

## FBI faces difficult choices

Agency weighs options for Virtual Case File system

- By Wilson P. Dizard III
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### Hindsight is 20/20

FBI officials told Congress they have learned lessons from the case management system debacle. They recognize that any new system must include:

- Design of an overarching enterprise architecture
- Stable project requirements
- Centralization of IT project management
- Abandonment of uncontrollable cost-plus-award fee contracting methods
- Adoption of earned-value metrics
- Use of schedule management tools
- Emphasis on project management techniques
- Strengthened security measures



FBI CIO Zalmi Azmi will decide this spring whether to terminate a troubled case management project with SAIC.

Henrik G. de Gyor

This spring, FBI's leadership will decide whether to scrap the much maligned Virtual Case File System or allow its contractor, Science Applications International Corp., to continue developing the system.

But whatever decision FBI Director Robert Mueller III and bureau Chief Information Officer Zalmi Azmi make, for many, the contract has become an object lesson on how not to run a procurement.

"One of the problems in the FBI and the Justice Department is that management in general, and IT management in particular, are way down on the priority list," said Steve Kelman, Weatherhead Professor of Public Management at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, and former administrator of the Office of Federal Procurement Policy.

When the FBI launched the VCF system under its Trilogy program five years ago, the goal was to build a case management system for

its agents. After spending more than \$104 million, the FBI has little to show for it except a pilot involving about 500 agents in New Orleans and Washington.

The FBI has hammered SAIC in congressional testimony for relying on outdated technology and proprietary software that make rolling out the system difficult.

SAIC has defended itself, saying the system can be expanded, and that the project suffered because the FBI went through several CIOs and program managers during VCF's development.

For many observers, the project has fallen victim to shifting requirements, a revolving door of management, poor acquisition practices and an agency culture that plays down IT management.

Mueller told Congress that the bureau stabilized the requirements for the Trilogy project's VCF component in 2002. But in the same testimony before the Senate Appropriations subcommittee on commerce, justice and state, he described how the bureau and SAIC were negotiating contract changes as late as last summer.

SAIC Executive Vice President Robert Punaro submitted testimony that detailed the bureau's shifting requirements: "The agents would look at the development product and reject it. They would then demand more changes to the design in a trial-and-error, 'We'll know it when we see it' approach to development."

#### REVOLVING CIOs

SAIC also criticized the government's "management turbulence" in the VCF project, citing 11 management changes at the FBI during the process and eight management changes at the General Services Administration's Federal Systems Integration and Management Center, which managed the contract.

FBI modifications of Trilogy requirements, especially of the VCF component, doomed the project, Kelman said.

"If you can't establish a baseline, you will never finish the project," Kelman said. "This is something that [FBI managers] should have known. This had been a widely discussed lesson learned from previous major project failures, like the [Federal Aviation Administration's failed] air traffic control modernization. They never stabilized their requirements." Randolph Hite, director of IT architecture and systems issues for the Government Accountability Office, said federal auditors had noted that the FBI needed firm IT project requirements.

"It all starts with requirements, with understanding what you need and what performance you need," Hite said. "If you are telling a builder to build a house and don't know your requirements, you shouldn't be surprised if you don't get the house you are looking for."

GAO also has cited rapid turnover of CIOs during the period when the bureau developed VCF. In the mid-1990s, the bureau's deputy director also served as its CIO, overseeing the Information Resources Management office. As IRM director, Mark Tanner played a key role in the project's early stages.

In 2000, bureau officials recruited retired IBM Corp. executive Robert Dies as CIO. Dies concluded that the bureau needed desktop, network and application upgrades to make its systems more usable, according to FBI officials, and moved those projects forward gradually. Dies retired in 2002, and Tanner became acting CIO until Darwin John joined the department as CIO in July 2002.

According to insiders, John took an analytic approach to the job, and within months wasn't exercising day-to-day control over Trilogy. After less than a year in the job, John retired in May 2003. He did not respond to a request for comment.

At the time, officials said Wilson Lowery, FBI's executive assistant director for administration, sought a more aggressive approach to the problems than did John.

Lowery, who became acting CIO when John left, was followed by Azmi, who was acting CIO starting in January 2004 and officially took the post five months later.

The VCF program also had several project managers, all of whom needed time to understand the activity and often changed policies.

When Cheryl "Sherry" Higgins, a former Lucent executive, became Trilogy project manager, "the first thing she did was quit having program reviews," according to a bureau IT official. Higgins did not respond to a request for comment.

The bureau also got plenty of outside help and oversight on VCF. The Office of Management and Budget approved the project's

business, even though the bureau lacked an IT investment review plan and an enterprise architecture. Congress intervened repeatedly, usually to complain about project delays.

## CHANGE IS AFOOT

Mueller and Azmi have shaken up the bureau's IT infrastructure, centralizing project control in the CIO's office, mandating IT investment reviews and system inventories and seeking to bring industry leaders on staff at the FBI. But, they told Congress, the reforms will take time to kick in.

Mueller recently testified before the Appropriations subcommittee that despite millions spent on computer upgrades at FBI, agents don't have an easy-to-use format for entering investigative and intelligence information into their computers.

Instead, agents face "a cumbersome, time-consuming process of preparing a paper record of that information, seeking the necessary approvals, then uploading the document into an existing database," Mueller said. "If agents had the VCF capabilities we envisioned, they could directly input information into their computers, receive electronic approvals, and, with the push of a button, upload information into the database, where it would be immediately available to others who need access to it: agents, analysts, other federal employees, state and local officials."

Mueller told the subcommittee that despite the problems with VCF, its absence does not keep the FBI from fulfilling its counterterrorism, intelligence and law enforcement missions.

But the subcommittee's ranking Democrat, Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, expressed frustration with the bureau's failure. "Congress paid for something to be built, not for learning about what to build through trial and error," Leahy said.

The FBI declined to respond to repeated inquiries for this article. OMB also declined to comment in response to questions.

Mueller and Azmi this spring will report to Congress the results of the VCF Initial Operational Capability pilot, which is running on the desktops of about 500 FBI employees. SAIC executives said the pilot could be expanded, tested and verified to comprise a full-scale case management system by the end of 2005.

The system provides only workflow management for users. Several other functions, such as document management, evidence management, lead management and a tickler file exist within pilot and could be tested and activated within months, said Mark Hughes, president of SAIC's system and network solutions group,

If FBI officials decide to terminate the VCF program, they have several options for moving forward. One would have the agency field an online version of its decades-old case system, Web-Enabled Automated Case File system. WACS has been available internally for about two years.

Hundreds of FBI employees have access to WACS, which largely comprises an online front end to ACS. Although WACS lacks the automated workflow function that VCF would provide, it is an improvement on the green-screen version of ACS.

Another option would be for the FBI to replace ACS with commercial case management software. The case management packages that have come on the market in recent years are more capable than anything available when the project began, FBI officials have said. The bureau now is evaluating off-the shelf technology.

Finally, bureau officials could simply wait until the Federal Investigative Case Management System project, an interagency program to plan an architecture for a case management system that many agencies could use, takes flight.

Even within FBI, some specialists doubt the bureau has the IT management and resources to handle the FICMS project, which could stretch out to five years or more.

"We believe we can do it," said one senior IT manager. "But we have issues, and we have resource limitations."

Wilson P. Dizard III is a senior editor with Government Computer News. He can be reached at [wdizard@postnewsweektech.com](mailto:wdizard@postnewsweektech.com).

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