

Appendix 13

Technical Guidance for Online Employment Services

This guidance is a companion piece to the recommendation “Enhance existing online employment services (Near-Term),” which appears in Chapter 6 under P-2 Employment. We offer suggestions to improve VR&E’s presence on the Web, which includes the VR&E Website, the VR&E America’s Job Bank, and VBA’s Veterans Online Application (VONAPP). The purpose is to focus these online resources primarily on Chapter 31 employment services rather than education and to improve navigation and readability. Here are the topics in this guidance:

- Recommendation Details
- New Language and Positioning
- Helpful Employment Links
- Usability Test Guidelines
- Proposed New Metatags for Webpages

Recommendation Details

Improve and incorporate VBA/VR&E’s online employment information and services into the new Five-Track Employment Process by (1) focusing on employment services and improving the usability of the VBA online application form (VONAPP), VR&E Website, and the DVA version of America’s Job Bank site and (2) developing ongoing training components on online services for staff and eligible veterans.

- Assign an official in the new Office of the Assistant Director for Employment Services to oversee VR&E’s online employment services effort. (Near-Term)
- Re-word and update the VR&E Website <http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/index.htm> to focus more on Chapter 31 employment services than education. (Near-Term; Priority)
- Integrate the VR&E Website (above) and the DVA America’s Job Bank Website <http://dva.jobsearch.org/> for jobseekers and employers into the agency-wide employment services program, including individual counseling and workshops for veterans. (Mid-Term)
- Update the VR&E Website and DVA America’s Job Bank Website links to other employment resources, such as the Department of Labor, Department of Defense, and the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. (Near-Term; Priority)
- Put the Web addresses (URLs) on the VR&E Website, DVA America’s Job Bank Website, and VONAPP on appropriate VR&E and other VA promotional materials to veterans and employers. (Mid-Term)
- Add employment services to VONAPP <http://vabenefits.vba.va.gov/vonapp/main.asp> (Near-Term; Priority)
- Write and apply appropriate metatags with site title, keywords, and content description for the VR&E Website, DVA America’s Job Bank Website and VONAPP so that major search engines will find and display these Web pages when disabled veterans look for career resources on the Internet. (Near-Term; Priority)

- Conduct one-on-one usability tests and/or group usability tests with two or three small focus groups to test the effectiveness of the changes before and after the improvements on the VR&E Website, DVA America’s Job Bank Website, and VONAPP. (Near-Term)
- Train Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, Employment Readiness Specialists, Marketing Placement Specialists and other VR&E staff as needed to use the VR&E Website, the VR&E DVA America’s Job Bank Website, VONAPP, and other appropriate Internet employment resources in and out of government. (Mid-Term)
- Apply appropriate software to maintain and use Web usage statistics¹ on the VR&E Website, the DVA America’s Job Bank Website, and VONAPP as performance measure outputs and as a management tool for Regional Offices and Central Office. (Near-Term)
- Collaborate with the VBA Survey and Research staff to determine veterans’ usage and satisfaction with the Online Employment Services provided by the VR&E Website, the DVA America’s Job Bank Website, and VONAPP. (Mid-Term)
- Employ online surveys, such as the American Customer Satisfaction Index, to determine veterans’ satisfaction on the VR&E Website, the DVA America’s Job Bank Website, and VONAPP. (Mid-Term)

DISCUSSION

The Internet has infiltrated everyday life for most Americans, and has had a serious impact on major life decisions, including careers.² Job sites are among the most popular sites on the Internet and many job seekers routinely submit resumes by email. The Internet provides important resources and tools to help both veterans and their counselors in America’s Job Bank activities.

Our recommendations will re-focus the online information and application form more directly on employment services and make it easier for a veteran to navigate the VBA/VR&E Webpages, a goal that is compatible with Electronic Government in the President’s Management Agenda.

The *Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance* report recognized the potential of an electronic platform and the Internet in providing employment services in its 1999 report. It envisioned that the Department of Labor would work with the Department of Defense and VA to design and maintain a customized, separate Veterans and Servicemembers Internet Site (VASIS) for servicemembers, veterans, and employers on DOL’s powerful electronic platform – what was then called America’s Career Center Kit. Then, as now, America’s Job Bank, one of four online services on the platform, was the largest and most frequently used job bank on the Internet. Everyday, 50,000 job seekers had access to almost a million jobs; 25,000 employers registered jobs. The Commission wanted DoD and VA to use this automated platform “rather than continue to fund and use their own outdated, in-house America’s Job Bank systems.”³

Today VA and DoD use DOL’s electronic platform and database for their Job Banks, but there is no career one-stop Website for veterans and servicemembers. The three departments maintain their own employment-focused or transition assistance Websites.

Indeed, there is a proliferation of such Websites – sponsored by government, business, and nonprofits – including some targeted to the National Guard and Reservists. See Internet Resources in our Bibliography (Appendix 19) for a partial list. It is beyond the scope of our Task Force to propose a fully integrated, cross-agency effort, but we understand that the agencies do work together on online projects of mutual interest, such as the Transferable Skills Identifier.

We have focused on how VR&E can improve its existing Websites for veterans with disabilities and integrate its online resources and those of other agencies into the new Five-Track Employment Process.

America's Job Bank

With DOL's permission, VR&E purchased a site from America's Job Bank (AJB), a grantee of Labor, for the rock bottom price of \$12,000, which includes ongoing maintenance and updates. This Webpage bears the VR&E name, but it sits on America's Job Bank's powerful databases for jobseekers' resumes and employers' job postings. While a job is in the AJB queue (approximately a 24-hour period after a job announcement is posted and awaits approval by the state), veterans' employment service providers can refer veterans to that job ahead of other candidates.

These and other features make it a valuable nationwide resource, but we received conflicting information as to how much it is used by VR&E Staff. One VR&E Officer pointed out that counselors in her state more often used a similar state Website. This is certainly an acceptable practice, but VR&E staff should give more consideration as to how the nationwide Job Bank can be more effectively used, especially for employers.

Web-based Customer Surveys

The Task Force believes that it is important to use Web-based survey tools to find out what customers – veterans and the public – think of the VA Website. We understand that VA is already working with the Federal Quality Consulting Group (FCG) <http://www.fcg.gov/> to implement such a survey tool. FCG is the executive agent for the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), which is a cross-industry measure of the quality of goods and services produced in both the public and private sectors of the national economy. The ACSI, developed by the University of Michigan Business School, has been successfully used by the federal government since 1994. The ACSI also allows federal agencies to benchmark their performance against comparable best-in-class entities.

New Language and Positioning

VA Homepage <http://www.va.gov/>

VA's Website has many helpful features for veterans and the general public. The introduction "How May We Serve You?" is especially user friendly. However, a visitor's first impression of VR&E on the homepage is that employment services take a back seat to vocational rehabilitation because of the size of the fonts used. Voc Rehab shouts. Employment Services whispers. The look is something like this.

Vocational Rehab & Employment Services

We understand that VR&E has requested enlarging the font for Employment Services to no avail. Our Task Force respectfully submits the same request.

VR&E Home Page <http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/index.htm>

Change the wording of the link entitled Ch 31 Job Bank to Job Bank (or better: America's Job Bank) on this and other pages. Newcomers have no idea what Chapter 31 is and they should not have to know.

Throughout the site, change the wording of On-Line Self Help to Online Forms or Online Self Help and Forms.

VR&E Welcome Page http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/voc_rehab.htm

The page is text heavy. Web studies and usability tests, such as those conducted by FirstGov.gov, show that users do not read large blocks of text. They look for descriptive links and headings. Rewrite and reformat this page using descriptive links and headings, which is what users prefer.

Move the Job Bank link in the left column near the bottom of the column to near the top, under the link for VA Home Page.

Also, proof read what you post. In the first paragraph are directions to the webmaster that should have been removed: (hyperlink to vocational-educational counseling page)

VR&E Employer Page http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/for_employers.htm

The link "For Employers" (with jobs) is an email to the VR&E National Employment Coordinator. This link should go to VR&E's Job Bank, <http://dva.jobsearch.org/> which provides tools for employers to register and post their own jobs. It is important that VR&E staff promote this important, time-saving resource for employers, veterans, and VR&E staff.

VBA's Veterans Online Application (VONAPP)

<http://vabenefits.vba.va.gov/vonapp/main.asp>

Focus on Employment. Veterans may use this online form to "apply for compensation, pension and vocational rehabilitation benefits." There is no mention of employment services anywhere on the introductory pages to the form. To keep the focus on employment, we recommend adding "employment services" in the heading, which now reads "If you are applying for Compensation, Pension, or Vocational Rehabilitation." The new wording would be:

If you are applying for Compensation, Pension, or Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Services:

Similar wording should be used in the table of internal links and throughout the text.

Helpful Employment Links

Here are other online government or military employment resources that may be helpful to veteran job seekers, including National Guard and Reservists. They could be added to the bottom of VR&E's Employment Resources Webpage http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/emp_resources.htm

eVets Transition Site <http://www.dol.gov/elaws/evets.htm>

Transition from Soldier to Civilian
<http://www.acap.army.mil/>

Veterans Information on Federal Employment
<http://www.opm.gov/veterans/index.asp>

USA Jobs <http://www.usajobs.opm.gov/>

The Job Page (Federal and State Jobs)
<http://www.thejobpage.gov>

Usability Test Guidelines

The VR&E Website would benefit from one-on-one usability tests and usability focus groups with a small number of people in each. Many agencies use contractors with this kind of expertise to improve their Websites and make them more user friendly. However VR&E staff can conduct their own preliminary usability tests to determine if a site is easy to navigate. Here are some guidelines.

Usability Tests for the VA/VBA/VR&E Websites and VONAPP

The purpose of usability tests is to see if a range of individuals can navigate a Website – that is, find information they may need or want. VR&E can start with its own staff or colleagues from other offices. Start by assigning a test leader who will take the following steps:

- Make a list of about 10 or 12 tasks on the VR&E Website. (See sample tasks below.) Write out the correct URL and most obvious of the paths.
- Reserve a computer training room so that each person can work on a computer.
- Ask 9 or 10 colleagues to take an hour-long usability test. If some don't show, you can conduct the test with fewer people. Ideally you would have a mix – assorted ages, races, male/female, different jobs, but all should be people who are computer literate and use the Internet.
- Invite a note taker and 2 or 3 silent observers, who may also take notes. No person should take names. The note taker and observers should be people who have a stake in the outcome – the people responsible for the web content and services and their supervisor(s). These people can be involved in designing the tasks.

- Prepare task sheets for the participants, providing space for each to provide name, age, male/female, race, job title or type of work. All of this is optional because some people will not want to provide some of the information. Provide a number for each task and enough space to write his/her path to the Webpage or information they are asked to find. Do NOT provide the task because you may not use some of the tasks or you may change the order of the tasks as you go along.
- Conduct the test. Make sure ahead of time that each computer browser is open and on the VA Homepage. Ask each person to introduce him/herself. Keep everything light. Explain that there are NO wrong answers and that you are trying to determine ease of navigation. If a person can't find something, it's a navigational problem, not the participant's problem. Use all or some of the tasks, depending on time. Allow no more than 3 or 4 minutes for each unless you see that everyone is struggling. No one should speak or ask for help, but you can repeat the question.

When time is up, ask who found the Webpage or answer and to tell you how he/she did it, since there are often many paths to the page. At the end you can ask each person to make up a task. Discuss the results. Ask participants for their ideas about improving the site. (You can also do this at the end of each question, but take care of the time.) Cut everything off at the end of the hour and ask the note taker to help you collect the task sheets. Thank everyone for helping out.

Sample Task Questions

During the test, use the wording of each question, which includes no acronyms or jargon that the average veteran would probably not know.

1. Start from the VA homepage www.va.gov.

You are a veteran who believes he/she may be eligible for the VR&E program and you want to find out if you can file online. File means that you can fill out and submit the form electronically.

Answer: VONAPP <http://vabenefits.vba.va.gov/vonapp/main.asp>

2. Start from the VA homepage www.va.gov

You are an employer who has new jobs to post and you are interested in hiring a veteran, possibly a veteran with a disability. You have heard that there is a national online database to do the posting directly. Find the Website.

Answer: VR&E Job Bank <http://dva.jobsearch.org/> (Note to facilitator: One link for Employers is an email address. That is not the answer since the employer wants to post his or her own jobs.)

3. Start from the VA homepage www.va.gov

You are studying to be a vocational rehab counselor at a university. You want a general overview or definition of independent living services.

Here is one answer: <http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/ilp.htm> , but there may be others, especially if the participant uses the VA search engine.

Proposed New Metatags for Websites

The Task Force found that the VR&E Homepage, VR&E Welcome Page, DVA Job Bank Website, and VONAPP had few or no metatags – coding that helps search engines find and display appropriate Web pages when users put keywords in search boxes of search engines. In this case, we want disabled veterans to find VR&E’s career resources and VBA’s online application form when they use major search engines.

To find metatags, click on “View” in the top bar of the browser, then “Source.”

Below are selected metatags as they currently appear, followed by wording we recommend for each site’s title, keywords, and content description.

Current Metatags for VR&E Homepage <http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/index.htm>

```
<title>Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment Services</title>
<meta NAME="Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment"
CONTENT="Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service Web Page">
<meta NAME="keywords" CONTENT="Vocational Rehabilitation,
Employment, Counseling, Vocational, Independent Living, Disability">
```

Proposed Current VR&E Homepage Metatags

The Task Force proposes that the title be customized for the VR&E page:

Title: Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program for veterans with service-connected disabilities; Veterans Benefit Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs

Keywords: Veterans, vets, vocational rehabilitation and employment, service-connected disabilities, service-related disabilities, jobs, employment services, job bank, employment resources, career resources, vocational rehabilitation, independent living, apply, apply online, application form, employers, hire a disabled veteran, disability, ability to work, vocational rehabilitation, Chapter 31, transition assistance, Veterans Affairs, Veterans Administration

Description: VA’s Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program provides job readiness services, employment services, counseling, vocational rehabilitation and independent living services to eligible veterans with service-connected disabilities.

Current Welcome to Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service Page http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/voc_rehab.htm

```
<META content="Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service Web Page"
name="Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment">
<META
content="Vocational Rehabilitation, Employment, Counseling, Vocational,
Independent Living, Disability"
```

Proposed Welcome to Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service Page

Use VR&E Homepage metatags.

Current VR&E Job Bank Website Metatags

<http://dva.jobsearch.org/>

```
<title>Home Page</title>
```

There are no other metatags and "home page" is not a suitable title.

Proposed VR&E Job Bank Website Metatags

This site uses a design and technology created by America's Job Bank sponsored by the Department of Labor. We used the metatags for that site as a starting place and added keywords specific to VR&E.

Title: America's Job Bank for Veterans, Veterans Affairs, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service, job search engine, jobs

Keywords: jobs, job search, dream job, job openings, job bank, job search, veterans, veterans with service-connected disabilities, resumes, sample resumes, careers, career search, job search engine

Description: Disabled veterans, are you looking for your dream job? Post your resume, set up an automated job search. Search through our database of over one million jobs nationwide.

Current VBA VONAPP Metatags

```
<title>Welcome to the Electronic Department of Veteran Affairs</title>
```

```
<meta name="keywords" content="Department of Veterans
Affairs", veterans, "veterans benefits", "VA benefits", vets, compensation,
pension, "vocational rehabilitation", VA, VBA, "VA Regional Offices",
", "Veterans Administration">
```

```
<meta name="description" content="Veterans Benefits
Administration interactive benefits applications. Veterans Benefits
Administration is an organizational element of the U.S. Department of Veterans
Affairs. Site allows applicants to apply for certain VA benefits on line.">
```

Proposed VBA VONAPP Metatags

Title: Veterans Benefits Administration interactive benefits application forms for compensation, pensions, and vocational rehabilitation and employment services.

Keywords: Online Form, Veterans, benefits, compensation, pension, vocational rehabilitation, employment, veterans with service-connected disabilities, disabled veterans, apply for, application form, online application, independent

living, Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Administration, Veterans Benefit Administration

Description: Official U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (V A) website, which enables veterans to apply for benefits using the Internet. U.S. military veterans and some service members within six months of separation or retirement can apply online for compensation, pension, and with a service-connected disability can apply online for vocational rehabilitation and employment services.

Conclusion

This guidance primarily deals with making a few edits and corrections to VR&E Web pages and the VBA online form to make them easier for veterans and the public to navigate. VBA and VR&E should consider a total overhaul to the Website to keep in step with the implementation of the new integrated, employment-driven service delivery system.

¹ Many federal agencies use WebTrends or a similar software

² *The Web as a Way of Life*, Robyn Greenspan, May 21, 2002,
http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/demographics/article/0,,5901_1142561,00.html

³ Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance Report, January 1999, pp 63-67.

