

Case Study: Veterans Benefits Administration

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), one of three main administrations of the Department of Veterans Affairs, is charged with providing benefits and services to American veterans and their families in a responsive, timely, and compassionate manner in recognition of their service to the nation. Over 12,000 people work for the VBA.

Meeting the Knowledge Sharing Challenge

In 1995, with the agency's continuous efforts to improve operating efficiencies, the VBA identified the need to improve its delivery of communications and training to all nationwide regional offices. Under the traditional method, employees traveled to receive instructor-led training, much of which was viewed as very repetitive. In order to reach all employees, the same class had to be repeated to accommodate class size limitations, travel schedules, and work loads.

Data gathered from an organizational assessment showed that staff saw an inconsistency in training from region to region as well as from class to class. Additionally, complaints were made about the slowness of receiving training and the inability to quickly disseminate information.

Added to this, Congress and the United States General Accounting Office were criticizing VBA for taking too long in processing benefit claims for veterans. Appeals for better letter writing had long been heard from veterans, legislators, and VA staff persons. Instruction letters sent to veterans, written by agency employees, were poorly written and veterans often had a difficult time understanding their benefit descriptions and instructions. It would often take two to three letters just to fulfill one request.

In order to increase the effectiveness and productivity of VBA's letter writing, as well as meet a Presidential Memorandum on Plain Language within the entire federal government, legislators issued a mandate to upgrade written communication within the VBA. The program was entitled Reader Focused Writing (RFW). Given the new mandate and the agency's own internal assessments, the VBA determined that they needed to fundamentally change the way they delivered and shared knowledge within the agency.

The Solution

After considerable research, the VBA chose OneTouch for their training and communication solution. There were several reasons for the decision including ease of implementation - the VBA felt that their employees could quickly adapt to the new technology. Another determining factor was the interactivity that the two-way data exchange allowed the employees. Employees see and hear the presenter and presentation materials on a conference room TV monitor and interact by using the interactive touchpads. Participants can answer questions and take quizzes issued by the presenter. Employee results are compiled and available for immediate display to all participants, while post-session tabulation allows presenters to determine their effectiveness in reaching participants. The results are measurable and certifiable, and class records can be logged into VBA's database.

“The OneTouch solution enables a faster, more efficient way for VBA to communicate and provides employees the convenience of learning at their offices.”

Luisa Hill
Learning Resource Officer
Veterans Benefits
Administration

The VBA marketing group, in an effort to ensure critical mass and success across the organization, developed several ways to reinforce the new communication strategy. A follow-up broadcast to employees was scheduled six weeks after the core RFW course ended in order to: reinforce primary teaching points; discuss what worked in real-life and share stories so staff could see that others were struggling and succeeding with similar challenges. By using the OneTouch solution, the marketing department was able to reinforce these messages quickly and cost effectively-reaching all participants and maximizing the impact of the RFW initiative.

Measure of Success

Since the implementation of the RFW course delivered via the OneTouch solution, 98% of the letters sent to veterans are successful the first time. According to the agency, the new letters are not only clearer, but they make veterans feel that they and the VBA are working together to solve a common problem. This not only makes life easier for the veterans; it saves the agency operating costs and makes the VBA employees' job much easier.

"VBA employees were really excited about the high level of interactivity that the OneTouch solution provides; they were suddenly given a voice," said Luisa Hill, Learning Resource Officer, Veterans Benefits Administration. "Once we had a cost-effective and easy-to-use means to deliver training, VBA employees were no longer hesitant to ask management to attend classes."

In addition to the successful conversion and broadcast of the RFW program, the VBA has found the OneTouch solution ideal as part of a blended technology training offering. Initial, intensive technical courses are delivered in person, while the agency's OneTouch network is used to communicate updates to system changes. This blended learning approach gives the agency flexibility, speeds the process for their 250 technical employees to receive the right tools and knowledge to do their jobs, and ensures consistent information is delivered.

Feedback from VBA technicians has been overwhelmingly positive. While not directly attributable to the implementation of the OneTouch solution, it is interesting to note that comparing VBA employee survey results prior to the solution implementation with afterwards shows an improvement in three communications areas. Employees who participated in the Organizational Assessment Survey increased their rating for the following statements: "employees are kept informed on issues affecting their jobs;" "employees share their knowledge with each other;" and, "managers communicate the goals and priorities of the organization." Clearly, the VBA's continuous efforts to improve communications are being realized throughout the organization, and ultimately, by the veterans that they serve.

"When we implemented the solution five years ago, the agency had a limited budget for a communication and training solution, but we knew we would eventually have the resources to expand our network. The OneTouch solution provided us the opportunity for future growth," commented Hill.



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