and provided it receives all DRI allocations through fiscal year 2004. Several officers said elimination of the mid-level gap depended on State's ability to promote the junior officers. For example, they said that if State continues to hire large numbers of junior officers, eventually there would be a surplus of officers eligible for promotion. If all of these officers were not promoted quickly, they might leave the Foreign Service. In addition, a few officials stated that elimination

⁹State generally does not hire Foreign Service generalists at the mid level because such hiring has not been effective, according to State officials.

of the mid-level gap depended on State's ability to continue hiring junior officers at the current rate. They feared a "feast or famine" situation in which increased hiring would be followed by years of no hiring. State officials believe that, due to the current deficit at the mid level, it will be able to provide adequate promotion opportunities to satisfy the career expectations of recently hired junior officers as it eliminates the mid-level deficit. They also believe that to avoid the feast or famine situation it will be necessary to protect the personnel float so that additional officers continue to be available in a crisis.

State Has Hired and Assigned Foreign Service Officers with the General Skills and Competencies to Do the Job

Almost all officials we interviewed said State identified and hired very talented and capable junior officers with the general skills and competencies, such as written and oral communication, required to do their jobs well, noting that the examination process was identifying junior officers with the needed skills. Junior officers said the oral exam effectively measured the necessary general skills that they use on their jobs. Many said the group exercise administered during the oral assessment was a potent tool for assessing a candidate's ability to lead and work with others. The current version of the oral assessment allows test-takers to present relevant information about previous work experience and skills that examiners would consider important. Junior officers we interviewed who had taken the oral exam twice—first when it did not allow candidates to present information about their background and skills and a second time when it did—said the latter version of the exam was an improvement in the oral assessment. Opinions about the effectiveness of the written exam to measure the same aptitude were mixed. Junior officers said the section of the written exam that focused on biographical, or personal, data did not identify skills needed to perform effectively. However, some junior officers said the written exam worked effectively as a knowledge screen for candidates to ensure that those hired had the broad intellectual skills needed for the job.

State is filling overseas positions with new officers who have the general skills that State requires, according to headquarters and overseas officials with whom we spoke. Officials said that overall, the assignment process was accomplishing its goals and that State was assigning junior officers with the appropriate skills and eliminating junior officer vacancies. Several overseas U.S. officials in Mexico City and Moscow cited interpersonal skills as particularly important and stated that the junior officers assigned to their posts had those skills. For example, one official said the number of junior officers entering the Foreign Service with excellent interpersonal

skills had increased dramatically in the past 3 or 4 years. An official at a small hardship post in Africa stated that flexibility and the ability to handle a variety of tasks were critical skills and that State carefully selected the junior officers assigned to his post. Several officers in Mexico City and Moscow commented on State's success at filling positions in general and noted that there were no vacant positions in their sections.

Junior Officers Are Pleased with Assignment Process

Junior officers generally spoke favorably about how State assigned them to their posts. They said they were pleased with the process because it allowed them to choose their top 25 jobs from an available list, and several junior officers told us they were assigned to one of their top locations. Some junior officers stated that although State did not necessarily take their previous work experience into account when assigning them to a post, they sometimes had opportunities to use their experience once they arrived overseas. For example, several junior officers said their legal backgrounds helped them perform their consular duties. Another junior officer commented that his past Army leadership and experience with the press directly related to his public diplomacy position.

The career development officers who assign junior officers to overseas posts stated that they are familiar with junior officers' background and work experience and may consider them when they make assignments. However, they explained that the ultimate purpose of the assignment process to meet the needs of the Foreign Service and to prepare junior officers for tenure. To be tenured, the officers have to reach required levels of proficiency in foreign languages and demonstrate core competencies that indicate their ability to have a successful career in the Foreign Service. Thus, these criteria guide junior officers' assignments.

Key Challenges Include Gaps in Certain Foreign Languages

State still faces challenges in recruiting, hiring, assigning, and training officers who are proficient in hard-to-learn languages. State officials at headquarters and overseas have stated that the department does not have enough Foreign Service officers with hard language skills. Three recent GAO reports also cited language skill gaps that adversely affected department operations.¹⁰ State has acknowledged that it needs more staff with skills in certain hard languages and, in addition to its efforts to ensure

¹⁰See [GAO-02-375](#), [GAO-02-626](#), and U.S. General Accounting Office, *U.S. Public Diplomacy: State Department Expands Efforts but Faces Significant Challenges*, [GAO-03-951](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 4, 2003).

adequate training in foreign languages, has begun an effort to recruit officers with hard language skills. However, State does not have data that link its outreach efforts to the number of people hired with skills in hard languages. In addition to the language issue, State officials and some junior officers expressed other concerns, including the junior officers' public diplomacy skills, supervision, and on-the-job training requirements, as well as issues related to rotational positions.

State Has Skill Gaps in Certain Hard Languages

Overseas post officials and several new officers told us that some junior officers who are assigned to hard language posts lack sufficient training in these languages. For example, in 2002, junior officers in Moscow sent a cable to State stating that they had not received sufficient language training to do their jobs effectively, which was weakening the post's diplomatic readiness. The junior officers, as well as most senior officials at this post, said that many of the junior officers have difficulty participating in high-level political meetings—which significantly impedes the political section's work—and interviewing visa applicants because they lack language proficiency. The latter is of particular concern as the department moves toward heavier reliance on interviewing applicants as a basis for determining whether they will receive a visa. While State classified the junior officer positions as requiring level-2 proficiency in speaking, post management and junior officers said they need a level-3 proficiency to perform their jobs effectively.¹¹

Our past work has also shown gaps in the numbers of officers with proficiency in certain hard languages. In September 2003, we reported that about 21 percent of the public diplomacy officers posted overseas in language designated positions have not attained the level of language speaking proficiency required for their positions, hampering their ability to engage with foreign publics.¹² In January 2002 we reported that State had not filled all of its positions requiring foreign language skills, and we noted that lack of staff with foreign language skills had weakened the fight against international terrorism and resulted in less effective representation

¹¹While additional time and resources are needed to move an officer to the third level of proficiency, U.S. government research has shown that a level-3 speaker is up to four times as productive as a speaker at level 2. See [GAO-02-375](#).

¹²[GAO-03-951](#).

of U.S. interest overseas.¹³ We cited similar shortages during our review of staffing at certain hard-to-fill posts.¹⁴ We reported that some new junior officers did not meet the minimum language proficiency requirements of the positions to which they were assigned in several countries of strategic importance to the United States, including China, Saudi Arabia, and Ukraine.

State's Effort to Address Critical Languages Lacks Numerical Targets, Data on Effectiveness

State has acknowledged that it has gaps in the number of officers proficient in certain hard languages, but its workforce planning does not identify the number of officers to hire with those skills.¹⁵ The department has further acknowledged that languages are integral to its work and important to its mission. However, because its officers are required to do much more than use a foreign language, State's philosophy is to hire officers with a wide range of skills it believes are predictors of success in the Foreign Service. It does not hire for skills that it can train for, such as languages. For example, State officials have told us that it is easier to train a person with good diplomatic skills to speak a language than it is to teach a linguist to be a good diplomat. Therefore, State officials do not believe the solution to the language skill gap is recruiting aimed only at filling this gap. According to State, increased staffing under the DRI will solve the problem. Nevertheless, the department has implemented efforts to identify candidates for the Foreign Service with hard language skills.

State has begun an effort to recruit more speakers of difficult languages. Since the DRI in 2001, the department has extended its outreach efforts by targeting professional associations, such as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and the Modern Language Association, and specific universities and colleges that produce graduates with ability in hard languages. While State does track the language skills of its new hires, it has not established numerical targets for the number of individuals with hard language ability it aims to hire. Nor could it provide current or historical data showing the number of individuals it hired as a direct result of targeted outreach efforts at these professional associations and schools.

¹³[GAO-02-375](#).

¹⁴[GAO-02-626](#).

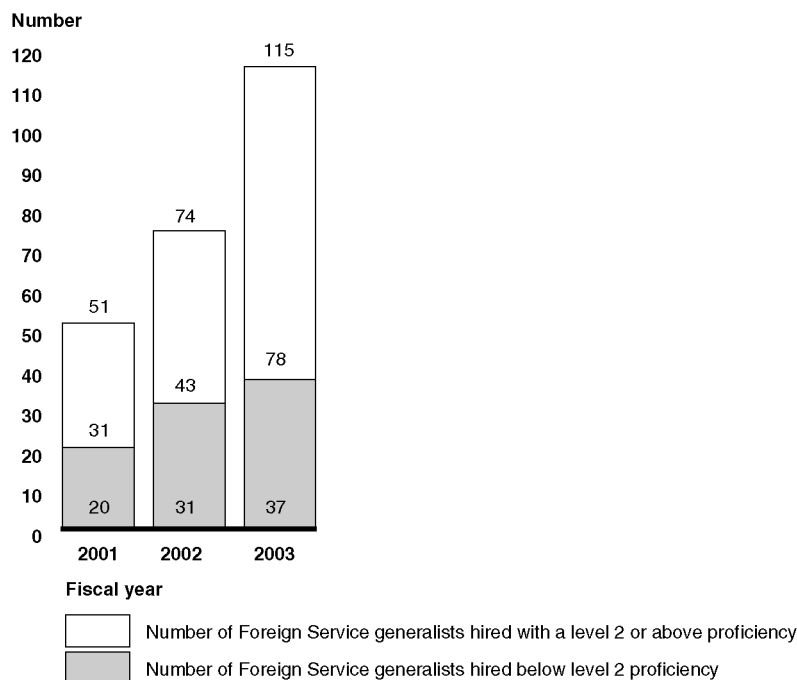
¹⁵State does identify foreign language training needs each year and uses the results to determine language training capacity required as well as the size of the training float needed to attain it.

While State has not set targets, our analysis of data from State’s Foreign Service Institute (FSI) on the number of junior officers who took a language proficiency test after they were hired indicates that the number of Foreign Service officers with ability in hard languages has increased since 2001, with State hiring 51 Foreign Service generalists with these skills¹⁶ in fiscal year 2001, 74 in 2002, and 115 in 2003. While these figures include new hires with a broad range of hard language skills, a subset of these hires speaks hard languages at a more advanced skill level. New hires in this subgroup have speaking skills ranging from a minimum level of 2, or what State refers to as “limited working proficiency,” to a level of 5—equivalent to skills a native speaker would possess.¹⁷ The number of these officers has also increased from fiscal year 2001 to 2003. State hired 31, 43, and 78 Foreign Service generalists who spoke languages at a level of working proficiency or higher from 2001 through 2003, respectively. (See fig. 2.)

¹⁶In our analysis of new hires with hard language ability, we included those officers who, at a minimum, possessed rudimentary skills in speaking or reading difficult languages, those who spoke or read at the level of a native speaker, and all those who fell somewhere in between these two categories.

¹⁷We used level 2 and above because that is the target of the department’s re-invigorated outreach efforts for officers with foreign language skills, according to a State official.

Figure 2: Number of New Hires with Working Proficiency in a Hard Language¹⁸ and Number of New Hires with Less than Working Proficiency in a Hard Language

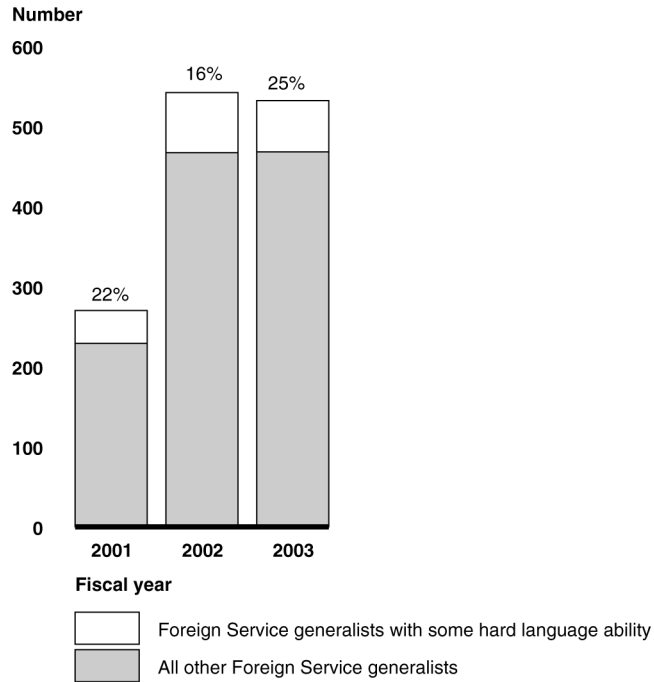


Source: GAO analysis of State Department data.

State could not provide data to demonstrate how many junior officers with hard language skills were hired as a result of targeted recruitment. Thus it is unclear whether the increase is the result of expanded outreach or a steep increase in hiring of junior officers. According to our analysis, the number of new Foreign Service generalists with hard language ability as a percentage of the total population of new hires has fluctuated since 2001 when it was 22 percent, compared with 16 percent and 25 percent in 2002 and 2003, respectively. (See fig. 3.)

¹⁸Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, Japanese, Korean, Russian, and Cantonese Chinese.

Figure 3: New Hires with Hard Language Ability as a Percentage of New Foreign Service Generalists



Source: GAO analysis of State Department data.

Telephonic Assessment of Candidates with Language Skills

In addition to outreach efforts, State uses a telephonic assessment—the Board of Examiners (BEX) test—to provide candidates with foreign language skills a competitive advantage in the hiring process, according to State officials. Candidates who have passed the written and oral exams can take the telephone test in their language of choice. If they pass, they are assigned additional points to their oral assessment score. The purpose of this tool is to raise the candidates’ oral assessment scores sufficiently for them to receive an immediate offer of employment.

However, our analysis of 102 individuals who passed the telephonic assessment in Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or Russian in fiscal year 2003 shows that, as of October 2003, only 32 received and accepted offers from the Foreign Service and were placed in A-100 training. Twenty-seven individuals are awaiting security or medical clearances; 6 are no longer junior officer candidates because they failed their security or medical clearances, withdrew their applications, or their candidate eligibility

expired; and 37 remain on the Foreign Service register. The 37 individuals in the latter category scored well enough to pass the oral assessment; however, the additional points they received from passing the BEX assessment were not sufficient for them to receive a job offer.¹⁹ Moreover, the State Department does not provide any additional points for BEX testees with hard languages versus other languages. However, State officials said the department is revising this system.

Junior Officers with Hard Language Skills Are Not Always Placed to Use Them

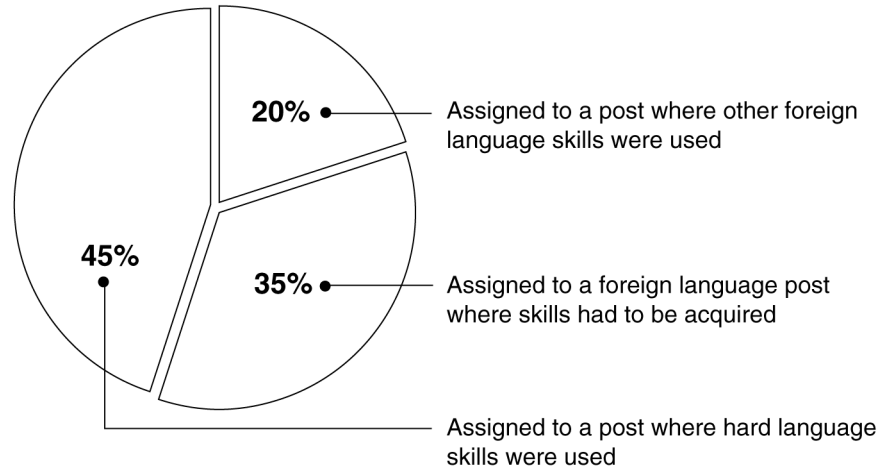
Although State is trying to increase the number of officers with hard language skills, it does not necessarily assign new hires to posts where they can use those skills during their first two tours.²⁰ We analyzed the assignment of 31 new officers with hard language ability²¹ to determine if during their first two tours they were assigned to a post where they could use their language skills. According to our analysis, 45 percent of new hires with hard language ability were deployed to a post where they could use their language skills during their first two tours. For the 55 percent of junior officers who did not use their hard language skills during their first two tours, 20 percent were assigned to a post where they could use other foreign language skills they had acquired and 35 percent were assigned to posts that required foreign language training. (See fig. 4.)

¹⁹Placement on the list of eligible hires for the Foreign Service register does not mean that a job offer will be made. Candidates may wait on the register until their eligibility expires or they may be called to serve before it expires, depending on the Service's needs.

²⁰A tour generally lasts 2 years.

²¹This analysis includes all those officers who, at a minimum, possessed at least rudimentary skills in speaking or writing difficult languages, indicated by a score of 1 from FSI.

Figure 4: Assignment Information for New Hires with Hard Language Ability in Fiscal Year 2001



Source: GAO analysis of State Department data.

Note: As of November 2003, State could provide first and second tour information for only 31 of the 51 officers with hard language ability hired in fiscal year 2001. State has not yet assigned the remaining 20 officers to their second tours.

It is even less likely that officers will be assigned to hard language posts during their first tour. Our analysis of first tour officers with hard language ability shows that 24 percent of these officers were immediately deployed in fiscal year 2001 to posts where they could use those skills and 32 percent in fiscal year 2002 and 28 percent in fiscal year 2003. The vast majority of the new hires were immediately deployed to posts where other foreign languages were spoken or to English-speaking posts.

The ability to speak a difficult language is one of many factors influencing a junior officer's assignment to an overseas post. As a practical matter, there may not be openings at particular hard-language posts at the same time junior officers are being assigned to their first and second tours. The requirements for tenure, which include a variety of regions and jobs for junior officers to prepare them for careers as Foreign Service generalists, are also a major consideration. The emphasis on career development and achieving tenure sometimes limits the department's ability to train and deploy a sufficient number of officers with the needed training in hard languages to do their jobs, according to several headquarters officials. For example, officials in one of State's geographic bureaus stated that some hard languages require a level-2 speaking proficiency, for which officers

may get from 24 to 26 weeks of language training. However, if junior officers spend a longer period of time in training, they could be at a disadvantage for tenure at the first year of eligibility because they would have a narrower range of on-the-job experiences on which tenure decisions are based. Security requirements are also a consideration when assigning junior officers overseas. According to State officials, junior officers with hard language skills are sometimes precluded from serving at a post where they can use their hard language skills for diplomatic security reasons, such as having an immediate family member or close ties with individuals in a country. In fiscal year 2003, 8 percent, or 38 of the 468 new Foreign Service generalists State hired, were precluded from serving at hard language posts for security reasons. However, because of Privacy Act restrictions and some unavailable data, State could only provide partial information about the foreign language skills of these new hires. As a result, we are unable to determine how many of these preclusions were also hard-language speakers.

Our analysis was limited to an officer's first two tours. State officials noted that when a new hire possesses strong language skills already, the employee and department may consciously use the first two tours to develop additional skills rather than existing ones. Skills brought into the Foreign Service are likely to be used later in a career if not immediately, according to the State officials.

Pilot Programs Under Way to Increase Training

State has been exploring options to provide additional training in hard languages for officers. State officials said their efforts to provide more language training while officers are in Washington at the FSI are affected by a tax regulation that limits the time officers can spend in temporary duty status to one year before they have to pay federal taxes on their per diem. To alleviate this situation, State is developing pilot programs to provide some officers with additional training in hard languages by sending them to training overseas. In one such pilot, an officer would spend a year studying Arabic at the FSI field school in Tunis prior to being sent to an Arabic-speaking post, according to an official of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. Under another pilot, junior officers assigned to Moscow are taking an immersion course in Russia following their initial language training in Washington.

Some Officials Say On-the-Job Training in Public Diplomacy Is Insufficient

In addition to the hard-language issues, some overseas officials expressed concern about the lack of on-the-job training opportunities for junior public diplomacy officers, citing overseas training as the single most important factor in building these officers' skills and positioning them to succeed in public diplomacy. The FSI's training did not include grant writing, program management, and basic supervisory skills, they said, and was not a viable substitute for overseas training. Moreover, about 58 percent of the officers responding to a GAO survey reported that the amount of time available for public diplomacy training was inadequate.²² Furthermore, State's Inspector General reported that public affairs officers in Africa were often first-tour or entry-level officers with no prior public diplomacy experience and as such, their mistakes in dealing with the media have embarrassed the post.²³ First-tour officers have also displayed poor judgment by not seeking advice from experienced local staff, the IG said. FSI has revised its public diplomacy training to address some of these issues. As of September 2003, public diplomacy officers are receiving from 9 to 19 weeks of training (depending upon the duties of their assignment) before they are sent to a post. Previously they received 3 weeks of training. State officials said the success of this effort depends on State's ability to hire sufficient staff for a training float that would allow officers time to take the training.

Placement in Positions Traditionally Held by Mid-Level Officers Yields Mixed Results

Several post officials said State's practice of filling positions traditionally held by mid-level officers with junior officers and assigning inexperienced junior officers to small posts where they would have increased responsibilities worked well. However, others expressed concern because junior officers in these positions require increased supervision and on-the-job training.

Benefits Cited at Smaller Posts, Hardship Posts

State has assigned a number of junior officers—new DRI hires—to positions formerly held by mid-level officers to fill unmet needs at that level. For fiscal years 2002 to 2003, 96 mid-level positions were downgraded to junior-level positions after consultations with posts, regional bureaus, and the Bureau of Human Resources. Career development officers explained that such positions have been restructured so that with more

²²GAO-03-951.

²³U.S. Department of State, Office of Inspector General, Office of Inspections, *Report of Inspection: Bureau of African Affairs*, Report No. ISP-I-02-52 (Washington, D.C.: September 2002).

supervision and revised portfolios, junior officers should be able to do the work. Smaller posts often have very few American staff, and junior officers are frequently responsible for work in more than one career track. For example, a junior officer with whom we spoke at a small post in Africa was responsible for the political and economic sections and served as backup for the consular section.

According to some officials, junior officers assigned to some smaller posts have been very qualified and have helped alleviate the burden of staffing at hardship posts. Several officials with whom we spoke at three embassies reported positive experiences with junior officers in positions that required more responsibility. Moreover, junior officers serving at smaller hardship posts can gain a multitude of Foreign Service experiences not available to other officers.

Assignments Require More Supervision, On-the-Job Training

Some post officials, however, noted that such assignments require more supervision and on-the-job training. Supervision is a particular issue at smaller posts where there may be few or no mid-level officers. According to several overseas officials, this situation creates a burden for the senior-level officers who have to mentor and provide on-the-job training as well as serve as backup for other jobs at the mission and manage the mission. For example, an official at one small African post said a mid-level supervisor would normally be responsible for training a junior officer to write cables. Because there are no mid-level officers to provide the training, more senior officials must provide it, leaving them less time to manage the embassy.

One overseas embassy official told us a junior officer was having difficulty serving in a mid-level position at a small constituent post where the officer had very little training and supervision. Officials explained that while the position had been designated as a junior officer position, it still required an individual with significant related experience. Unfortunately, the junior officer assigned to this position did not have the requisite work experience or knowledge. Another official said that placing junior officers in positions formerly held by mid-level officers was not achieving the same results as hiring people with directly related management experience. Furthermore, State's Inspector General reported that assigning inexperienced junior officers to mid-level consular positions in African posts with high levels of visa fraud was a serious problem. A Bureau of Human Resources official stated that this problem should ease as positions are filled under the DRI. In the meantime, according to State officials, the bureau tries to fill vacancies in mid-level consular positions with at least a second-tour officer.

Rotational Positions Have Value for Officers but Do Not Always Serve Posts' Needs

State established “rotational” positions that allow some junior officers to serve one year in one career track and another year in a different career track—for example, consular and public diplomacy. Several officials in Mexico City and Moscow said that the rotations were working well at their embassy and the length of the rotations was adequate for the junior officers to learn their jobs. Some officials said rotational assignments could benefit junior officers and the Foreign Service by increasing officers’ knowledge of how an overseas post operates. One official noted that working in different sections of the embassy becomes harder as an officer is promoted, so it is extremely important to have this experience at the junior level.

Other officials, however, said that rotational assignments were not serving the posts’ needs. For example, one official stated that a year is not enough time for a person to learn the tasks of the job in the consular section and, as a result, local national employees carry much of the responsibility in the section. An overseas official stated that a 1-year consular rotation might not allow the junior officer to get the same breadth of experience as junior officers who spend 2 years in the consular section. In addition, State’s Inspector General reported that many consular supervisors said junior officers are not assigned to consular work long enough to acquire the skills to adjudicate visas under new performance requirements to improve U.S. border security.²⁴

Rotational positions also increase managers’ training responsibilities. As one post official described it, managers have to “start from scratch” each time the position turns over. Some officials said the rotational program was hindering productivity in the Foreign Service because junior officers rotate soon after they master their current position. These issues led the Inspector General to recommend discontinuing the practice of assigning junior officers to 1-year rotational positions in consular sections. The Bureau of Consular Affairs and the Bureau of Human Resources have decided to continue the rotational program, according to a Bureau of Human Resources official. The official stated that the bureau continues to believe the program is beneficial and said that there are safeguards in place to address the Inspector General’s concerns. For example, the official stated that the two bureaus have reviewed all of the consular positions and

²⁴U.S. Department of State, Office of Inspector General, *Review of Nonimmigrant Visa Issuance Policy and Procedures*, Report No. ISP-I-03-26 (Washington, D.C.: December 2002).

have identified those that should not be filled as part of a rotation by first-tour junior officers.

Conclusions

Critical gaps in the number and skills of Foreign Service staff endangered State's ability to carry out U.S. foreign policy. The department has addressed the numeric shortfall through its Diplomatic Readiness Initiative, which has been successful in expanding the candidate pool for Foreign Service positions. State has been able to hire junior officers with the general skills it requires and to fill overseas positions. However, State continues to face gaps in personnel who are proficient in speaking languages considered hard to learn. To address these gaps, State has undertaken outreach efforts to attract speakers with proficiency in certain hard languages, extended the time junior officers spend in training, established pilot programs to develop a cadre of speakers of hard languages, and assigned many junior officers with skills in hard languages to countries where they can use those skills. However, it is not clear to what extent these efforts will help eliminate the gaps, and State has little data to demonstrate their success. Furthermore, State's process of assigning junior officers, with its emphasis on achieving tenure, may hinder the department's ability to take advantage of the hard language skills that some of its officers have.

Recommendations for Executive Action

This report recommends that the Secretary of State collect and maintain data on the effectiveness of State's efforts to address language gaps. State should use these data to, among other things, report on filling such gaps through its outreach efforts to recruit more junior officers with hard language skills and its pilot programs to increase training in hard-to-learn languages for junior officers. State should also explore additional opportunities to maximize assignment of junior officers who have skills in these languages to overseas posts where they can use these languages.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

The State Department provided written comments on a draft of this report. These comments and our response are reprinted in appendix II. State also provided technical comments, which we have incorporated into the report as appropriate.

The State Department generally agreed with the report's findings and observations, but did not completely address our recommendations. State

commented that it is already addressing our recommendation that it maintain data on its efforts to recruit speakers of hard-to-learn languages. State said that the department collects and maintains extensive data to monitor its recruitment efforts. However, State has not used the data to determine whether its outreach efforts for increasing the number of hard-language speakers are effective or have helped decrease the gap in certain languages. State further said that it is confident that its overall hiring plan will address the language gaps over the next several years, but the plan does not provide specific milestones for achieving this goal. We believe State needs to more specifically link its efforts to its hard language needs. We have modified our recommendation to make this clearer.

State did not completely address the second part of our recommendation, but stated that our approach, which focused on six specific languages, was too narrow. We disagree with State's assessment. We focused on the six languages because of their strategic importance and findings from previous GAO reports that lack of staff with skills in some of these languages has hindered diplomatic readiness. In its comments, State also overstated a number of our findings, observations, and conclusions.

We are sending copies of this report to appropriate congressional committees. We are also sending copies of this report to the Secretary of State. Copies will be made available to others upon request. In addition, this report will be made available at no charge on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me on (202) 512-4128. Other GAO contacts and staff acknowledgments are listed in appendix III.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jess T. Ford". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

Jess T. Ford
Director, International Affairs and Trade

Scope and Methodology

To report on State's processes for determining the number and skills of junior officers it needs during the next 5 to 10 years, we examined workforce planning documents and data, including the overseas staffing model.¹ We also interviewed officials from State's Resource Planning and Compensation Division and Office of Resource Management and Organizational Analysis, Bureau of Human Resources. We reviewed and analyzed data from the Office of Resource Management and Organizational Analysis on projected promotions and hiring for fiscal years 2002 through 2007 and the current deficit and surplus of Foreign Service generalists according to the five career tracks and grade levels. We also interviewed officials from all six of State's regional bureaus, the Bureau of Consular Affairs, the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), and the U.S. embassies in Mexico City and Moscow. We selected these embassies because they contained the largest number of junior officers. During our fieldwork, we conducted interviews with senior level, mid-level, and junior officers.

To determine whether State is hiring and assigning officers with the general skills to meet the needs of overseas posts, we reviewed information related to State's recruiting program, including Diplomatic Readiness recruitment goals and hiring data from 2001 through 2003 and projected hiring through 2007. We interviewed officials from the Office of Recruitment, Examination, and Employment; the Office of Career Development; the Diplomatic Readiness Task Force; all six of State's regional bureaus; and the Bureau of Consular Affairs. In addition, we interviewed one of the consultants who helped perform State's 1997 job analysis—a comprehensive revalidation of the skills tested by the Foreign Service written and oral exams. We also reviewed the raw data in the form of survey responses by Foreign Service generalists about the skills that are most critical to their work, but we did not evaluate the validity of State's analysis. We interviewed officials, including junior officers, at the U.S. embassies in Mexico City and Moscow and supplemented our fieldwork with telephone interviews of Foreign Service officers at U.S. embassies in Angola, Djibouti, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, and South Africa. We selected the first four countries to obtain the perspective of officers at small or hard-to-fill posts. We selected South Africa at the recommendation of a Bureau of Human Resources official. We also conducted in-person interviews with junior officers at headquarters.

¹We did not assess the validity of the staffing model.

To examine the challenges State still needs to address, especially regarding officers with hard-to-learn language skills, we solicited data from three different State Department databases. We interviewed State officials who were authorities on each of the three databases and determined that the data obtained were reliable in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

- To determine the number of officers with hard language ability hired in 2001, 2002, and 2003, we developed the “New Hires Database.” To create this database we used information drawn from FSI’s Student Training Management System (STMS) database and the Bureau of Human Resources’ Global Employment Management System (GEMS) database. The New Hires Database contains information on the number of junior officers with hard language ability hired in 2001, 2002, and 2003. It includes their levels of proficiency—as rated by the FSI’s School of Language Studies—in those hard languages, additional foreign languages spoken and their corresponding FSI rating of proficiency, A-100 class information, and first—and in some cases second—tour assignment information. In our analysis of new hires with hard language ability, we included those officers who, at a minimum, possessed at least rudimentary skills in speaking or reading difficult languages, indicated by a score of 1 from FSI on these two dimensions (the FSI scale ranges from a score of 0 to a score of 5, with 5 indicating proficiency at the level of a native speaker). To determine the number of new hires with working proficiency, we considered only those officers with a level 2 or higher proficiency in both speaking and reading and writing. To determine the percentage of new hires with hard language ability in the population of new hires in fiscal years 2001 through 2003, we took the number of officers with hard language ability from the New Hires Database in fiscal years 2001 through 2003 and divided that number by the total number of Foreign Service generalists hired during those years.
- To report the status of candidacy for individuals who had taken and passed the Board of Examiners Telephonic Assessment (BEX) test in fiscal year 2003, we developed the BEX Database. Categories in the table include: number assigned to A-100, pending clearance; name on foreign service register; no longer a junior officer candidate; and total number of BEX Passers. To create this database we used information from the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) School of Language Study’s Student Training Management System (STMS) database and the Bureau of Human Resources’ Global Employment Management System (GEMS) and Automated Foreign Service Examination and Registry System

(AFSERS) database. The BEX Database contains individuals who passed the Foreign Service's telephonic assessment in hard-to-learn languages and, where applicable, their A-100 assignment information, and proficiency scores according to FSI in hard languages as well as additional languages they bring to the service. Names of individuals in the BEX Database for whom there was no A-100 information were resubmitted to the State Department to obtain their alternate outcomes. These individuals and their alternate outcomes were subsequently recorded on a separate spreadsheet. The alternate outcomes of these individuals were primarily derived from the AFSERS database and the following categories: expiration of eligibility dates, withdrawals, terminations, status on the Foreign Service Register, status of medical and security clearances, and employment start dates.

To examine assignment location for new hires with hard language ability in fiscal year 2001, we used the New Hires Database to create three distinct categories of junior officers for whom we had information on two tours: (1) posted where hard language skills could be used, (2) posted where other foreign language skills were used, and (3) posted where other foreign language skills had to be acquired. To calculate the percentage of junior officers in each of the three categories, we divided the category total by the number of new hires with hard language ability for whom information was available about two tours. The total number for each category was defined as the number of those officers being sent to hard language posts who had at least basic speaking and writing skills in that language for the first category. For the second category, we used the number of officers with hard language skills assigned to a post where they could use other foreign language skills they brought to the service, and for the third category we used the number of officers assigned to posts during both their first and second tours where they did not have the relevant foreign language skills.

- We also used the New Hires Database to determine the number of junior officers with hard language ability assigned to hard language posts during their first tour for fiscal years 2001 through 2003. For each fiscal year, we divided the number of officers hired in that fiscal year and assigned to hard language posts during their first tour by the total number of officers hired in that fiscal year.

In addition, we met with officials from all six of State's regional bureaus and the Bureau of Consular Affairs; officials and junior officers at the U.S. embassies in Moscow and Mexico City, as well as junior officers at headquarters; and officials from the Office of Recruitment, Examination,

and Employment, the Office of Career Development, and the Diplomatic Readiness Task Force. We reviewed State Department recruitment data from the Diplomatic Readiness Task Force on efforts to recruit Foreign Service officers with hard language skills from the following targeted language schools: Brigham Young University, Columbia University—Columbia College, Cornell University, Harvard University, Indiana University—Bloomington, Middlebury College, Ohio State University, University of California Los Angeles, University of Chicago, University of Michigan—Ann Arbor, University of Washington, University of Wisconsin—Madison, and Yale University. These data showed the number of individuals from each of these universities who had passed the Foreign Service written exam, but did not indicate whether these individuals possessed any hard language skills or if they were in fact even hired by the State Department.

We conducted our work from December 2002 through August 2003 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Comments from the Department of State

Note: GAO comments supplementing those in the report text appear at the end of this appendix.



United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

NOV 11 2003

Dear Ms. Westin:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "STATE DEPARTMENT: Targets for Hiring, Filling Vacancies Overseas Being Met, but Gaps Remain in Hard-to-Learn Languages," GAO-04-139, GAO Job Code 320167.

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

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Laura Hall, Program officer, Office of Director General, Bureau of Human Resources at (202) 647-2665.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joseph W. Bowab".

Joseph W. Bowab, Acting
Assistant Secretary for
Resource Management and
Chief Financial Officer

Enclosure:

As stated.

cc: GAO/IAT - Jess Ford
State/OIG - Luther Atkins
State/DGHR - W. Robert Pearson
State/H - Paul Kelly

Ms. Susan S. Westin,
Managing Director,
International Affairs and Trade,
U.S. General Accounting Office.

Department of State Comments on GAO Draft Report
Targets for Hiring, Filling Vacancies Overseas Being Met,
but Gaps Remain in Hard-to-Learn Languages
(GAO-04-139, GAO Job Code 320167)

Thank you for allowing the Department the opportunity to comment on the draft report "Targets for Hiring, Filling Vacancies Overseas Being Met, but Gaps Remain in Hard-to-Learn Languages." The report addressed the Department's processes for recruiting and hiring Foreign Service generalists ("junior officers") to fulfill its staffing needs, and focused on whether it is hiring and assigning junior officers with the necessary skills to carry out foreign policy overseas. The report's observations confirm that the Department's recruitment and hiring processes are successfully working to attract, hire and assign junior officers with the skills necessary to address our staffing needs at post and that the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative is going a long way towards addressing longstanding staffing gaps, especially at the mid level.

See comment 1.

The GAO analyzed our efforts to hire and assign junior officers with the necessary skills to carry out U.S. foreign policy within the next five to ten years. The report assessed our workforce planning, focusing on our Overseas Staffing Model, and the Department's recruitment, examination, training, and assignment processes. The GAO found that the Department is targeting and hiring highly talented and capable Foreign Service career officers who have the skills needed to perform their jobs. The GAO also found that this process is conducted using a skills assessment that is valid, a robust workforce planning process that determines hiring needs, a dynamic recruiting program that targets needed skills, an examination process that accurately evaluates competency in those skills, and an assignment process that meets the needs of posts and the expectations of Junior Officers.

See comment 2.

The Department is pleased that the GAO reached these conclusions. The Foreign Service recruitment, examination and employment process is rigorous and continually evaluated. The skills needed to be a Foreign Service Officer have been confirmed year after year and the examinations' ability to assess for those skills has been validated yearly. The report supports our contention that seeking candidates with certain general skills, bringing

Appendix II
Comments from the Department of State

them in at the entry-level, and assigning them to a range of jobs over a career is the best way to ensure that we meet our mission requirements. Nearly all officials with whom GAO spoke said the assignment process was effectively eliminating junior officer vacancies and assigning junior officers with appropriate skills. Junior officers were found to possess the broad intellectual and oral/writing skills necessary for their jobs. Officials cited interpersonal skills as particularly important and commented that the Department was effectively hiring those with the ability and flexibility to lead and work with others.

See comment 3.

The GAO concluded that the Department is successfully meeting its staffing needs through the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative. After years of critical shortages, the Department is now hiring junior officers above attrition and filling vacancies overseas. As the report notes, we have successfully met our hiring targets for FY 2002 and 2003, and are ready to implement FY 2004, depending on continued funding. We have eliminated staffing deficits at all five career track entry levels and we plan to eventually promote the junior officers at sufficient numbers to eliminate the critical gap of mid-level officers. The report notes that the mid-level gap will be eliminated within the next 9 to 10 years, based on attrition and hiring projections, provided that the Department receives all DRI allocations through FY 2004.

See comment 4.

The GAO stressed the importance of language fluency for officers, and we agree that we must be able to meet the language proficiency levels that posts deem necessary. The GAO recommended that we enhance efforts to recruit and train foreign service officers in certain hard-to-learn foreign languages, which the GAO defines as Russian, Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Arabic, which will be herein referred to as 'selected languages.' We agree that the use of these selected languages are critical to certain positions. But we also believe that the GAO's approach is too narrow. The GAO posits that increasing the number of selected language speakers will address our diplomatic readiness needs. We believe that while language skills are critically important to certain positions, it would be a mistake to regard them as the defining skill. As the GAO team concluded, the Department's skills assessment produced valid results and the exam based on those identified skills needed for a

See comment 5.

career is resulting in the hiring of employees with those skills. It is, relatively speaking, much easier to train a person with good diplomatic skills to speak a language than it is to teach a linguist to be a good diplomat. Our goal is to fully staff overseas posts with the brightest officers who have the capacity and integrity required for their responsibilities. We seek those who are motivated by service, who are prepared for a career-long commitment, and who have the aptitude for training in additional specific skills. In addition, we require large numbers of language-qualified employees each year to serve in posts where "world" languages (such as Spanish) are spoken; the GAO's focus on six languages only is narrower than ours.

It is our expectation that language training of employees will remain the main avenue by which we will meet the rigorous language training demands of the foreign service. While there is room for improvement on the recruitment side, it is not realistic to expect recruitment methods to supplant training as the main avenue by which we achieve our very ambitious language goals. The Department believes that the largest and most significant factor limiting its ability to fill language-designated positions is its long-standing staffing shortfall. The Diplomatic Readiness Initiative is correcting this shortfall with the goal of allowing additional training time for employees to learn languages before each assignment. With increased staffing, the Department has also been able to change its policy to allow certain Junior Officers up to 44 weeks of language training versus 24 weeks formerly. In addition, we note that the academic study of a language does not necessarily mean the person is ready to conduct diplomacy; FSI language training, unlike academic language training, is designed to teach language skills tailored to the requirements of the job.

With regard to concerns about language requirement levels in certain positions, with DRI and implementation of the language continuum, we believe we can approach near complete staffing of the current language designated positions (LDPs) with officers having the requisite proficiency level within several more years. Additionally, it is our intention actually to "raise the bar" with respect to target levels of language proficiency to which we aspire. We have already reminded our Chiefs of Mission overseas to look carefully at language-designated positions in each mission; we have made a special appeal to them to

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look within their management and consular sections to ensure that all positions that would benefit from being encumbered by a language proficient officer become language-designated. Historically, due to our overall staffing deficits, missions were conservative about language-designating positions, as doing so often increased the likelihood of the position not being filled at all. DRI is changing this equation.

See comment 6.

We appreciate the GAO's review of assignments of JOs, including use of preexisting language skills, and the positive conclusions. We believe the results of the GAO's analysis demonstrate that in spite of all the other considerations and logistical constraints, we do a good job of using the skills of new hires. However, the GAO did not review assignments beyond the first two tours. The Department hires for a career, and anticipates that many skills possessed at entry will be used throughout a career, not just in the first two tours. The Department notes that we have already implemented efforts to maximize the use of existing skills in future assignments where much of this maximization will occur. In fact, if a new hire already possesses strong language skills, the first two tours may be used by the employee and the Department to develop additional skills rather than to use existing ones.

The Career Development Officers who assign junior officers to overseas posts stated that they are familiar with junior officers' background and work experience and consider those factors when they make assignments. The ultimate purpose of the assignment process is to meet the needs of the Foreign Service and to prepare junior officers for tenure. To be tenured, officers must reach required levels of proficiency in foreign languages and demonstrate core competencies that indicate their ability to serve successfully across the normal career span of a Foreign Service Officer. These criteria guide junior officers' assignments. Other factors such as tandem couple issues, family medical and educational concerns, security issues and employee career goals may affect an employee's bidding as well.

There are two additional factors to consider when officers are assigned for their first and second tours. One is practical; one is philosophical. On the practical side, not all posts are available for people on their first and second tours. Much depends on the timing of the opening

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and the timing of the A-100 class or the subsequent bidding cycle for second tours. For example, the Department has relatively few Japanese and Korean speaking posts as compared to Russian, Arabic and Chinese posts.

Philosophically, we strive to recruit Americans of all ethnicities. Our goal is to reflect the face of America. We do not, however, force employees into stereotyped roles. We do not automatically assign African-Americans to Africa, Hispanic-Americans to Latin America, or Chinese-Americans to China. An Hispanic-American may wish to make a career in the Russian-speaking world, and we respect that view. Another philosophical issue is the principle that we are generalists, rather than single subject-matter experts. Because we are generalists, we are able to deal with a rapidly-changing world; we had no Central Asia experts when the Soviet Union broke up, but Foreign Service generalists were able to establish effective diplomatic missions there immediately.

See comment 7.

The Department is making considerable progress in recruiting for language skills along with all other required skills. The Department has bolstered efforts to recruit candidates with language skills and developed a new "language continuum" plan to guide efforts to meet the need for higher levels of competency in all languages, especially those critical to national security concerns. The Department already has a language incentive program that encourages acquisition and use of critical languages. We provide extra credit for language skills in the hiring process and neither we nor the GAO recommend making language skills a requirement for hiring. We are currently planning to implement a revision to this system whereby languages of critical national security importance and shortage may receive more credit than other "world" language skills.

With regards to the reference to another GAO report's recommendation that the Department program adequate time for public diplomacy training into State's assignment process, the Department is currently addressing this issue. The GAO's review of Public Diplomacy - which was not focused on junior officers - found that staffing shortfalls made it difficult for PD officers to attend training. Since the number of mid-level vacancies at post exceeds supply due to years of below attrition hiring, there is tremendous pressure on officers to begin tours as soon as possible.

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The significant increase in Foreign Service officer staffing resulting from the DRI will go far to alleviate this shortfall and allow officers sufficient time to attend training.

The Department's three-year Diplomatic Readiness Initiative is dramatically serving to remedy the shortfall by filling critical requirements overseas and by creating a "personnel complement" or "training float" that will allow staff sufficient time to receive training not only in public diplomacy but in foreign languages and other key skills while still having staff to meet day-to-day requirements. With continued Congressional support, we will be able to fully staff our overseas requirements and program adequate time for training.

Additionally, the Department launched a new public diplomacy training program in September 2003, increasing the number of weeks of available public diplomacy training for public diplomacy officers (including Junior Officers going to PD positions) from three weeks to as much as 19 weeks. The Department has also added public diplomacy components to its training curriculum for certain officers outside the public diplomacy cone, including economic and political officers, ambassadors, and deputy chiefs of mission. None of this expanded training would be possible without sustained hiring under the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative and will not be sustainable without continued support to maintain a robust "personnel complement" or "training float," even while addressing emerging priorities.

Regarding the impact of rotational assignments on junior officers' performance and managers' time, the GAO understates the contribution that rotational assignments make toward accomplishing our mission goals. The rotation process works to provide junior officers with the broad career and managerial experiences necessary to make them effective career-long foreign service officers. A proper breadth and depth of rotation assignment ensures that the officers have the general training and skills for them to become diplomats, managers, and leaders. In addition, rotational opportunities can be an incentive to bidding on otherwise hard-to-fill positions, including those requiring lengthy language training.

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See comment 8.

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We are currently working to ensure that junior officers are not placed in positions where they bear an inappropriate amount of responsibility. Many positions have been restructured, and the Department is working closely with at post employees to ensure that the workload is appropriate and tailored to the junior officer's abilities. We continue to strive to allot the proper time and resources to address on-the-job training. We believe that supervision is key - regardless of how long junior officers spend in a section - to ensuring that junior officers perform well. We recognize that increased responsibilities, combined with mid-level staffing gaps, have made for stressful, demanding jobs for mid-level supervisors. Due to years of below attrition hiring, we are confronted with a gap of mid-level officers. Continued congressional funding will serve to minimize the staffing shortfall. With continued implementation of the DRI, we expect that the junior officers will ultimately be promoted to supervisory positions and the Department will have adequate numbers of mid-level officers to share the workload of on-the-job training and supervision.

See comment 9.

The Department is already addressing the GAO's recommendation to track language recruitment efforts. Neither the Department nor GAO recommend numerical targets, but the Department collects and maintains extensive data to monitor and modify recruitment efforts and training programs. Indeed, few activities are given as much attention or are as closely watched as our recruitment, hiring, and training efforts. Given all the factors influencing candidates, the range of outreach efforts, the variety of skills tested, and the range of sources of language skilled candidates, there is no certain way to predict the direct impact of targeted recruitment on specific hiring results. The difficulties in distinguishing between which outreach effort yielded which candidate does not mean that the Department did not collect and analyze this information.

Once again, we appreciate the opportunity to comment on the draft provided to us.

The following are GAO's comments on the Department of State's letter dated November 11, 2003.

GAO Comments

1. State overstated our conclusions. The department wrote that "GAO found that [State's] process is conducted using a skills assessment that is valid, a robust workforce planning process that determines hiring needs, a dynamic recruiting program that targets needed skills, [and] an examination process that accurately evaluates competency in those skills..." While we described State's workforce planning and staffing processes, we did not validate its staffing model or its skills assessment. Furthermore, we did not describe the workforce planning process as "robust" and the recruiting program as "dynamic." We reported that State used elements of workforce planning to determine its Foreign Service staffing needs, junior officers stated that the exam tested for the skills they used on the job, and State officials believed the department was hiring and assigning junior officers overseas with the skills they needed to do the job.
2. While we reported on State's processes for recruiting, hiring, and assigning new staff, we did not conclude that these processes are the best way to meet mission requirements. There may be other ways to accomplish State's mission, but an evaluation of alternatives was beyond the scope of this report.
3. We did not conclude that the department is successfully meeting its staffing needs through the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative. We concluded that State had met its hiring targets for Foreign Service generalists in fiscal years 2002 and 2003. Also, State officials told us that it would take 9 to 10 years to eliminate its mid-level staffing gap. We did not assess whether this gap could be closed more quickly.
4. State mischaracterized what we wrote and thus did not address the second part of our recommendation. State further commented that our approach, which focused on six specific languages, was too narrow and implied that we believe increasing the number of speakers of selected languages will address diplomatic readiness needs. We focused on the six languages because of their strategic importance and findings from previous GAO reports that lack of staff proficient in these languages hinders diplomatic readiness. Moreover, senior officials at the U.S. embassy in Russia told us that some junior officers lacked sufficient Russian skills to effectively do their jobs.

5. We are not suggesting that State supplant training as its main avenue for achieving its language goals as State's comments infer. However, we believe that State should explore as many avenues as possible to eliminate its gaps in officers with proficiency in hard-to-learn languages.
6. The intent of our analysis of the assignment of junior officers with preexisting hard language skills was to show the extent to which those officers were assigned to posts where they could use those skills. We had no basis to conclude that the results were positive as State commented. State also commented that we did not review officers' assignments beyond their first two tours. We did not go beyond the first two tours because the scope of our review was the recruitment and assignment of junior officers. However, we have incorporated the department's statements that many skills officers bring to the Foreign Service will be used throughout their careers, not just in the first two tours.
7. State wrote that the department is making considerable progress in recruiting for language skills, along with all required skills. However, as we have previously noted, State has not set numerical targets for the number of individuals with hard language ability it aims to hire. Moreover, the department does not maintain data to demonstrate how many junior officers with hard language skills were hired as a direct result of its outreach efforts.
8. State commented that we understated the contribution that rotational assignments make toward accomplishing mission goals. We disagree. The report provides several examples of the benefits of the rotations. However, a number of officials raised the issue of increased supervisory requirements as a concern.
9. State commented that it is already addressing the first part of our recommendation that it maintain data on its efforts to recruit speakers of hard-to-learn languages. As we noted in the report, State has not used the data to determine whether its outreach efforts for increasing the number of hard-language speakers are effective or have helped decrease the gap in certain languages.

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