

Veteran Resources in New York State: What are the barriers to creating and supporting an online
directory of Veteran resources in New York?

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Abstract

Veterans and their families are inundated with resources with little to no guidance. While a centralized directory of basic resources from each state exists on the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (U.S. DVA) website, there is no comprehensive and centralized Veteran resource directory for the state of New York. This paper attempts to identify what barriers have prevented the development of such a resource in New York by reviewing other state's attempts at creating a similar resource such as Massachusetts and how the integration of activity theory and common identity theory can be utilized in the creation of a centralized resource directory. It will also evaluate the role the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs (NYS DVA) can play in housing, maintaining and collaborating with Veteran Service Organizations, nonprofits and private sector partners to create a successful Veterans resource directory for New York. The creation of a mockup to demonstrate the incorporation of the knowledge gained is also presented as a part of this proposal.

Introduction

“Veterans don’t have a resource problem, they have a navigability problem” (Mallach, 2017).

Veterans are a lauded group in American society and as a result, many people, groups and institutions were created to assist and provide services to them. Consequently, these resources remain widely dispersed, unvetted and relatively unknown to the vast majority of Veterans and their families. While the US VA does provide an overview of federal benefits that exist for Veterans and their families, there is virtually no information available about finding resources or assistance on a state level. Therefore, if you are a Veteran in New York State, there is no centralized location to find out about what may be available to you and your family in New York unless, you do your own research and gathering of resources. The New York State Division of Veterans’ Affairs (NYS DVA) as the state licensing authority (*New York State Executive Law*, 1945) for all Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) should be responsible for creating, maintaining and engaging with the Veterans community to develop a centralized, online resource directory that both Veterans and other organizations can utilize to identify and make use of the available resources in their area.

This study is to determine what barriers exist for creating an online consolidated Veteran resource directory and the successful elements of other online resources and how they can be incorporated. As well as, how the theoretical basis of activity theory, which is based on the concept of how subjects (Veterans and Service Veteran Organizations) and objects (resource site) interact with one another (Kaptelinin, 2013) and common identity theory, which “refers to people’s different reasons for being in a group, that is, because they like the group as a whole — identity-based attachment (Ren, Kraut & Kiesler, p. 380 2007) could be integrated into an online

directory and the author's own experiences in working with Veterans and attempting to use the currently available resources for directing them to services.

Therefore, this study is largely a qualitative analysis of existing resources that exist including identifying their strengths and weakness, an explanation of how activity theory and common identity are particularly relevant to the nuances and unique approach of Veterans to collaborative spaces and what role the NYS DVA, VSOs and private sector partners play when it comes to interacting with Veterans and how they can be key players and benefitters in the creation and maintenance of an online Veterans resource directory for New York State. A mockup (Appendix 1) of such an online resource directory will be created to incorporate elements that the literature has identified as useful for online directories and incorporates elements that help foster common identity based on common identity theory and rely on activity theory for the basis of how the Veterans will interact with the site and be transformed by it (Kaptelinin, 2013).

Background

Several attempts at an online Veteran resource directory have been made in New York State in recent years, all of which have been short-lived and are no longer used (Pomerance, 2018). None of these attempts, however, were completed or maintained by the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs which, is a statewide Veteran Service Organization that advocates for Veterans and their families and assists in the creation and submission of Veterans benefits on the local, state and federal levels (New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs, n.d.). They also have the legal authority to oversee all VSOs in the State of New York which, puts the agency in a unique position to act as a coordinating player to bring all the major VSOs to the table to seek their feedback and knowledge of local resources for incorporation into an online resource directory.

Additionally, their role of having offices and authority across the state also makes them an ideal organization to be the centralized point of contact for such a resource as they can collaborate with other VSOs across the state and increase the awareness of the resource with Veterans and their families during their visits to NYS DVA offices.

Plenty of organizations have attempted to create a directory, though they are often static in the form of PDFs with no way to contact someone if something is incorrect or out of date, they are the products mostly of VSOs with little to no consulting with Veteran clients about what information and formats would be most useful to them, they demonstrate territorial differences (American Legion, a VSO, will not list resources from the Veterans of Foreign Wars, another VSO, because they each occupy their spaces) and they often miss huge numbers of resources. Just recently, in two separate meetings in March, 2018 that the author attended, the issue of being unaware of the resources that exist in New York, the lack of a centralized location for resources that are state specific and the momentous task of sorting through and vetting all of the available Veteran resources were all cited as issues that Veterans would like to see addressed by NYS DVA.

This project will review some of the existing resource directories and provide a rationale as to why they fail to meet the current needs of Veterans and VSOs in the State of New York. It will also look into how Veterans interact with online spaces and why they can a valuable resource for the addition and vetting of resource onto an online directory. A review of current literature that addresses why such a resource is important and what Veteran identified issues exist with them will be incorporated into the proposed paths forward and solutions that NYS DVA could take to see this online resource directory realized. It will also draw from the author's

own personal experiences and interactions as the Information Technology and Public Information Specialist within NYS DVA with Veterans and VSOs. A proposed mockup of this online resource directory will also be included in this project to provide the basic foundation of what such an online resource could look like and be the basis for future development.

Research Questions

The primary research questions for this study are: What are the obstacles NYS DVA will face when creating and maintaining an online resource directory of Veteran resources throughout New York? What elements will the mockup site include based on the literature and websites reviewed? How could the creation of such an application be useful to Veterans and Veteran Service Organizations throughout New York?

Secondary research questions this study hopes to address include: What resources and support would be necessary to successfully manage and maintain this online resource? How can activity theory and common identity theory act as a basis for developing buy-in from VSOs and Veterans to contribute to this resource? What are the benefits and drawbacks to taking a more localized approach to a resource directory rather than a generalized view? What will be the recommendations for next steps for the NYS DVA to take to create such a resource?

This study should address all of these questions and provide recommendations for next steps in the creation of this online consolidated resource directory. The basis for this analysis and recommendations will come from previous experiences creating Veteran resources, understanding the benefits of what an interconnected resource provides VSOs and Veterans and an understanding of how the identity of Veteran and how interacting with such a site will provide

for a rich platform of engagement that will hopefully, contribute to its success and useful as a Veterans and their family members resource.

Literature Review

Abstract

For Veterans in New York, a resource awareness problem about benefits that exists across the state. Newer generations of Veterans increasingly technology based, and older generations of Veterans have taken online communities and social networks. This development revealed the need for a centralized online Veterans directory. The literature reviewed found an online resource directory which, prioritizes ease of use and acts as a “one-stop shop” for services across the state increases Veterans awareness and utilization of resources and Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs). In all of the studies and research conducted, the barriers of decentralization, ill-maintained online applications and a lack of awareness had a negative effect on Veterans impression and attitude towards seeking services. However, the studies differed on whether their approaches were based online or as McCaslin, Leach, Herbst & Armstrong’s (2013) research did, utilized an in-person approach with a focus on the geographical obstacles Veterans face. But, it created parameters for an online resource with the additional research by Ren, Kraut & Kiesler (2007) and Kaptelinin (2013) on common identity and activity theory provide the theoretical framework for it. This framework will help create an engaged and participatory online community more likely to work towards the common goal of helping maintain and disperse such an online resource like the ones maintained by other state Veteran agencies. These studies are categorized into states abilities to provide information for Veterans

on benefits, identifying barriers and solutions for veterans seeking Veteran resources and theoretical frameworks for social networking and online communities for the purposes of evaluation in this review.

States Abilities to Provide Information for Veterans on Benefits

Veteran benefits exist on three levels: local (town, county or city), state and federal. These benefits are created, distributed and maintained by their corresponding municipalities. Currently, New York State does not have a consolidated resource directory for Veterans. This literature review discusses efforts by states to increase the flow of knowledge between Veteran Service Organizations (most of which exist at a national and state level) and Veterans.

In “Supporting Veterans in Massachusetts An Assessment of Needs, Well-Being, and Available Resources” (Farmer et al., 2017), the researchers conducted outreaches, focus groups and interviews with Veterans and Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs). They analyzed the Veterans understanding of state resources and their utilization of them in Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Department of Veterans’ Services worked with the Red Sox Foundation to create an online resource portal for Massachusetts Veterans to inform them of resources on municipal levels as well as non-profits (Farmer et al., 2017). The creation and maintenance of an application by another state agency speaks to the feasibility of New York to create something similar. The site is hosted by the state agency which, provides support for a similar application to be hosted by New York State’s Veteran agency (Farmer et al., 2017).

Farmer et al. (2017) found Veterans cited a difficulty locating benefits online as their main reason for not seeking out services. Other important findings included determining the online resource portal was a useful start for Veterans to find out about benefits but a lack of

updating and awareness campaigns on made the resource useless for Veterans and VSOs (Farmer et al., 2017). VSOs acknowledged the benefits of online resources but cautioned that online resource directories may have the unintended consequence of overloading Veterans with information (Farmer et al., 2017). The researchers also found the Massachusetts application was difficult to navigate and resulted in Veterans leaving the site (Farmer et al., 2017).

The causes of these issues, lack of updated trainings for Veteran Service Officers on benefits, the absence of a consolidated point of information and an inability to keep up with the constant changing requirements on a state level from the federal VA, are similar in Farmer et al. (2017) and Wittrock, Ono, Stewart, Reisinger & Charlton (2014). This is despite these studies examining two different populations of Veterans (urbans versus rural) in two different areas (Northeast and Midwest). Wittrock, Ono, Stewart, Reisinger & Charlton (2014) similar to Farmer et al. (2017) found the websites Veterans used to navigate to resources were outdated and inaccessible. A resource directory in the Wittrock, Ono, Stewart, Reisinger & Charlton (2014) study was not noted on a state-level for Veterans in the Midwest to learn about resources they may use in contrast to the Farmer et al. (2017) study.

The issues of poorly maintained online resources and a lack of awareness among Veterans and VSOs found in Farmer et al. (2017) is a similar theme found in the research of Wittrock, Ono, Stewart, Reisinger & Charlton (2014) on state resources in rural areas of the U.S. These findings note the need for a centralized and update resource directory from the state regarding local, state and federal resources. As noted in both studies, while resources do exist, if they are not properly maintained and if VSOs are not made aware of its existence, it simply creates another confusing and useless website for Veterans to navigate.

Wittrock, Ono, Stewart, Reisinger & Charlton (2014) found in their research the presence of knowledgeable state and county level Veteran Service Officers increased Veterans engagement with the federal Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and other benefits. Unfortunately, their research found with rural area Veteran Service Officers, there was a gap in knowledge on benefits. This lack of knowledge resulted in a bias to discourage Veterans from seeking out resources (Wittrock, Ono, Stewart, Reisinger & Charlton, 2014).

Identifying Barriers and Solutions for Veterans Seeking Veteran Resources

Veterans face a multitude of obstacles as they transition from military to civilian life. This transition does not necessarily happen in the immediate aftermath of their return home, sometimes it can take years or decades. As a result, Veterans of different generations (Vietnam Era Veterans, student Veterans, post-9/11 Veterans, etc.) experience a variety of barriers. The bureaucratic nature of government and accessing benefits for Veterans compounds their frustrations and lack of engagement. The literature reviewed in this section identifies the barriers and solutions Veterans and Veteran Service Officers have found when utilizing Veteran benefits.

McCaslin, Leach, Herbst & Armstrong's (2013) research focused largely on student Veterans, most of whom were post-9/11 Veterans. Their research created a replicable model based on their work with the San Francisco Veterans' Medical Center and the City of San Francisco Veterans Outreach Program. The barriers identified by student Veterans in the study were around difficulty making time to speak with and go to appointments either with Veteran Service Officers or VA administrators, long commutes to resources and a lack of usable online resources to community-based services (McCaslin, Leach, Herbst & Armstrong, 2013). As a result, the research team created a physical one-stop shop on campus for the Veterans to access

local, state and federal services, reaching over 1,000 of the 1,2000 student Veterans on campus (p.ix, McCaslin, Leach, Herbst & Armstrong, 2013).

The researchers addressed the issues of convoluted, poorly managed and ineffective services which were also referenced by Veterans in the studies of Farmer et al. (2017) and Wittrock, Ono, Stewart, Reisinger & Charlton (2014). Additionally, the model used by McCaslin, Leach, Herbst & Armstrong's (2013) increased the overall awareness of services to this particular Veteran community through a centralized location on campus and collaborating with partners. By creating a one-stop shop of resources directory and courting buy-in from Veteran oriented organizations to increase their commitment to a project can be applied to the online realm to help Veterans overcome the barrier to knowledge and resources (McCaslin, Leach, Herbst & Armstrong, 2013).

The work of Resnik et al. (2012) expands in many ways upon the barriers addressed by Veterans in McCaslin, Leach, Herbst & Armstrong's (2013) but focused on post-9/11 Veterans as a whole regarding barriers to services. In contrast, however, the work was done via a working group for Resnik et al. (2012) to create a theoretical basis rather than an actual prototype of service model used by McCaslin, Leach, Herbst & Armstrong (2013).

An aspect spoken about in Resnik et al. (2012) which, failed to appear in the other literature was the inclusion of familial and friend support as both a barrier and an advantage for Veterans to access Veteran services. Veterans are expected by their families and friends to return to their old selves. They often feel isolated and alone causing them to retreat from seeking help and resources (Resnik et al., 2012). As Resnik et al. (2012) notes to help combat this, friends and

families need to be included in the creation of Veteran resources and given access to the vital information they can use to connect to the Veteran in their lives and help them seek out services. This is similar to Savitsky, Illingworth & DuLaney (2009) who point out the need for civilians to have access to resources to inform them about the culture and experiences of the Veterans they serve to provide better services. This disconnect between civilian providers and families unaware of the experiences Veterans may have had while serving was cited as a barrier for families and Veterans (Savitsky, Illingworth & DuLane, 2009). Similar to the recommendations from Farmer et al. (2017), Savitsky, Illingworth & DuLaney (2009) note the importance of keeping and maintaining a resource directory created with the collaboration of non-profits, private sector and governmental partners those working in the Veteran sphere can contribute to the successful linking of services to Veterans across sectors and geographic areas.

The barrier of access to services across geographic areas becomes especially clear when working with rural Veterans as Wittrock, Ono, Stewart, Reisinger & Charlton's (2014) demonstrated and as Druss' (2007) research showed when studying Veteran access during a natural disaster to services. In contrast to the other articles and research reviewed, Druss (2007) studied the before, during and after periods of Hurricane Katrina, and found the ability to go to any VA facility enabled Veterans to have a continuity of medical and mental health services the civilian population did not. By studying the data from the VHA facilities in the area, Druss (2007) determined 67.8% of Veterans enrolled in the VA in New Orleans were able to receive services before and during the storm, with 87.5% in the Biloxi-Gulfport area receiving services. Druss' (2017) research demonstrates when Veterans overcome obstacles to access VA resources they are provided with a stable source of health and social services.

These articles shed light on the major barriers service providers, Veterans and military families face when attempting to access Veteran services. These barriers include but are not limited to: lack of awareness of services, decentralized resources which, makes navigating the systems difficult, ill-maintained and out-of-date online directories, and unfamiliarity by both Veterans and civilian counterparts about Veteran Service Organizations which, exist to assist them. The literature also demonstrated that by connecting with a Veterans Service Officer and consolidating resources in one location, a Veterans likelihood of enrolling in and engaging with the VA system increases. An online resource directory which, is centralized for services across the state, navigable and updated by an agency with Veteran Service Officers across the state to provide direct assistance to Veterans, their families and other service providers would help to minimize these barriers.

Theoretical Frameworks for Social Networking and Online Communities

To create an online resource directory, it is important to gain an understanding of how tightly knit groups such as Veterans operate in online communities. To do this, one must review the literature on how theories and procedures such as transparency, activity theory, common identity and bond theory inform the creation and support of these communities. By understanding these theories, it is possible to employ these frameworks to create a guide of best practices for the eventual implementation of a tool which, will engage and inform the Veteran community.

Creating technology which, adds value to the lives of the users and why users interact with these technologies in the particular way they do is examined by Kaptelinin (2013) through the lens of activity theory. Activity theory is based on the concept of subjects (for these purposes,

Veterans and Veteran Organizations) and objects (a resource directory site) (Kaptelinin, 2013). According to activity theory, “Activity-centered” application, organized by their usefulness to the group rather than standardized categories, elevates the user experience and encourages people to want to use the resource, as seen in successful examples such as the Apple Computer (Kaptelinin, 2013). This aligns with the findings and analysis of Ren, Kraut & Kiesler (2007) regarding common identity theory and how a structured group like Veterans gravitate towards resources that help them accomplish a specific task or goal (receiving benefits) rather than engaging in a general discussion. Gunawardena et al. (2009) also found this to be true when examining the creation of online communities through social networking sites. They found that a common goal to work towards engaged end-users of a shared group (Gunawardena et al., 2009). These theories emphasize the design of online sites and communities should encourage end users to contribute to and use these online networks because they feel they are a part of a common identity. Common identity encourages the common goal design because groups (such as Veterans) want to be involved in an activity which, helps to fulfill their lives and the group (Ren, Kraut & Kiesler, 2007).

In order for camaraderie and group attachment to develop as described in common identity and activity theory, policies of trust and transparency should be in place by the governmental organizations helping and providing services. Bertot, Jaeger, Munson & Glaisyer (2010) note with transparency from government agencies about their goals and seeking constituents input through social media, it is possible to create superior programs which, incorporate the opinions of those most likely to use it. This provides buy-in for the end-users and increases the efficacy of the program or resource developed by the agency. This encourages

awareness and results in increased usefulness for end-users and superior quality programs and policies for the agency (Bertot, Jaeger, Munson & Glaisyer, 2010).

This policy of transparency and engagement supports the methods of common identity and activity theory to create an active and engaged online community resource (Bertot, Jaeger, Munson & Glaisyer, 2010). When a community is created and invested in the betterment of the group using social networking tools, they create “collective intelligence” that spurs them towards the achievement of a common goal (Gunawardena et al., 2009). As noted by Gunawardena et al. (2009), social networks and social bookmarking (online directory sites) can increase awareness and learning about resources in an online environment. The combination of these practices and theories provides a solid foundation for creating involved and participatory online communities through the design of a resource that prioritizes a common identity and goal for the group to commit to.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed provided insight into the barriers Veterans face when attempting to learn about and access services. By identifying the recurring issues and by seeking feedback from Veteran and their families, the paper can identify best practices for what to include in an online resource that Veterans themselves would find helpful. Additionally, it reinforces that an awareness campaign among stakeholders and Veteran resource administrators would be needed for the overall success of the online resource directory. Civilians and Veterans alike need to learn about and consider the cultural differences of their groups. Resources should be created in such a way that included Veterans can direct and help other Veterans to the resource and civilians can educate themselves about what exists to help the Veterans in their lives.

Integral to all of this is the role that the Veteran Service Officers and Organizations play in connecting Veterans to this resource but also contributing to its maintenance and upkeep so that it remains a useful tool for all involved. By having trusted experts in the field endorse and administer the online resource, it helps to establish credibility. Veterans will feel more likely to engage with it and refer others to it. In utilizing the common identity and activity theory in the mockup of such a resource, it will be designed so that it encourages communication and contribution by the Veteran community. It will fuel them towards the common goal of spreading awareness about Veteran resources and continuing their legacies as public servants protecting and helping their comrades.

Methodology

Introduction

This study utilized qualitative methodologies including participant observation within the realm of ethnographic research and a review of similar resource directories and of existing literature. This was done to determine what barriers have prevented a long-lasting and well-maintained online Veterans resource from being created in New York and how NYS DVA can overcome those issues. The mockup site's design incorporated the elements identified in activity and common identity theory for fostering an engaged and interactive online community. This also included incorporating in elements that were identified in the literature as useful to add to the mockup Veterans resource site and the feedback that the researchers identified regarding why such a resource is important.

Limitations

This particular study did not receive approval from SUNY Poly's Institutional Review Board (IRB) so it does not include any other human participation other than the author's own. As

a result, the subjects examined for the purpose of this study were based entirely on the literature reviewed, the author's own experience as the Information Technology and Public Information Specialist at NYS DVA and the author's review of other organizations attempts at creating Veteran resource directories. Given the limited primary data from Veterans, VSOs and others for this study, it should act as the starting point for more in depth research.

Theoretical Basis

The observed elements above were incorporated into the mockup site using activity theory and common identity theory to inform the design. An engaged community of Veterans is more likely to be invested in contributing to and using the online resource directory. These theories provide the basis by which, to engage these Veterans and their families with the resource.

Activity theory is based around the concept of subjects and objects and their interactions (Kaptelinin, 2013). A guiding principle from activity theory that was used in the design mockup of the directory is the idea of "relating the operational aspects of the interaction with technology to meaningful goals and, ultimately, needs and motives of technology users" (Kaptelinin, 2013). Every time someone interacts with the online resource directory, it should be taking them one step closer to accomplishing whatever their goals and needs may be from the resource. This is done through incorporation of easy to navigate guides, groupings of information by geographic location and also by resource type (education, housing, legal services, etc.).

By keeping the idea that "generally speaking, people are not interacting *with* computers: they interact with the world *through* computers" (Kaptelinin, 2013) as a basis for the online resource, it informs all decisions to be as intuitive to the user as possible even if it is not in a format the user may be familiar or comfortable with. In this way, the online resource attempts to

be what in activity theory is known as “activity-centric” where “the primary concern of designers of interactive systems should be supporting meaningful human activities in everyday contexts” (Kaptelinin, 2013). By creating a mockup site that incorporates the needs identified by Veterans themselves and VSOs within the resource and making its navigation easy to understand through the aforementioned filtering by geography and resource type. It creates an “activity-centric” online resource directory based around their need to find benefits information and other Veteran resources that they find useful to their identity as a Veteran (Kaptelinin, 2013).

Common identity theory also provides a useful theoretical background for the mockup site because it speaks directly to the strong link men and women have with their service under the title or identity of Veteran. Additionally, “common identity theory...help[s] us to understand and predict important outcomes in online communities, including the conditions under which these communities can recruit new members, retain old members, and successfully solicit contributions from them” (Ren, Kraut & Kiesler, p. 378, 2007). All of these elements are critical to the success of the online directory as the contributions and the involvement of the Veteran community (including those Veterans who work within VSOs) will determine how well maintained and well known it becomes. Since the titles of “Veteran” or “family of a Veteran” are identities that people designate themselves as “these attributes are shared among people who otherwise are strangers, may lead to common category membership” (Ren, Kraut & Kiesler, p. 388, 2007) and it is this feeling of membership that will be the basis for asking Veterans, their families and VSOs to feel like they should contribute to this online directory. By keeping this identity in mind for the mockup and capitalizing on this shared identity, it is possible to create an “online context...[where] members feel a commitment to the online community’s purpose or

topic” (Ren, Kraut & Kiesler, p. 381, 2007) of creating, maintaining and spreading awareness of an online Veteran resource directory.

Analysis

Comparison

Using the literature on Veteran resources and activity and common bond theories to establish a basis for analysis, a comparison of two Veteran resource directories was conducted. This comparison identifies their flaws, their successes and how none of them fit the need of a localized Veteran resource directory online. These three resources include the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs “[New York/New Jersey Veteran Resource Directory](#)”, Massachusetts “[Mass VetsAdvisor](#)” and the National Association of State Directors of Veterans' Affairs “State Veterans Analysis”.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is composed of three branches: Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and National Cemetery Administration (NCA). All three provide a variety of services to Veterans and their family members on a national scale. The U.S. VA is also responsible for accrediting all Veteran Service Organizations, which ensures that the Veteran Service Officers who work with Veterans and their families are familiar with federal regulations to help them file claims with the U.S. VA. Given the large scale that the U.S. VA covers, it is not surprising that there are limited amounts of localized information or resources. However, as the U.S. VA is the most well known government Veterans agency, it is often the first place that Service members returning home turn to to find resources in their local area (Houston et al., 2013).

Yet, when a Veteran in the New York area is to search for Veteran resources in New York on the U.S. VA's website, the below screenshot is what they would find. The resources on the right-hand side of the webpage are cut off, making it virtually impossible to read or identify the sources (Appendix 2). If a Veteran were to select the link to "[New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs Bureau of Veterans Education](#)", a benefit frequently sought out by younger Veterans who want to use their G.I. Bill upon returning home, they will be greeted with a "Page Not Found" which, is likely to cause frustration and provides no way to contact the U.S. VA to correct this issue or seek guidance on where to visit (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015). And if in this scenario that Veteran were to have the understanding to contact a Veteran Service Officer through the link provided by the U.S. VA New York/New Jersey resource page, "[Locate a State or County Veteran Service Officer](#)", the Veteran would again find a "Page Not Found" (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015) (Appendix 3).

The U.S. VA's attempt at an online Veteran directory falls short in quite a few ways and illustrates many of the barriers that Veterans in the literature cited as issues for them accessing Veterans information. Two of the major barriers that Veterans cited and were illustrated by the U.S. VA's website were that of a lack of updates websites and resources as well as a difficult to navigate page (Farmer et al., 2017). These lacks of updates mean that a Veteran will have difficulty even finding a Veteran Service Officer to help them navigate through these challenges. It took the author searching for "New York resources" and scrolling through three pages of inapplicable information before even finding this resource page. Another aspect that is not addressed by the resource page for the U.S. VA is any information or resources for family members of the Veteran, which severely limits their ability to help or guide the Veteran in their

lives (Resnik et al., 2012). And while the resource is meant to apply to New York, looking at the resources as a Veteran located in Western New York or in North Country, they would not find what looked like any resources in their local area. This speaks to the need for listing resources that are available throughout the state not just the most populous areas (Druss, 2007). The only aspect of this resource page that was useful for incorporation into the mockup is its utilization of “Activity-centered” categories such as VA Healthcare, Benefits, Education, etc. for Veterans as these are the most useful categories that a veteran will want to access when researching resources (Kaptelinin, 2013).

The next example of a Veteran resource Directory is that of [Mass VetsAdvisor](#). This is the Massachusetts Department of Veterans’ Services (their state Veterans agency) attempt at creating a localized and informational one-stop online Veteran Directory. It is immediately different from that of the U.S. VA as there is a much more defined and clear layout of the application. Additionally, it provides the end-user with the ability to search by Veteran, Veteran's Spouse, Veteran's Child, and Veteran's Parent which, is much more inclusive and addresses the concerns raised by Resnick et al. (2012). They can also browse via different categories similar to the U.S. VA’s web page showing a consideration towards an “activity-centered” design. However, while the surface appearance makes the web application look much better than the U.S. VA’s, it too, suffers from many of the same downfalls.

The author searched for “[Disability Compensation](#)”, perhaps the most common and used benefits provided by the U.S. VA to Veterans and the benefit that most Veteran Organizations including State Veteran Organizations help Veterans file claims for. While the internal webpage functions, it fails to provide any information about where a Veteran may locate the help of a

Veteran Service Officer from the Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services or any other VSO for that matter. The Veteran would have to navigate all the way back to the front page to access that feature. If the Veteran were to select the link on the website to apply for VA benefits through the eBenefits site, they would find that the link provided on Mass VetsAdvisor is broken. Therefore, this webpage which, provides no instructions to seek out a Veteran Service Officer to help file a claim (despite this being a major components of the Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services work), no proper links for Veterans to even file a claim for themselves through eBenefits, and the form provided (VA 21-526) to file a disability claim is over 7 years out of date as of this writing (Appendix 4). This again reinforces the issues that Veterans have cited with these types of online directories being out of date and poorly maintained (Farmer et al., 2017).

Even if a Veteran were to select the tab "[All Benefits & Resources](#)", they would encounter an issue cited by Veteran Service Offices about online directories, "that these tools can contribute to information overload as veterans struggle to determine which options are best for them" (Farmer et al., 2017). This particular tab lists all of the resources broken down by alphabetical order and nothing else (Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services, 2017). All of the other filtering options seen on the other internal web pages are no longer used and it is information overload and none of it is useful. Unless a Veteran knows specifically which, program they are looking for, this alphabetical breakdown does nothing to facilitate their search to find resources either by topic or locality within the state of Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services, 2017). To make matters even worse, when a Veteran selects the "[Resources](#)" tab on the webpage and tries to navigate to The Massachusetts Department of

Veterans' Services webpage to seek out any more specific services, they will once again encounter a link that half the time returns an error or brings them to an old web page that is no longer updated.

This is a particularly big issue as these resources are meant for Veterans throughout the state and are maintained by the state agency, yet without any geographical filters, the vast majority of the resources one would encounter on Mass VetsAdvisor will be for the urban areas (Farmer et al., 2017). This leaves out a huge group of rural Veterans who will suffer from lack of access to physical resources within their proximity but digital resources as well, just as it was found in Wittrock, Ono, Stewart, Reisinger & Charlton (2014) research of rural Veterans in the Midwest. It would not be hard to see Veterans would get frustrated with their lack of progress and possibly abandon their search for help and information altogether, leaving them without valuable benefits and resources that they earned in service.

Prototype

Unlike Massachusetts, the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs has never attempted to create an online Veteran resource directory. Several nonprofits based in New York such as Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University (IVMF), and Robin Hood, have launched and subsequently decommissioned their resource directories (Pomerance, 2017). Yet, as all of these attempts demonstrate and as Veterans the in McCaslin, Leach, Herbst & Armstrong (2013) research noted, a one-stop shop is ideally how they would access information to resources they need and want. In order for such a resource to be successful, it has to address the failures seen in other examples.

The prototype Veteran resource should be housed and maintained by the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs by their Public Information Officer and Project Manager. As the state authority over Veteran Service Organizations and with 42 offices across the state, it would be able to gather localized resources in a streamlined manner that other VSOs with less formal authority and reach would not be able to (New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs, n.d.). By housing this resource within the agency that has a mandate to provide services to Veterans and tasking it specifically to the Public Information Officer and Project Manager, there is both a legal and moral imperative for the agency to maintain this resource for the Veterans of New York. The prototype will be broken down by regional economic development councils (REDCs) which, are a standardized format used within New York State government to speak about the different regions of the state and to allocate money and resources to them by these regions ("New York State Regional Economic Development Councils", n.d.). In adhering to this predetermined format and including the counties that fall within them, it will make it easier for end-users and NYS DVA to research resources and to assign them to categories used across state government.

Similar to the U.S. VA's website and in line with creating an "activity-centered" resource, the directory should be broken down by categories that the Veteran or family members most frequently need and use (Kaptelinin, 2013). More research in the form of interviews, observations and collection of data from NYS DVA's website on most frequently visited pages will be needed to better inform these choices. Building on this, the prototype should include outreach via social media to Veterans and their families to gather information from them about resources they have found to be useful and ask them to contribute to the resource page via a submission page. This demonstrates NYS DVA's dedication to transparency and accountability

to their constituents by ensuring they are made aware of what information is being collected and encouraging a dialogue with a group that is often cited as “highly distrustful” (Pomerance, 2017) of government organizations. In promoting this engagement and activity, the prototype utilizes the three main components of activity theory: subject, object and community to create a better Veterans resource, “activities can be carried out not only by individual human beings but also by social entities...the model includes the *outcome* of the activity system as a whole: a transformation of the object produced by the activity in question into an intended result” (Kaptelinin, 2013). This will be a step towards engaging in end-user buy-in which, ideally will increase the utilization and as a result the usefulness of the online resource.

Within each REDC page, the resources should be delineated by resource “type” which, should include education, health, legal services, housing, employment, county services and resources for family members. This provides broad categories that end-users could select and once in that particular page, navigate to more specific sub-categories. These sub-categories would contain headers that address more specific issues within the broader category (e.g. homelessness or mortgages within the “housing” page), the name of each organization, their specialization, address, email, phone number and a link to the organization’s Charity Navigator page to add a level of transparency to the types of resources featured on the resource. In this way, the online resource would utilize a nest structure which, “are most commonly used to group information and functions, and to represent simple logical relationships” (Lidwell, Holden & Butler, 2012, p.122, 2012). This nesting structure would be a “design that influence[s] its correct use” (Lidwell, Holden & Butler, p.104, 2012) in the form of a good affordance. By creating a simple and logical system and making it “activity-centered” it would help to eliminate the oft

cited issues of poor or illogical navigation seen in other examples such as the U.S. VA's webpage. Lastly, by including resources for family members as their own category, it would be a step towards addressing the issues of not knowing where to find help that is specifically design for family members of Veterans as cited in Resnik et al. (2012).

Building off of the desire to promote feedback on the online resource, the resource should also incorporate a forum page where Veterans, their family members, Service members and VSOs can swap information with one another and experiences. This would serve two important purposes for the resource, the first would be to present NYS DVA with a forum where they can gather information to include in the resource and also correct any misinformation people may be exchanging and the second would be to encourage this exchange of information to help develop and maintain a common identity. In doing this, it would help create an identity (Veterans or advocates for Veterans) that would theoretically encourage these users to contribute information to the resource and increase awareness in their circles about the resource. By incorporating the design element of a lightly regulated forum on the resource, it will facilitate and reinforce this common identity which, will produce an increase in resource submissions and product awareness. It should be noted though, that forums are often difficult to successfully implement and monitor unless they are extremely limited in scope. The author believes that these forums would be addressing the concerns of Veterans and their families in New York that this scope is narrow enough that it may be successful.

Conclusion

The prototype online resource directory intends to address all of the concerns brought up by Veterans, their family members and service providers in the literature that was reviewed. The

prototype will consist of an easy and intuitive navigation based on activity theory and through stair hierarchy structures to help the end-user. Additionally, by having all of the resources on the local, state and federal levels available on one centralized site, it fulfills the request from Veterans that there be a “one-stop shop” available for them to learn about resources. Through having the resources organized by the standardized Regional Economic Development Councils, it can help ensure that further financial resources can be allocated to VSOs to help them utilize and promote the resource. In addition, the regionalized approach promotes the use and awareness of resources in more rural parts of the states where the need for knowledge of local resources is greatest for both VSOs and Veterans as Wittrock, Ono, Stewart, Reisinger & Charlton (2014) noted in their study. Though this prototype seeks to address and resolve all of the issues presented within this paper, ultimately it will need to be tested by the intended end-users and further refined to meet their needs.

Next Steps

The main aspect of research that is needed to bring this online resource to fruition is testing and interviews with potential end-users to ensure that this product fits their needs. As noted earlier in this paper, the major limitation of it is that no user testing, interviews or prototyping was done aside from the author’s own experience which, while valuable for initial insights is not adequate enough for definitive conclusions. As a result, the author has suggested that the following steps be taken to further this research and full flesh-out this resource so that it may best serve the Veterans and their families of New York.

The first recommendation is that a series of focus groups be conducted with the county Veteran Service Organizations and NYS Division of Veterans’ Affairs (arranged by REDC’s to

keep the regionalized approach) to discuss what they think would be useful to have included on the online resource and how it should be organized. They should be given the ability to test out a beta site that would allow them both as providers and Veterans to give critical feedback for the refinement of the resource. The benefit to doing this is two-fold. The first is that County Veteran Service Officers will be able to add valuable insights (both as service officers and Veterans themselves) and help in increasing their awareness and proper usage of this tool. The second is that by seeking their involvement it provides an opportunity to gain buy-in from these VSOs increasing their likelihood of using and recommending it once it is out of testing. To follow up these discussions, these VSOs should be asked to fill out a Google Form (or some form based system that generates spreadsheets) of the local resources and contacts that they utilize for Veterans and their families so that it can be added to the online directory. This creates a standardized method for collecting local resources while the online directory is still in its testing phase. By starting with a comprehensive resource list to begin with, the job of collection and maintenance of resources becomes easier for the NYS DVA when the resource launches.

The second recommendation is that this site be maintained by NYS DVA's Public Information Officer and Project Manager. The Public Information Officer who could maintain the social media response, provide responses to those with questions regarding the resource and solicit resource information from VSOs. The Project Manager would be responsible for maintaining the technical aspects of the website itself and ensuring links are working. By working jointly on the maintenance of the resource, it would help prevent issues of poor-maintenance and broken links like those seen on MassVetsAdvisor. It also divides up the work and prevents a single person from being overwhelmed with the thousands of Veterans

organizations that may be featured on the online resource. Additionally, as NYS DVA is the state authority for all Veteran Organizations in New York, seeking out information necessary for the maintenance and expansion of the resource would be substantially easier to obtain by the PIO and Project Manager than those at other organizations. Lastly, as an agency that serves not just the Veteran themselves but their family members as well, NYS DVA would be able to gather information and insight from those family members as well.

The third recommendation is family members of Veterans need to be included in the interviews and testing of the online resource as they are in many way the least supported of the groups and yet the most critical. It is common knowledge in the Veterans sphere that it is often a family member who convinces the Veteran in their life to seek out help and resources (Pomerance, 2017). Given this, it is imperative that their feedback is sought to ensure that they are aware of the resource and it meets their particular needs. This will mean pairing up with Blue Star Families, attending events such as Month of the Military Child and arranging focus groups where NYS DVA actively recruits family members to participate. This provides the opportunity to seek out valuable insights that may otherwise be overlooked for this critical group.

Overall, these recommendations seek to obtain the “human” component needed to test and refine this online resource. Regardless of any literature or theorizing on the author’s behalf, actual Veterans, their families and VSOs need to find the resource to be helpful and useful otherwise, it will be just one of many attempts that is relegated to an expired URL somewhere on the web. The only way to find this information is to present as many of these possible end-users with the opportunity to test and provide feedback. These focus groups, interviews and testing will also provide an opportunity for added awareness and ensure that County VSOs are able to

share it out with their local partners. This paper provides a theoretical basis for why and how this resource should exist. It will ultimately need to be tested and validated by the perspective end-users for the ultimate decision on how it will be designed and function.

Conclusion

Veterans and their families continue to need the support and resources of their local communities and organizations to assist them in their unique situations and assisting them in obtaining their benefits. This is true for the 776,000 Veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017) that call New York home and the many more who will return to it. There is a need for a consolidated resource of all Veteran organizations and agencies in New York that are able to assist Veterans and their families. The author embarked on an analysis of what Veterans are looking for in an online resource through a review of current literature and using information design theories to create a mockup of what that resource would look like.

In reviewing the available literature, the author was able to identify some of the barriers that Veterans and their families face when attempting to obtain benefits and services. Within the literature there were several barriers identified for online resources including: poorly maintained links, no localized approach to resources, difficult web page navigation, and a lack of resources for family members. By identifying these obstacles, the mockup is able to incorporate and resolve these issues to ensure that the resource will be as useful and effective as possible for the expected end-users. This meant incorporating information design theories such as common identity and activity theory to inform the actual structure of the webpage but as is noted in the paper, additional testing by Veterans and their families will be needed.

This can be accomplished through the recommendations presented in the paper including utilizing the NYS DVA's mandate to serve the Veterans and families of New York by housing the online resource at their agency with the PIO and Project Manager maintaining it. There will also need to be testing of the prototype by Veterans, their families and service providers to develop the most useful consolidated resource for them as this paper did not explore testing beyond the author's own observations. Additionally, the initiative to seek out feedback from local VSOs to increase the effectiveness of the resource and the awareness of it would ensure that the resource is developed to its fullest potential.

Ultimately, this online consolidated resource would provide a centralized point of contact and awareness for hundreds of thousands of Veterans and their families in New York. The literature demonstrates that not only is it possible to create such a resource but that one is needed by this particular population to navigate through the immense bureaucracy. Additionally, it is another tool that VSOs can use to help their clients and other providers about the appropriate places to direct Veterans to for information on localized resources. As Veterans continue to be more and more entrenched in online culture, their way of exploring their benefits and assistance will need to follow suit and this resource would provide for a way to do that. In creating this resource as described above and creating an awareness campaign for those who serve Veterans on it, it would be another way the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs would be able to confidently express that they are providing assistance and resources to Veterans and their family members across New York State.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Appendix 2

Appendix 3

Appendix 4



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