



Q&A

Executive Viewpoint

A conversation with

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This conversation is adapted from a presentation at an FCW event.

Soliciting feedback from veterans

Ten million unique users per month visit a VA website. The online component of citizen experience, which is what I'm most passionate about, is a huge opportunity for agencies like the VA to make a good impression.

When I joined the agency in 2017, we asked ourselves: How are we doing for these 10 million people? We talked to 5,000 veterans, service members and family members, and through a series of qualitative and quantitative research studies, we asked them how we were doing.

We learned that we were doing OK, but there were three consistent points of criticism. One, it was too hard to find what they were looking for on a VA website. Two, they felt our websites were disjointed and hard to navigate. And three, they were frustrated that they had to work to navigate the VA.

Decision-making is usually delegated down to the program level, and as a result, we had built up a fragmented ecosystem. This is really confusing for people. They don't think of the VA as a collection of brands. They think of the VA as a single entity, and so it's very frustrating when they talk to one part of the VA but that part can't help them with another part of the VA.

This is also confusing for Google, which is maybe an even bigger problem. If you've got 10 different versions of

the same content on your website and somebody Googles how to apply for your benefit, they're going to get 10 different results that all have slightly different content delivered with a different look and feel.

Agreeing on North Star objectives

Another consistent piece of feedback we got from veterans was that there was one place they would expect to find what they were looking for, and that was VA.gov.

Before November 2018, VA.gov looked like many other agency websites. There was a lot of information, but it was not designed for the user. Very few of the 10 million people who visit a VA website are looking for the fiscal 2019 budget submission, but too many federal websites have a lot of information that is more about the agency than about the services the agency provides.

We had a lot of stakeholders who were experts at delivering their benefit lines, so it was important to get everyone on the same page. The first thing we did was commit to some North Star objectives before we got down to the nitty-gritty about what's going to be on the homepage, what brand it's going to look like, and who we are redirecting and when.

Our first goal was to increase the use of our self-service tools. The second was to decrease the time that users spend waiting for an outcome from the VA. The first and second go hand in hand because in a lot



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of cases, if you use a self-service tool, the VA can get you an answer faster. The third goal was to consistently deliver a satisfying experience.

We thought about the experience our customers have when they interact with non-government websites. Companies present themselves in a way that's very customer focused with a clear way to log in and see a personalized view of the things you can get from that business. They also have action-oriented content that quickly takes you through a flow or connects you with the thing you're looking for. And there's a single corporate brand.

The new VA.gov homepage was the result of six months of iterating on designs, starting with low-fidelity wireframes that we would test in in-person usability sessions in regional offices and medical centers. From there, we worked it up into a slightly higher fidelity – still not full graphics but just trying to get the information architecture down and testing the designs to see how quickly people could complete a task and find information that we know a lot of veterans are looking for.

Iterative design and measurable results

We had the benefit of a platform called Vets.gov that had been working to improve the customer experience for a few years before we did the redesign of VA.gov.

Vets.gov began with a mandate to make it easy to access the services and benefits that the VA provides, but it started off pretty small. It just provided content about how to get disability and education benefits, rewritten in a way that was easier to understand.

It was not a full solution, but that didn't stop us from launching the site and then iterating it over time, adding new content and seeing how well it was working. The usage of the site grew, and Vets.gov got a redesign that was a little more action-oriented by 2018. The platform provided a lot of lessons that we could bring forward to the new VA.gov, which launched in November 2018.

VA.gov is now focused on the 20 things that represent over 80% of what veterans are coming to a VA website to do. They're very action oriented, with lots of verbs: check your status, apply for health care. Also, VA.gov used to have descriptions about how to do something, but the actual interaction took you to a different portal. Today, if you click on one of these links, it takes you right to the place where you can do what you need to do, all on the same platform.

Across a number of our business lines, we've seen significant increases in usage. Disability compensation benefits submitted online are up over 20%. Profile updates – updating an email or mailing address – were hard to access before. They're up over 400% since we relaunched VA.gov. And

there are ripple effects. A claim submitted online is faster for the VA to work because we don't have to deal with the paper. A mailing address updated easily means we don't send a postcard to the wrong address and have it sent back or lost.

And, importantly, we saw a 9% increase in our overall customer satisfaction scores. This is across every VA website even though not every website was touched by this redesign. Among the areas that were touched by the redesign, we saw a 25% increase in customer satisfaction scores.

Making changes less risky

In government IT, we often make it hard to do something that should be simple. A person needs something and there's a piece of software that could deliver it, but we put all this stuff between them. We found success in cutting through that by using DevOps tactics.

It requires a tight integration with the business team, software developers and designers. Finding a team – and then giving them a clear mandate and letting them do what they do best – was probably the single biggest reason this project succeeded.

All these tactics are just trying to make changes easier, less risky and less costly. If every change is small, it's not that risky. Also, it's easy to undo. What's risky is packaging up a bunch of changes into a big quarterly deployment that you do over a weekend and hope it all works. ■