

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-217](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Defense's (DOD) major acquisition programs continue to experience cost and schedule overruns. GAO previously found that selecting skilled program managers is a key factor to achieving successful program outcomes. DOD relies on military and civilian program managers to deliver its most expensive new weapon systems, meaning its approach to training, mentoring, retaining, and selecting program managers is critical.

House Report 114-537 included a provision for GAO to review the career paths, development, and incentives for program managers. This report addresses how leading organizations train, mentor, retain, and ultimately select program managers; and the extent to which military service practices align with those leading practices. To conduct this work, GAO identified leading practices documented in prior work and by the Project Management Institute, and interviewed commercial companies identified by the Institute as leaders in this field. GAO also analyzed military service practices for developing program managers and compared those to leading practices.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making eight recommendations, including that the military services improve practices that do not align extensively with leading practices and make greater use of existing financial rewards for good performance. DOD concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-18-217](#). For more information, contact Michael J. Sullivan at (202) 512-4841 or sullivanm@gao.gov.

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DEFENSE ACQUISITION WORKFORCE

Opportunities Exist to Improve Practices for Developing Program Managers

What GAO Found

Leading organizations use 10 key practices to train, mentor, retain, and ultimately select skilled program managers. GAO found that military service practices for developing program managers align extensively with four of the leading practices, as shown in the table below.

Leading Practices That All Military Services Align with Extensively

Leading practices	Air Force	Army	Navy
Training classes that allow program managers to share experiences	●	●	●
On-the-job learning and information repositories	●	●	●
Recognition	●	●	●
Assignment based on skills, experiences, and program needs	●	●	●

Legend: ● = extensive alignment ○ = partial alignment ○ = little to no alignment

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-18-217

At least one military service's practices do not align extensively with five of the leading practices, as shown in the table below.

Leading Practices That Not All Military Services Align with Extensively

Leading practices	Air Force	Army	Navy
Rotational assignments	●	○	○
Mentoring programs with senior leader involvement	●	●	○
Career paths that describe skills needed to advance	●	○	○
Education subsidies	○	●	●
Identification of high-potential talent by senior leaders	○	●	○

Legend: ● = extensive alignment ○ = partial alignment ○ = little to no alignment

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-18-217

For the remaining leading practice, none of the military services' practices align extensively, as shown in the table below.

Leading Practice That No Military Service Aligns with Extensively

Leading practice	Air Force	Army	Navy
Financial rewards for good performance	○	○	○

Legend: ● = extensive alignment ○ = partial alignment ○ = little to no alignment

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Military service officials generally agreed with the assessments. More consistent alignment with leading practices—adapted for military and civilian personnel as appropriate and including greater use of existing financial rewards—would enhance the services' ability to manage acquisition programs.