

washingtonpost.com > Nation > National News Special Reports > Remembering Sept. 11

The FBI's Upgrade That Wasn't

Advertisement

By Dan Eggen and Griff Witte
Washington Post Staff Writers
Friday, August 18, 2006

As far as Zalmay Azmi was concerned, the FBI's technological revolution was only weeks away.

It was late 2003, and a contractor, Science Applications International Corp. (SAIC), had spent months writing 730,000 lines of computer code for the Virtual Case File (VCF), a networked system for tracking criminal cases that was designed to replace the bureau's antiquated paper files and, finally, shove J. Edgar Hoover's FBI into the 21st century.

It appeared to work beautifully. Until Azmi, now the FBI's technology chief, asked about the error rate.

Software problem reports, or SPRs, numbered in the hundreds, Azmi recalled in an interview. The problems were multiplying as engineers continued to run tests. Scores of basic functions had yet to be analyzed.

"A month before delivery, you don't have SPRs," Azmi said. "You're making things pretty. . . . You're changing colors."

Within a few days, Azmi said, he warned FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III that the \$170 million system was in serious trouble. A year later, it was dead. The nation's premier law enforcement and counterterrorism agency, burdened with one of the government's most archaic computer systems, would have to start from scratch.

Advertisement

The collapse of the attempt to remake the FBI's filing system stemmed from failures of almost every kind, including poor conception and muddled execution of the steps needed to make the system work, according to outside reviews and interviews with people involved in the project.

But the problems were not the FBI's alone. Because of an open-ended contract with few safeguards, SAIC reaped more than \$100 million as the project became bigger and more complicated, even though its software never worked properly. The company continued to meet the bureau's requests, accepting payments despite clear signs that the FBI's approach to the project was badly flawed, according to people who were involved in the project or later reviewed it for the government.

Lawmakers and experts have faulted the FBI for its part in the failed project. But less attention has been paid to the role that the contractor played in contributing to the problems. A previously unreleased audit -- completed in 2005 and obtained by The Washington Post -- found that the system delivered by SAIC was so incomplete and unusable that it left the FBI with little choice but to scuttle the effort altogether.

David Kay, a former SAIC senior vice president who did not work on the program but closely watched its development, said the company knew the FBI's plans were going awry but did not insist on changes because the bureau continued to pay the bills as the work piled up.

"SAIC was at fault because of the usual contractor reluctance to tell the customer, 'You're screwed up. You don't know what you're doing. This project is going to fail because you're not managing your side of the equation,'" said Kay, who later became the chief U.S. weapons inspector in Iraq. "There was no one to tell the government that they were asking the impossible. And they weren't going to get the impossible."



While accepting some blame for the system's failure, FBI Director Robert Mueller said the software "was not what it should be." (By Melina Mara -- The Washington Post)

TOOLBOX



Resize

Print

E-mail

Reprints

12/15/2017

The FBI's Upgrade That Wasn't

Mueller's inability to successfully implement VCF marks one of the low points of his nearly five-year tenure as FBI director, and he has accepted some of the blame. "I did not do the things I should have done to make sure that was a success," he told reporters last month.

CONTINUED [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [Next](#) >

© 2006 The Washington Post Company