



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

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.

STATE DEPARTMENT

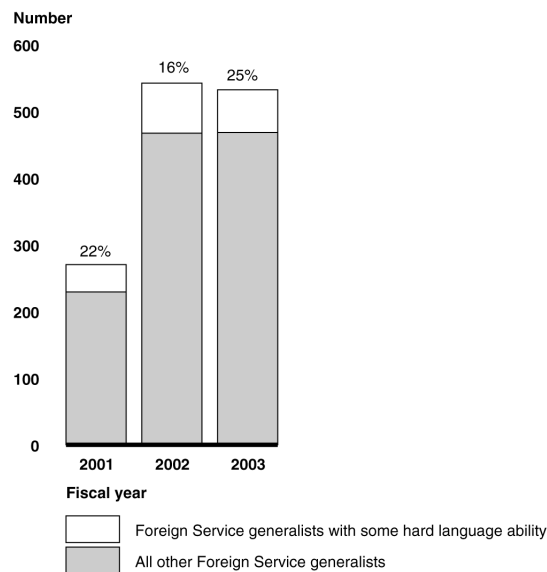
Targets for Hiring, Filling Vacancies Overseas Being Met, but Gaps Remain in Hard-to-Learn Languages

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.