

GAO

Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Federal Workforce, Postal Service, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

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**“The Government
Accountability Office
(GAO) Act of 2007”
(H.R. 3268), and Other
GAO Reforms**

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today at your hearing on H.R. 3268, the “Government Accountability Office (GAO) Act of 2007” and other GAO reforms, to discuss the results of the survey that you previously requested that the Employee Advisory Council (EAC) conduct of all GAO employees (except Senior Executive Service/SL and interns) on GAO’s Band II restructuring and the Watson Wyatt market-based compensation study used to set salary ranges. My name is Shirley Jones and I am an Assistant General Counsel at GAO. For the last four years I have served as the Attorneys Representative to the EAC. Since your hearing last May, I have worked with the EAC committee that conducted the survey. I am here today to share the results of that survey with you.

Overview of EAC Creation and Purpose

The EAC was established by Comptroller General David Walker to provide a consolidated forum for him to meet with representatives from the various employee liaison groups (e.g. Advisory Council for Persons with Disabilities, Blacks In Government, Gay and Lesbian Employee Association, etc.) so that these groups could voice the concerns of their constituency groups. He also decided to include representatives from each of the staff positions (i.e. Administrative Professional Support Staff (APSS), attorneys, and each of the Band levels). Consequently, the EAC was chartered in January 2000 to serve as an advisory body to the Comptroller General and other senior executives by seeking and conveying the views and concerns of the individual employee groups they represent, proposing solutions to those concerns where appropriate, providing input by assessing and commenting on GAO policies, procedures, plans and practices, and communicating issues and concerns of the CG and senior managers to employees.

Survey Background

Five EAC members volunteered to conduct the survey that you requested. In addition to myself, the committee consisted of Betsy Morris, Senior Analyst, Defense Capabilities and Management, Beverly Ross, Senior IT Specialist/Data Analyst, Applied Research and Methods, Nellie Shamlin, Executive Assistant, Professional Development Program, and Shana Wallace, Assistant Director, Applied Research and Methods. We received assistance from a survey specialist, Luann Moy, an Assistant Director from our Applied Research and Methods group.

Upon completion of our preliminary survey development work, the survey was pre-tested among a small number of employees representing the

different Band levels and positions in the agency, and representing both headquarters and field staff. A draft of the survey instrument was provided to the Chairman's staff for comment. A courtesy copy was given to the Comptroller General and the attorney representing the IFPTE.

The finalized survey was ultimately launched on Thursday, November 15, 2007. The survey was closed on Friday, December 14, 2007. Your staff was briefed on the results on January 15, 2008 and March 5, 2008.

Overall Survey Response Rate

The survey was sent to all GAO employees except Senior Executive Service/SL and interns (a total of 3,002 employees). 71% of eligible employees participated in the survey.

To provide a picture of those responding to the survey, respondents were asked demographic questions regarding their position, years at GAO, age, race, ethnicity, sex, and location (headquarters or field). As is normally the case, some respondents chose not to answer some or all of the demographic questions.

The highest area of nonresponse to the demographic questions was in the answer to the question about race identification, which was not answered by 253 or 12% of the respondents. The highest nonresponse was from Asian employees (the number who responded and identified themselves as Asian represents only 40% of those eligible) and African Americans (the number who responded and identified themselves as African American represents only 49% of those eligible). Because of the lower response rate for these two races, the EAC survey committee noted its concerns with presenting comparisons by race and with the possible underrepresentation of the views of those two groups in particular.

Analysis of Close-Ended Survey Questions

Several survey questions asked employees about the Watson Wyatt market-based compensation study and specifically about staff involvement, input and transparency. Specifically, respondents who were at GAO prior to January 1, 2006, were asked if they were involved in several different types of activities conducted by Watson Wyatt and GAO during the study. These activities included focus groups, interviews, meetings with team management, and CG chats.

Of those respondents who were at GAO prior to that date (83% of respondents), 30% could not recall if they received communications from management advising that Watson Wyatt would be conducting focus

groups. Of those who recalled whether they participated in focus groups, more APSS than analyst staff reported participating. Specifically, 19% of APSS staff reported participating, while only 4% of analysts and 8% of attorneys reported participating.

Only 4% of all respondents at GAO prior to that date reported being interviewed by Watson Wyatt. More APSS than other staff reported being interviewed (21%). Of particular note, no Band I or Band II respondents reported being interviewed by Watson Wyatt. However, in comparison to the 4% that reported being interviewed by Watson Wyatt, 21% of respondents reported having attended briefings conducted by Watson Wyatt.

A higher number of staff who were at GAO prior to that date, 94%, reported that they listened to CG Chats or attended town hall meetings. 13% also reported asking a question or making a comment to the CG about the transition outside of meetings.

53% of respondents reported little or no opportunity to provide input to management on the transition to market-based pay. A higher percentage of respondents who identified themselves as Hispanic (67%) or African American (66%) as compared to other racial groups reported that they had little or no opportunity to provide input into the transition.¹

81% of respondents reported that they felt they were only slightly involved or not at all involved in providing input to management on the transition to market-based pay. Similarly, 81% of respondents also felt that employee input on the transition was ultimately only slightly or not at all considered. 42% responded that employee input was not at all considered.

57% of all respondents at GAO prior to January 2006 felt the level of transparency of the Watson Wyatt study to be very or somewhat unreasonable. Similarly, 58% also felt that the level of transparency of the GAO decision-making process was somewhat or very unreasonable. Generally, the more years of service a respondent had at GAO, the more likely he or she was to report feeling the GAO decision-making process was somewhat or very unreasonable. 75% of respondents with over 20

¹As noted earlier, because of the lower response rate for Asians and African Americans, the EAC survey committee noted its concerns with presenting comparisons by race and with the possible under-representation of the views of those two groups in particular.

years of service felt this way compared to 55% of respondents with 2 years or less.

46% of survey respondents felt generally dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with GAO's market-based pay system compared to 34% of survey respondents who were generally or very satisfied. 20% of respondents reported that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

There were notable differences in dissatisfaction level based on position, age, and race. Band IIAs and Band IIBs reported being more dissatisfied than Band I and Band III analysts, APSS, and attorneys. A higher percentage of respondents age 40 and over (59%) than under 40 (25%) reported feeling generally or very dissatisfied with the market-based pay system. African Americans also had higher percentages of respondents (64%) than other racial groups who said they were generally or very dissatisfied with GAO's market-based pay system than those in other racial groups.

With regard to the effect of the transition to market-based pay on overall morale, 81% of respondents thought morale in general was worse or much worse now than before the transition to market based pay. 48% responded that their own morale was worse or much worse now. A higher percentage of respondents age 40 and over than respondents under 40 reported that their morale and productivity are worse or much worse than before the transition. A higher percentage of African Americans than other racial groups reported that their morale was worse or much worse (58%).

Regarding the Band II Restructuring (i.e. the restructuring of Band II into a Band IIA and Band IIB with IIB having a higher salary range), 54% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the Band II analyst and analyst-related restructuring, while 29% agreed or strongly agreed. Certain demographics disagreed or strongly disagreed at a higher rate - African Americans (67%), Band IIA (67%), those at GAO 10 years or longer (66%), and employees 40 years or older (65%).

Regarding specific outcomes of the Band II restructuring, 55% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the restructuring rewards workers more equitably, while 31% agreed or strongly agreed. Similarly, 67% disagreed or strongly disagreed that the restructuring enhances productivity while 13% agreed or strongly agreed.

Conversely, a slight majority (52%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Band IIB staff lead more complex jobs. These results varied

widely by Band level – 34% of Band IIAs agreed or strongly agreed while Band IIBs and Band IIIs agreed or strongly agreed at a much higher rate (69% and 71% respectively).

Regarding the current general climate at GAO, 40% of respondents said that their own level of morale related to working at GAO was high or very high. 36% said their level of morale was moderate, while 24% said it was low or very low.

There were notable differences in responses regarding general climate at GAO based on position, age, and years of service. Among the different positions at GAO, Band IIA analysts had the lowest percentage responding that their morale was high or very high (30%) while attorneys had the highest percentage (60%). 53% of respondents under 40 years old reported high or very high levels compared to 32% of respondents who were age 40 or older. Staff with less than 10 years at GAO (50%) reported higher levels of morale than respondents with 10 or more years at GAO (only 30%).

45% of respondents reported feeling that their professional contributions at GAO were valued to a high degree. 33% said that their contributions were moderately valued, and 22% said their contributions were valued to a low or very low degree. Lower percentages of Band IIA analyst and APSS (33% and 38% respectively) felt their contributions were highly or very highly valued compared to attorneys and Band III staff (67% and 63% respectively).

The more years of service respondents had at GAO, the less likely they were to report that they felt their contributions were highly or very highly valued. A lower percentage of respondents with 10 or more years of service (37%) than respondents with under 10 years of service (54%) felt that their contributions were highly valued. Similarly, a lower percentage of respondents age 40 and older (38%) than respondents under 40 (59%) felt that their contributions were highly valued.

A lower percentage of African Americans compared to other race groups felt that their contributions were highly valued. 27% of African Americans responded that their contributions were highly or very highly valued compared to 51% of White staff.

Methodology for Content Analysis of Open-Ended Survey Question

To give respondents an opportunity to provide additional thoughts or concerns, we include an open-ended question which read “What other comments or thoughts would you like to provide to the House Subcommittee about the Watson Wyatt study, Band II restructuring, market-based pay system, the GAO performance management system or GAO work life, in general?” 1113 respondents provided substantive comments to this question.

To classify the nature of the comments, we created 29 categories to use as codes. Two survey committee members independently coded every comment, and then discussed comments where there were any differences in coding until 100% agreement was reached. Some comments were coded into more than one category since some respondents discussed more than one topic.

Analysis of Open-Ended Survey Question

The comments to the open-ended question cannot be generalized to the entire GAO employee population. They do, however, provide some insights into why some respondents answered close-ended survey questions as they did.

Our content analysis of respondents’ comments showed the top specific areas of concern expressed as the Band II restructuring being damaging to employee morale or otherwise providing disincentives (217 comments), the Pay For Performance (PFP) system being damaging to employee morale or otherwise providing disincentives (133), PFP ratings not being accurate (108), GAO employees not receiving the same COLA as employees at Federal executive branch agencies (107), and the Watson Wyatt study being flawed or fraudulent (84). (The other two categories among the top seven most common comments were “other” less specific consolidated comments.)

Although not generalizable to the overall GAO population, we noted that more than twice as many respondents commented that the Band II restructuring was damaging to employee morale or otherwise provided disincentives than those that responded that it was the right thing to do. Specifically, in contrast to the 217 comments noted above from respondents that said that the Band II restructuring at GAO is damaging to employee morale or otherwise provides disincentives, 74 of the narrative comments said the Band II restructuring was the right thing to do. Some other comments expressed agreement with the Band II restructuring in concept but didn’t believe it was working (74). Some comments also noted concern with the lack of transparency in the Band II restructuring (47).

Some respondents also noted their belief that the Band II restructuring should have included “grandfathering” provisions for staff already within Band II at the beginning of the process (31).

While 133 respondents commented that GAO’s Pay For Performance (PFP) system is damaging to employee morale or otherwise provides disincentives, 80 respondents said that they believe that PFP at GAO is helpful or worthwhile. Similarly, 108 respondents specifically noted their belief that PFP ratings are inaccurate. Some others agreed with PFP in concept but didn’t believe it was working here at GAO (48). Some respondents also noted their concern with the lack of transparency in the PFP system at GAO (69). A smaller number of respondents specifically noted their belief that the PFP system is flawed, fraudulent or unethical (45).

Cost of living adjustments (COLAs) were also a consistent theme within the narrative responses. As noted earlier, 107 respondents specifically noted their belief that GAO employees should receive the same COLA as employees at Federal executive branch agencies.

Compared to the 84 narrative comments that noted concerns with the Watson Wyatt study being flawed or fraudulent, 6 narrative comments specifically noted belief that the Watson Wyatt study was correct. Some respondents’ comments also noted concerns about the lack of transparency with the Watson Wyatt study (73).

Some narrative comments conveyed positive thoughts including the belief that the Comptroller General should be given credit for moving the agency in the right direction (30) and that GAO has excellent benefits (32). Other generally positive comments (44) that did not fit into one of the more specific categories so were coded as “Other-Positive” included beliefs that GAO’s Professional Development Program (PDP) is a very good one and that GAO’s work is cutting edge.

Staff also used the narrative comments, however, to express their belief that the changes at GAO were going to happen anyway regardless of staff input (64). Other negative comments included concerns with GAO losing talented staff because of recent changes (74), GAO’s overall processes being discriminatory (54), lack of trust overall (45), and locality pay decisions being flawed (27).

The count of combined negative comments that did not fit into the more specific categories and that were captured as “Other-Negative” had the

highest overall category count (426). This category captured a variety of negative comments such as promoting Band I staff to IIA faster results in less qualified staff at higher levels, GAO should deal with the real problem – poor performance, concerns about the lack of domestic partner benefits, and concerns about the treatment of communications analyst positions under the Band II restructuring.

Conclusion

In general, Band IIA staff reported more unfavorable responses to many of the topics covered in this survey (Band II restructuring, the Watson Wyatt studies –analyst and APSS, market-based pay, and overall GAO climate) than staff in other bands and positions. African American staff, older staff, and staff with more years at GAO, also had generally less favorable opinions of these topics. There were few differences of opinion between male and female staff, and headquarters and field staff about these topics.

Respondents used the open-ended question that we included to further highlight their concerns regarding these topics as well as to express their continued belief in the work of the agency. While the narrative comments can not be generalized to the overall GAO population, they did provide insightful and thoughtful feedback for consideration.

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