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Until relatively recently, departmental planning at DFAIT was largely a matter of preparing the Main Estimates. Planning was not part of the culture and many officers considered it either a Treasury Board obligation or a resources exercise. Bureaux tended to approach planning as damage limitation, the typical strategy for protecting existing resources being to ask for more. This contributed to what one former DG of corporate resources called a "culture of initiatives" which encouraged new ventures, disdained how they would be paid for, and every year burdened senior management with the laborious task of sorting through piles of spending proposals. The introduction of a new headquarters business planning process in 1996, along with some innovative mission planning, began the transformation to a more directive form of planning whose benefits are already becoming evident. But in the view of workshop participants and others interviewed for this study, there is still progress to be made: many in the department remain unconvinced of the value of planning, the current planning process strikes many as overly complex, and there are still too many priorities and not enough strategies.

The value of planning

Workshop participants reported that officers remain ambivalent about the current business planning process. In some cases, this was simply a refusal to accept that it is possible to plan foreign policy. As one participant observed, "Only 50 percent of activities are plannable in any one year, but that is still a lot. You can predict many large negotiations, when they'll start and about how long they'll take; you can predict things like annual and semi-annual events." A more legitimate complaint, participants believed, was that the current approach to business planning produced plans which were "irrelevant", "not connected to anything". "We never consult the plan during the year". In the view of one participant, the problem was that planning was "a two-month exercise, not a 12-month cycle". Others argued that plans were "useful up to a point", that they were "sometimes relevant in resource considerations, for example the re-balancing exercise". They were also useful "as a means of dialogue with missions".

Complexity of the process

A common complaint was that the department required the preparation of bureaux business plans which were "overly complex". The requirement to produce them came at one of the busiest times of the year and involved the expenditure of hundreds of hours in each bureau to collect data, prepare and review drafts some of which approached a hundred pages in length, and consult with all the relevant parties. The plans were especially complicated for geographic bureaux, required as they were to produce plans which reflect a complex matrix. The consultative burden on them was immense. A simpler version was needed.