



Q&A Executive Viewpoint

A Conversation with

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A USDS leader discusses how VA's focus on modernization is translating into better services for veterans

How is the U.S. Digital Service helping the Department of Veterans Affairs modernize the way it provides services to veterans?

The U.S. Digital Service is a technology startup at the White House. We attract top tech talent from across the country to come to D.C. and serve tours-of-duty tackling the toughest technology problems facing the American people.

USDS has several teams deployed to various agencies, including the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security, and the

website. With the previous site, veterans had to figure out how to navigate VA's bureaucracy to accomplish any task. With the new VA.gov, if you want to refill a prescription or apply for education benefits or health care, all those activities are just a single click from the home screen.

One of the major priorities of the secretary of VA is to improve the customer experience for veterans. The redesign of VA.gov and the addition of more veteran-facing tools help VA get one step closer to achieving that goal. The website has proven to be an immense success. But it's just the first step. There's more work for us

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Department of Health and Human Services. This structure allows us to directly help agencies navigate major challenges while maintaining the flexibility to address critical situations at a moment's notice.

At VA, the USDS team has been involved in two major projects. First, we relaunched VA.gov last November. Launching the new site was the culmination of several efforts over the last few years to rethink and reimagine how veterans want to engage with VA from a digital perspective.

We spoke with over 2,000 veterans and got a lot of insightful feedback about what they want to do when they come to VA's

to do to continue to improve the veteran experience.

We've also been deeply involved with the Board of Veterans' Appeals. The Appeals Modernization Act of 2017 sought to establish new pathways for veterans to appeal their disability ratings. In the past, that process could take well over two years, and a lot of it had to do with internal systems and processes that were extremely old and not optimized for making sure those appeals could go through as quickly as possible.

We worked alongside the board to develop a new piece of software called Caseflow, and we're particularly proud of the approach we took. Instead of trying to



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do a big-bang release of the entirety of the software, we took an agile and iterative approach. We broke down Caseflow into a number of much smaller pieces, and we didn't just complete each piece and demo it to the teams. We actually put it directly in their hands and got it into production.

Because of those incremental wins, when the Appeals Modernization Act went into effect this past February, we were able to support it from a technology perspective. We were able to launch VA.gov on Veterans Day last year because of the different approaches we took – using iterative and agile approaches, conducting usability testing with users, and incorporating user feedback throughout the iterative process.

What are the implications of taking a more agile approach to development?

In the more traditional IT mindset, one team is given a project to build out, and when they are “done,” they send it to another team to do the sustainment and bug fixes and whatever else the product needs.

We take a product management-oriented approach. We're constantly monitoring the tools we've built and getting feedback, whether it's conducting user research sessions or listening carefully to the issues that come in through call centers and support lines. For us, it's a continuum and a continuous

process of iterating and improving and iterating and improving.

In the end, if we're taking a DevOps, iterative approach to development of these tools, it results in a better customer experience for our veterans.

How can the VA's work serve as a model for other agencies?

The types of problems we run into at VA are not unique. Digital service teams encounter similar problems across government, so there's a lot of cross-agency learning that can take place.

We have found that the partnership within the agency is extremely important to the success of any one of these projects. The two major projects I talked about did not happen just within the digital service team. They were done in partnership with stakeholders across VA.

The impact of the redesigned VA.gov and of Caseflow is twofold. First, we're proving to other agencies that iterative and agile development can work. Being focused on user-centered design can work. Other agencies can compare their own websites against the new VA.gov and brainstorm how they can take a similar approach. Also, many of our strongest materials are public. The Digital Services Playbook is available online, and we share it with colleagues when they express an interest in taking a more user-centered design approach for their digital products.

Second, when our headquarters team receives requests for help from agencies, we do what we call discovery sprints. We gather a few experts and insert them at those agencies for two to four weeks so they can dig into the problem with a fresh set of eyes. We can help an agency identify some core problems and solutions they may be unable to see because they've been staring at them for so long.

How can agencies improve the way they recruit and retain top digital talent?

By highlighting the mission and the impact folks can have. People get into the technology field because they want to make the world a better place. They see how important technology is to everybody's lives, and they want to contribute to that.

The federal government has a very strong ability to amplify that desire for mission and impact. At VA, being able to serve the veterans who have served this country is an incredible mission to rally behind. There's incredible impact to be had by improving the way that millions of veterans receive the benefits they deserve.

Emphasizing the mission and potential impact software developers or designers can have by joining the government has been incredibly powerful for USDS. We firmly believe agencies across the federal government can attract top tech talent by taking a similar approach. ■