

Recruitment

CASE STUDY

GAO: Great Recruiting is Not Enough



The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) has set out to become one of the world's premiere professional services firms. In order to succeed, the agency must recruit and retain world-class talent-experts in the defense, economic, scientific, financial and social programs the federal government administers. This challenge is especially difficult in light of GAO's stereotypical image as a legion of accountants with green eyeshades straight out of central casting. GAO's leadership team accepted the challenge and launched a recruiting initiative that produced results and a model for the rest of the federal government.

BEING THE BEST IN THE BUSINESS

GAO is the legislative branch agency charged with the mission of improving the performance and assuring the accountability of the federal government. GAO analysts, financial auditors, IT specialists, economists, attorneys and subject matter experts regularly deal with some of the country's most pressing issues. Three-quarters of the organization's 3,200 employees are based in Washington, DC and the remainder report to one of GAO's 11 field offices.

INSPIRING THE NEXT GENERATION OF PUBLIC SERVICE

Significant downsizing during the nineties, an aging workforce and a lack of investment in people programs due to severe budget cuts led to significant talent shortages that threatened the accomplishment of GAO's mission. Standing firm in their belief that people are an agency's most significant organizational asset, GAO launched a recruitment initiative in 2000 that has won praise as a model for the rest of the federal government.



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"Earlier this year, I worked on an investigative project on what the government needs to do to address its personnel and hiring woes. One surprising answer kept coming back with remarkable frequency from experts: The whole government, they said, should emulate the GAO."

Nick Thompson, "The Watchdog That's Off and Running," washingtonpost.com, August 03, 2003

Like most federal agencies, GAO had seriously neglected its outreach to college campuses during the 1990s. Because the agency had been downsized by almost 40 percent, very few people were hired over a five-year period. In 1996, for example, there were only three new hires. To address their talent crisis, GAO's leadership took a comprehensive approach to recruiting, hiring and assimilating young talent. Their recruitment strategy also focused on shoring up identified skill gaps and addressing the large number of employees who were becoming eligible for retirement.

The new initiative recognized that effective college recruiting would require leadership involvement, long-term relationship building, and a coordinated effort across the agency, including:

- ◆ A new branding strategy to dispel the perception of government accountants in green eyeshades and replace it with an image of a high-impact, global consulting organization;
- ◆ A targeted college outreach effort in which most GAO employees act as recruiters and GAO executives are front and center on college campuses, along with recent hires who can "tell it like it is;"
- ◆ A revitalized summer intern program to create a ready talent pool of potential new hires;
- ◆ A more candidate-friendly hiring system that leverages technology to help students navigate the application process;
- ◆ A "First Day" strategy designed to greet and impress new hires with all systems - phones, computers, workspace, etc. - ready to go;
- ◆ A two-year Professional Development Program featuring meaningful and challenging work along with numerous development activities, advisors to help smooth the transition, and rotational assignments that provide opportunities to learn quickly;



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- ♦ An opportunity for new employees to receive pay raises every six months for the first two years, commensurate with performance level; and
- ♦ Ongoing feedback and evaluations on the recruiting and Professional Development systems to update and enhance the recruiting process.

"It's very much about looking at the most important issues of the day and focusing on making a difference and improving government."

Sally Jaggar, Managing Director, Recruitment
Washingtonian magazine,
November 2003

Branding strategy

The organization took an aggressive approach to re-branding GAO careers with new recruiting brochures, website improvements, special training for college placement officers, and the development of interview scripts. Although accounting is GAO's "middle name," the agency is also active in reviewing and evaluating programs as well as conducting policy analysis. Career paths include acquisition, infrastructure, information technology, financial management, health care, education, justice, and international affairs. GAO's recruitment efforts focus on those who hold advanced degrees in a number of academic disciplines, including law, engineering, public and business administration, economics, computer science, and the social and physical sciences.

GAO's Career Messages

When We Talk Others Listen: GAO is at the epicenter of government decision-making, helping Congress make informed decisions by providing it with information on policy issues and constructive recommendations to improve government operations.

Our Work Takes Us Everywhere: We testify before the Congress several hundred times a year, are cited regularly in the national news media, and are the second most referenced organization in the world. Annually, our recommendations result in hundreds of actions-including landmark legislation-that lead to meaningful improvements in government operations and billions of dollars in direct financial benefits on behalf of the American people.

Our Organization Is People Driven: Our employees are at the front line of congressional oversight, and our work depends on their knowledge, analyses, and specialized skills. Recognizing the importance of our people, we continually strive to provide a progressive work environment.



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A key concept in GAO's branding message is *"At GAO you make a real difference in American life."* Visitors to the GAO Careers webpage can read in plain English how GAO employees make a difference in the world around them. An accompanying video presentation includes clips from major news anchors and the TV program "The West Wing," documenting the scope and depth of GAO's influence. (See the [GAO Careers Webpage](#).)

College outreach

At GAO, recruitment is everyone's business. Senior staff members are actively involved in campus outreach activities at select schools. Institutions may be targeted by GAO for their renowned public policy and administration programs, specialized expertise and/or diverse student bodies. Heading the recruiting team at most target schools is a GAO executive, often an alumnus of that school. These executives are responsible for establishing meaningful, in-depth relationships with the selected universities, and also for devising the recruitment strategy for that school. Recruitment teams, comprised of mid-level managers paired with recent graduates, offer students different and valuable perspectives on what it is like to work at GAO. Recruiters are well prepared by GAO's training on topics such as structured interviews, minority outreach, legal issues, effective interviewing practices, GAO's Professional Development Program and its competency-based performance management system.

GAO recruiters become part of the fabric of the academic environment: they may even serve as adjunct professors.

GAO does not rely on annual job fairs alone. In fact, career fairs comprise a small part of the agency's outreach efforts. The most important element is relationship-building with school administrators, deans, career placement staff and faculty. This strategy allows GAO employees to become part of the fabric of the academic environment; they participate in curriculum development, host students at GAO headquarters for informative speaking engagements, and may even serve as adjunct professors. Recruiters also provide GAO reports for use in undergraduate and graduate-level classes to supplement instructional tools, a practice which highlights the agency's real-time impact on government policy and services.

A candidate-friendly hiring process

GAO aims to build a positive relationship with applicants starting at the outset of the hiring process. Toward this end, the organization developed a user-friendly,

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Summer Intern Events

- ♦ Hill presentations where staffers or GAO detailees share inside perspectives on legislative branch operations
- ♦ An ice cream social with the Comptroller General and other top GAO staff
- ♦ Tours of the Pentagon
- ♦ Brown bag presentations by GAO teams sharing their line of business experiences and career opportunities
- ♦ Viewing the live filming of CNN's Crossfire news program from the studios in Washington

online application process that significantly reduces the paperwork associated with federal hiring. Candidates meeting general GAO requirements are referred to analysts and HR staff, who meet weekly during the hiring season to review and disseminate applications from qualified candidates to the most appropriate work units based on applicants' education and experience.

The work units screen selected applicants and then schedule half-day interviews with unit management, selected supervisors, a recent hire at the same level as the applicant, and a Human Capital Manager. GAO places particular importance on giving prospective employees the opportunity to meet with a recently-hired staff member, as it gives applicants the opportunity to find out what it is really like to work at GAO. A staff member involved in the interview process follows up with the applicant regarding the hiring decision. Candidates who receive job offers are assigned to a "buddy" who responds to questions and provides additional information before they come on board.

Creating a pipeline through the summer intern program

GAO views its summer intern program as both a great way to spread the word about GAO jobs on college campuses and also as a valuable pipeline for talented, energetic future employees. With this in mind, GAO works hard to ensure that interns have the best summer experience possible.

The intern program consists of 140 paid positions and other non-paid and/or school stipend positions in GAO locations across the country. All interns are brought to GAO headquarters in Washington for a two-day orientation and training session. Upon completion of a 400-hour commitment, the best-performing interns may be noncompetitively appointed to permanent positions after graduation. The internship is an ideal way for GAO managers, as well as the students themselves, to determine whether GAO is the right fit for their careers. The program is appreciably helping GAO to meet its recruiting goals. In 2003, more than 100 summer interns were offered permanent positions. GAO expects these "converted interns" to fill about 50 percent of entry level staff openings annually.



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**New Hire Talks
about GAO**

"I had a really positive experience as an intern at GAO. I felt that they had a lot of respect for what new people had to offer. I was treated as a full member of the team, and I was able to start working immediately on important projects.

My job as a GAO analyst is like piecing together complex puzzles. You have to ask the right questions to understand how the pieces of government programs fit together and what their relevance is to the larger picture. It's also exciting to see large federal institutions making changes based on our findings and recommendations. You could apply the same skill set as a consultant in a private company, but you wouldn't have the same degree of influence."

Susan Barnidge, GAO Analyst

Engaging and developing new talent

GAO knows that building a world-class organization does not end with great recruitment. Integrating new employees into the organization's professional and social culture is also critical to the short-and long-term success of employees and, ultimately, to accomplishing GAO's mission. GAO understands that a strategic recruitment plan must be coupled with a retention strategy that includes meaningful work assignments, the opportunity to utilize skills and knowledge, opportunities for increased responsibility, pay for performance, work that truly makes a difference, and a people-oriented work culture - factors that employees say keep them engaged and committed.

To that end, GAO's recruitment initiatives are integrated with retention strategies such as the Professional Development Program (PDP). The first day for an entry-level GAO employee marks the beginning of a carefully structured two-year journey and signals a commitment to the development of each and every new hire. The cornerstone of the PDP is a requirement that staff work on at least three different engagements during their first two years. This mobility gives newly-hired staff the opportunity to see GAO through various lenses, different supervisory styles, subject matters, and stages of GAO work. These rotations also allow new hires to apply different skills to different jobs and to gain a broad view of agency and team operations. Before the end of new employees' two-year probationary period, GAO carefully reviews their performance and development to ensure they are a "good fit" for the organization and to assess their likelihood of success with the agency.

Each person in the PDP is assigned an advisor who monitors his or her experience, makes sure that new hires are given challenging and useful work, are paired with quality supervisors, and that they become knowledgeable of GAO's policies and procedures. The advisor meets regularly with the staff member and his or her supervisor, observing performance, addressing questions, handling concerns, and developing and implementing intervention strategies if necessary.

Fast-track advancement opportunities

Every six months, teams meet with PDP advisors to conduct performance reviews for their new hires. New hires can receive salary increases at six-month intervals for

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Why Work for GAO?

"In my job search, I looked mostly at non-profits in the international development arena. GAO was the only government position I looked at, and the PDP was a selling point for me. The program let me try out three or four different teams before receiving a permanent assignment.

I also think the work at GAO makes a difference. We started out as accountants looking at the federal budget, but now we evaluate just about everything that uses federal dollars. Congress looks to us to be an objective source of information, and that's really powerful. In terms of public service and research, there's no better example than GAO."

Tahra Edwards
GAO Analyst and recent PDP graduate

the first two years of their employment. The amount of the increase varies based on their performance level.

Other professional development activities include the creation of Individual Development Plans, mentoring and buddy relationships, a speaker series, attendance at Congressional hearings where GAO is testifying, and social and community activities. After completion of the PDP, participants are permanently assigned to a GAO team. Every effort is made to assign new hires to the team of their first or second choice.

Student loan repayment program for retention

GAO has found that if new hires stay with the organization for three years, they tend to stay indefinitely. To encourage new hires to stay for at least three years, GAO is making widespread use of student loan repayment. Eligible hires who are performing well can apply for this benefit in exchange for a three-year service commitment. In 2003, GAO spent approximately \$950,000 in repayment of loans for about 230 employees, second only to the much larger State Department.

THE RECRUITING INITIATIVE PAYS OFF

GAO is becoming increasingly visible to the talented candidates it is seeking, and its recruitment efforts have paid off in the form of improved quality of applicants and new hires. Last year, the agency received more than 1,600 applications for roughly 50 jobs. Nearly 75 percent of job offers are accepted, and the agency is close to meeting 100 percent of its annual hiring goals. GAO was also recently featured as one of the "50 Great Places to Work" in Washingtonian magazine.

As a result of its recruiting success, GAO is now facing a new and different challenge. The agency must now carefully select from among an unprecedented number of highly-qualified candidates applying for each job vacancy - a problem any federal agency would consider itself lucky to have.



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