

Report Summary

Social Security Administration Office of the Inspector General

May 2012



Objective

To determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) has a strategic plan to convert its legacy application programs to a more modernized programming language.

Background

SSA relies on legacy applications programmed with Common Business Oriented Language (COBOL) to process its core workloads. A March 2011 Social Security Advisory Board report stated that transforming the Agency's current systems infrastructure into a modern technology platform required a more aggressive and strategic systems modernization plan. The report also stated that the lack of a longer range vision results in planning that is piecemeal, crisis directed, and ultimately more costly. The Future Systems Technology Advisory Panel also recommended that SSA consider developing a comprehensive Agency-wide strategic systems development roadmap.

To view the full report, visit <http://oig.ssa.gov/audits-and-investigations/audit-reports/A-14-11-11132>.

The Social Security Administration's Software Modernization and Use of Common Business Oriented Language (A-14-11-11132)

Our Findings

Our review determined that SSA does not have a strategic plan to convert its legacy COBOL application programs to a more modernized programming language. Nonetheless, the Agency has developed an approach to gradually reduce its reliance on COBOL for its core processing of program transactions, such as retirement and disability claims.

While the Agency has moved forward in modernizing its information technology environment, several factors limit the Agency's ability to operate efficiently and improve service delivery. At a minimum, SSA should address the following factors in its modernization roadmap: (1) projected future service delivery demands; (2) growth of information technology and maintenance costs; (3) loss of institutional legacy programming knowledge; (4) lack of integrated business processes; and (5) outdated user interfaces. Although these factors are not unique to COBOL, SSA relies on COBOL applications to deliver its core services. Therefore, the Agency's use of COBOL impacts its current system environment and its system modernization path.

Our Recommendations

1. Develop a comprehensive, long-term strategic plan to modernize SSA's legacy applications. This plan should:
 - ✓ include a target timeframe and estimated resources to modernize SSA's existing environment;
 - ✓ include an in-depth analysis of projected service delivery demands and how new approaches and technology can promote greater productivity while meeting customer expectations for service;
 - ✓ position the Agency to maximize the effectiveness and cost-efficiency of its systems over the long-term; and
 - ✓ be reevaluated over time and revised as necessary.
2. Ensure its human capital plan addresses the loss of COBOL programmers and identifies how to maintain COBOL expertise and institutional knowledge transfers to new programmers.

SSA agreed with our first recommendation but disagreed with our second recommendation.