Air Force Reveals Causes Behind ECSS's $1B Failure

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With ongoing budget uncertainty, the Department of Defense and Congress are looking for ways to trim waste, improve program performance and modernize key aspects of the nation's military capability. So when there are major program failures like the Air Force's Expeditionary Combat Support System (ECSS) Congress wants answers.   The results of an Air Force inquiry into ECSS reveal a program fraught with issues.

When the ECSS cancelation was announced last December, Senators Carl Levin (D-MI) and John McCain (R-AZ), the Chairman and Ranking Member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, demanded an explanation for the failure in a **letter** they sent to then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta. In March, 2013 the Air Force appointed an Acquisition Incident Review (AIR) Team to respond to Congressional demands for an explanation. Now, nearly a year later, the Air Force has submitted its findings.

Contributing Causes to the ECSS Cancelation

The report, of which only an **executive summary** has been released publicly, identifies four contributing causes as to why the ECSS project was cancelled. These four contributing causes are:

- **Governance** – a confusing and, at times, ineffectual governance structure that varied repeatedly during its existence. Various DoD acquisition methodologies were used and/or combined throughout the program and there lacked coherent leadership guidance and coordination on how to implement these meshed approaches, adding delays, uncertainty and additional effort. The AIR Team says this issue is not yet resolved.

- **Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures** – ECSS "suffered from instances where either the wrong "tool" was selected from the "acquisition toolbox" or the proper tool was selected but misapplied." The driver for this was an underestimation of how to deal with the size and complexity of the effort, lack of defined requirements and use of an ESI BPA for an effort that required significant development effort. The AIR Team concludes that the Air Force did not understand the magnitude of legacy system data involved so they were not able to effectively communicate requirements to program bidders.

- **Difficulty of Change** – ECSS attempted to develop a strategic and disruptive technology to improve logistics business processes while concurrently seeking "buy in" from a skeptical user community. The Air Force didn't effectively manage the proposed changes in systems and processes demanded by the ECSS approach. The issue was made worse by lack of program successes undermined credibility with the field.

- **Personnel and Organizational Churn** – High turnover (6 PMs in 8 years, 5 PEOs in 6 years, etc.), the use of term positions (vs. permanent positions), and the way the Air Force organizes its acquisitions all led to instability, uncertainty and program churn that put the program at increased risk.

Recently I **wrote** about how the House version of the FY 2014 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), passed in June, includes provisions related to Air Force ERP systems modernization efforts and specific requirements for root-cause analysis of the ECSS program. It appears that both this AIR Team report and the NDAA provisions are an acknowledgement of the level of scrutiny which major systems modernization efforts will continue to have on Capitol Hill. We'll see if the House provisions survive to the final NDAA if and when the Senate finalizes their version of the bill and the two sides head to Conference.

Either way, it seems that it will take significant time to work out any modernization approach. A related recent **news article** reveals that the Air Force continues to wrestle with how to modernize its logistics systems, even if they have begun to see how *not* to proceed from lessons learned with ECSS.

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