Department of Veterans Affairs Internet World Wide Web Server

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Overview

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Internet World Wide Web (WWW) server is a worldwide resource that provides information on VA programs, veterans' benefits, VA offices worldwide, and VA medical automation software. Since September 1994, the VA WWW has served several major constituencies including the veteran and his/her dependents, veterans service organizations, the military, the public, and VA employees around the world. During the month of February 1999, the VA WWW provided 2.4 million document views in nearly 325,000 sessions. There are over 150,000 documents on the server.

This WWW service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to veterans via the Internet. Internet mail is also available to allow veterans to make specific inquiries and receive official responses from VA staff. These documents are easily accessible and richly linked from their table of contents, as well as searchable by a keyword. Personnel across the Department have made substantial contributions to the high quality of this Web site.

VA's home page at <www.va.gov> is the product of Department-wide cooperation, with contributions from the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), the Veterans Benefits Administration, the Board of Veterans Appeals, and the Offices of Public Affairs, Planning and Analysis, Information Resources Management, Finance, and Acquisition and Materiel Management. Since the inception of the Web site, VHA has provided the hardware platform and system software, permitting program offices to have a Web presence without the costly overhead of a production facility.

Meeting Our Customers' Needs

VA is committed to using <www.va.gov> to meet the needs of our external customers: veterans, dependents, veterans service organizations, and citizens. The following is a summary of the major sources of information that are available on the VA Web Server:

* VA Forms - VA posts forms on the Internet, makes them interactive, and tests them for accessibility and print quality. Currently, most electronic forms on the server have to be printed and completed manually. VA is adding interactive fields and controls to these forms, as well as formatting them so that the Web search engine can locate them with greater reliability.

* Veterans Service Organization Database - This database provides employees, veterans, and the public with details of dozens of veterans organizations at both the national and state level, including, when available, links to the electronic services of each VSO.

* Federal Benefits Manual for Veterans and Dependents - A general directory of resources and eligibility information, as well as detailed organizational listings of VA Central Office, and all VA benefits and healthcare field facilities.

* What Are My VA Benefits? - A collection of current fact sheets on frequently asked questions related to VA compensation and pension, insurance, home loan & sales, and education benefits.

* Boards of Veterans Appeals Decisions 1994-97 - Over 75,000 decisions of the Board are available for searching. This is a convenient tool used by veterans and veterans service organizations to research the Board's findings to determine claim precedent.

* 1-Stop Customer Service Inquiry Page - The VA customer service team answers electronic mail messages from veterans and other members of the public. Where to Go For Help - VA list of toll-free phone numbers for the convenience of veterans and dependents, including VA benefits, life insurance, debt management center, CHAMPVA, headstones and markers, Persian Gulf Hotline and telecommunications devices for the deaf.

* Facilities and Leadership Directory - contains a complete list of all VA facilities complete with addresses and telephone numbers, a profile of each medical center and pictures of many facilities.

* VA Research - A Research Projects Database containing approximately 1,400 records of currently active VA-funded research programs and projects and is updated quarterly.

* VA GILS - The Government Information Locator System (GILS) is a "virtual card catalog" providing pointers to VA-held information dissemination products, such as books, publications, studies, automated information systems, and Privacy Act Systems of Records.

Server Usage Patterns Are Evolving

Over the past 12 months, the number of sessions per month has leveled off at 330,000. During this period, both the Veterans Benefits Administration and the National Cemetery Administration have established their own Web servers and sites, drawing their respective clientele toward these services. Likewise, numerous VA medical centers and regional offices have set up their own Web sites offering both general and specialized sources of information. As program offices become more experienced and their services more sophisticated, the value of independent operations becomes more apparent. However, the hypertext links on Web pages enables seamless movement from one site to another. So

new Web sites and services can be readily incorporated into existing Web pages, allowing customers to move smoothly through the entire virtual VA.

A session is the series of Web pages attributed to a given user or a personal computer. A session identification code is created in the visitor's browser cookie file for the purpose of generating this usage data. VA does not collect these files; nor do these files contain any personal identifying information on Web site visitors. When the cookie expires after 24 hours, the next contact with the Web server creates a new cookie and a new session. Hence, an individual may create several sessions in a given month.

Although the number of sessions is steady, the number of hits sharply increased in the fall of 1998. A hit is the downloading of a Web page or image associated with a Web page. A single page can generate multiple hits; the more images and other objects on the page, the greater the number of hits. This effect can be somewhat mitigated by careful Web page coding.

A large number of page objects is not necessarily undesirable. We have undertaken to improve navigational aids, resulting in a greater number of images. Furthermore, certain showcase applications will involve a large number of images and sound files. These applications demonstrate the leading edge of Web technology, encouraging management support for further initiatives. Nevertheless, care must be taken to provide low tech alternative sites for bandwidth-challenged users.

Along with the hit rates, session lengths also rose sharply last fall. This suggests that VA customers were visiting more pages, or that VA's pages were becoming more complex, or both.

Issues Facing VA Webmasters

Electronic Records Management - Agencies have come to depend on electronic versions of policies and procedures found on their Web sites and those of other agencies. Agencies with many field stations cannot afford one or more clerks at each site to organize this information on paper. Web sites may become the cornerstones of agency record keeping. Paper documents are being converted to electronic media to allow full text indexing and searches, computer-assisted quantitative and qualitative analysis, hyperlinks to related documents and files, and support access from anywhere in the world.

Government Paperwork Elimination Act (GPEA) - GPEA provides authority for acquisition and use of alternative information technologies as a substitute for paper and for the use and acceptance of electronic signatures. OMB in consultation with the National Telecommunications and Information Administration is to develop procedures for the use and acceptance of electronic signatures not later than 18 months after enactment of the GPEA. Also, not later than 18 months after enactment, OMB is to develop procedures for private employers to store and file electronically with Executive agencies forms containing information pertaining to their employees.

Not later than five years after enactment, Executive agencies are to provide for the option of the electronic maintenance, submission or disclosure of information, when practicable, as a substitute for paper. OMB issued draft guidelines for comment. These guidelines provide a

road map for agencies to follow in implementing GPEA. Agency Webmasters will play a key role in the implementation of this legislation.

Public Key Infrastructure - Presently, the cachet of the agency domain name provides the first and often the only authentication for Web documents. The framers of GPEA understood that the Federal Government needs to implement a public key infrastructure that private industry supports. Moreover, Webmasters need effective technology for documenting the custody and online maintenance of electronic documents. We must be able to determine with certainty who did what to a document, and when.
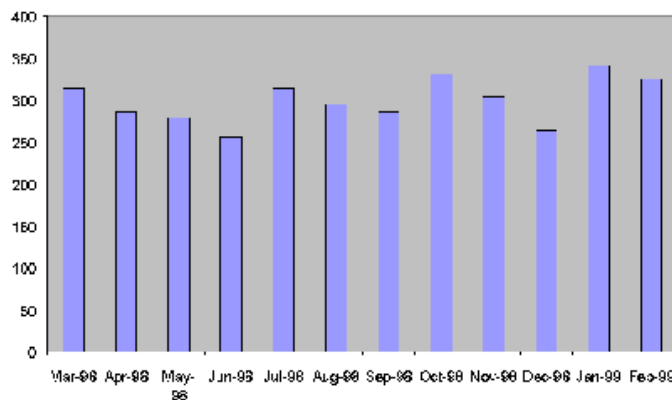
Relying on the Web for authoritative documentation is easy and relatively cheap. Although a bargain for the agency as a whole, control and integrity of the electronic records are neither easy nor cheap. If official records appear on Web sites, keepers of the sites will have to limit privileges to those with the appropriate rights.

Access for the Disabled - VA is addressing access for the disabled on VA Web sites. VA has 481 visually-challenged employees. VA statistics show a veteran population of over 100,000 with some visual disability. Web page authors need to understand the value they add for the blind when they use text to describe their graphics. Moreover, the blind have difficulty completing forms online on the Internet. Scanned photocopies of forms are not readily interpretable by the software that the blind use to read text.
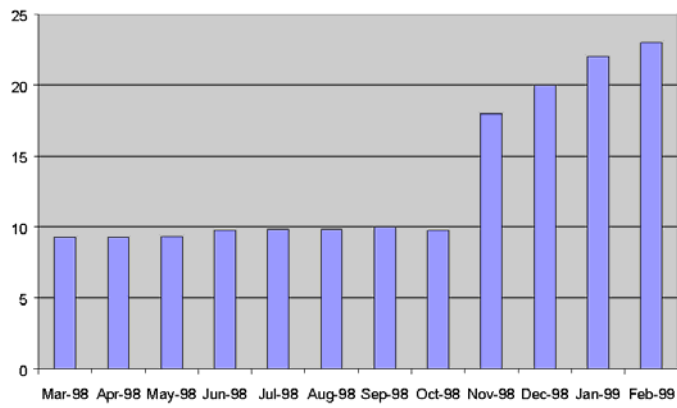
Conclusion

VA program and staff offices have come to rely on Web-based communications, mirroring the explosive growth of the World Wide Web. The ability to publicize special emphasis services, policies, standards and other offerings of the Department has been an unqualified success in achieving the immediate goals of each effort and in advancing VA's presence as a service driven agency. The speed with which major issues can be disseminated for the widest possible dissemination is of great importance and value as new initiatives and topics emerge. The Department's management and staff now think of <www.va.gov> as one of the most effective means of getting the news out. The agency's and Webmaster's challenge is to deliver on this expectation.

Number of User Sessions (in Thousands)

Average User Session Length (in Minutes)

Month	Value
Mar-98	~9
Apr-98	~9
May-98	~9
Jun-98	~10
Jul-98	~10
Aug-98	~10
Sep-98	~10
Oct-98	~10
Nov-98	~18
Dec-98	~20
Jan-99	~22
Feb-99	~23

Number of Successful Hits for Entire Site (in millions)

Month	Value
Mar-98	~5
Apr-98	~4.2
May-98	~4.2
Jun-98	~3.7
Jul-98	~4.2
Aug-98	~4.1
Sep-98	~4
Oct-98	~4.6
Nov-98	~12.2
Dec-98	~8.8
Jan-99	~10.4
Feb-99	~10.5