

Panel: Pentagon Needs New, Dedicated Information-Technology Acquisition Track

April 20, 2009 -- The Defense Department should establish an acquisition system dedicated to buying information technology that is more nimble than the traditional weapon system procurement process in order to ensure U.S. forces are equipped with state-of-the-art, information-technology capabilities, according to a new report.

A Defense Science Board task force says the military's practices for buying information technology -- an area in which the Pentagon will spend \$33 billion this fiscal year -- is "ineffective," adding that delays and cost growth in acquiring both weapons and associated IT systems "create an unacceptable risk to national security."

The task force, empaneled in response to congressional concerns about the effectiveness of the military's IT procurement practices, "believes that there is a need for a unique acquisition process for information technology," states the new report. "Such a process must be designed to accommodate the rapid evolution of information technologies; their increasingly critical position in DOD warfare systems, warfare support systems, and business systems; and the ever evolving and often urgent IT needs of our warfighters."

The current acquisition process "is too long and too cumbersome to fit the needs of the many systems that require continuous changes and upgrades," states the report, dated March 2009.

The "Task Force on Department of Defense Policies and Procedures for the Acquisition of Information Technology," co-chaired by Ronald Kerber and Vincent Vitto, also considered a wide range of organizational changes, including subordinating the assistant secretary of defense for networks and information integration -- who reports directly to the defense secretary -- to the Pentagon's acquisition executive.

In the end, the task force did not recommend that option; however, the report calls for consolidating acquisition oversight for information technologies under the Pentagon's acquisition chief by stripping that responsibility from the assistant secretary of defense for networks and information integration.

John Grimes, assistant secretary of defense for networks and information integration, disagreed with that recommendation. In a one-page dissent included in the task force

report, Grimes suggested as an alternative that the office of the Pentagon's acquisition executive be reorganized with a focal point for information technology "as it applies to embedded systems and those IT systems which are determined [by the defense secretary] to be national security systems."

Lastly, the task force calls for the Defense Department to set higher IT-expertise standards for its senior procurement officials.

"Acquisition leaders need proven and relevant business experience in the appropriate areas of acquisition, product development and management," Kerber and Vitto write in a cover letter accompanying the report.

The task force identified problems common to all major IT acquisition programs for which cost, schedule or quality and performance were issues: inadequate experience of senior leaders, program executive officers and program managers and a cumbersome acquisition system where accountability is diffused.

"The experience and qualifications of [the Office of the Secretary of Defense] and service leaders, and program executive officers and program managers is critical to making the right judgments to begin a program with executable objectives and then to manage it to successful completion," the report states.

In FY-09, the Pentagon's IT budget is larger than \$33 billion, according to a September 2008 briefing prepared by Grimes. The figure includes \$15.5 billion for communications and computing infrastructure; \$8.5 billion for warfighting systems; \$5.1 billion for business systems; and \$3 billion for information assurance projects.

The Fiscal Year 2008 National Defense Authorization Act asked the Defense Science Board to examine the Pentagon's policies and procedures for acquiring IT systems. – *Jason Sherman*