

## Veteran's Benefits Browser

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**Organisation:** Office of the Veterans Ombudsman and Veterans Affairs Canada

**Country:** Canada

**Level of government:** Central government

**Sector:** General public services

**Type:** Communication, Digital, Public Service

**Launched in:** 2009

**Overall development time:**

4 months

**Link to the innovation's website**

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# Description

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The Office of the Veterans Ombudsman (OVO) was created in November 2007 and immediately started handling hundreds of complaints from Veterans about services and benefits received from Veterans Affairs Canada. A tool was needed to get the staff informed on the complex system of veteran benefits.

A tool which transfers knowledge to both staff and citizens that intuitively allows individuals to cut through complexity and over-abundance of information associated with Veterans' benefits creating transparency and operational/training efficiencies. The Office created the tool based on the Wiki the Office uses as a intranet. A visual tool was created that showed all the benefits available and a drop down menu helped to identify the type of Veteran being spoken to, than the applicable benefits would come forward and the others would recede. Clicking on the benefits showed the policy. The information was no more than 3 mouse clicks away and all the information was linked to the source document so the requirement for updating the tool was eliminated The tool has now evolved from the preliminary objective to becoming the Department's flagship initiative for citizen engagement and outreach, creating an unparalleled level of transparency for Veterans.

A web version of the Benefits was put on line in Oct 2012. The announcement can be found [here](#). The goal from the Veterans Ombudsman Office is to have the more powerful internal version made public.

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## Why the innovation was developed

At the OVO over the first year, as the initial small temporary work force was replaced by permanent staff it became readily evident that a new approach to understanding the complex administration of Veterans benefits was required to overcome the training and knowledge transfer imperatives associated with a completely new staff. The goal was to produce a tool that would allow the staff talking with Veterans on the telephone to have immediate access to all the information they would need and transfer the knowledge of a few experts to all the staff.

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## Objectives

Enhance public trust, Improve access, Improve effectiveness, Improve efficiency, Improve service quality, Improve user satisfaction

- Improve service outcomes by effective knowledge transfer from a few experts to all the staff.
  - Consistent communication of information to the public.
  - Turning data/information into knowledge.
  - Improve service quality by training, outreach and proactive public engagement.
  - Improve cost efficiency by enhanced communications.
  - Improved knowledge management.
  - Better knowledge transfer.
  - Improved resource allocation.
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## Main beneficiaries

Families, General population, Government bodies, Government staff, High-risk populations, Other

- Over one million Veterans and their families.
- 4 000 staff members.

# Results

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## Efficiency

- 500 Active Users.
  - 20 000 page view.
  - 557 pages.
  - Average 45 page views per page.
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## Effectiveness

Intuitively effectiveness should have increased but a measurable benchmark has not been identified as of yet to provide statistical proof.

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## Service quality

### Responsiveness:

- Front line staff can quickly focus engagements with Veterans on areas of need.
  - A modified version the Benefits Browser went public in Oct 2012. This version is still expected to transform the engagement of clients with the Department. Conversations will be much more focused when both client and staff are working from the same knowledge level.
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## User satisfaction

- Less direct training required for new employees.
  - Refresher training for existing employees not required.
  - Less effort required to disseminate information.
  - Less effort required by staff to find information.
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## Evaluation

Although there was no formal evaluation, staff were continually evaluating the tool every time they used it and if they were not satisfied or desired an enhancement, that was communicated back immediately and for the most part changes were put in place within a day of notification.

# Development

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## Design

The Office of the Veterans Ombudsman (OVO) was created in November 2007 and immediately started handling hundreds of complaints from Veterans about services and benefits received from Veterans Affairs Canada. Over the first year, as the initial small temporary work force was replaced by permanent staff it became readily evident that if the Office was to quickly become effective a new approach to understanding the complex administration of Veterans benefits was required to overcome the training and knowledge transfer imperatives associated with a completely new staff. In the process of developing the internal tool, it was quickly realized this was the very same tool that Veterans and their families needed to have both government and the citizen communicate and engage more effectively. During the winter of 2009 a staff member with the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman created a mock-up of how the tool could work and developed the initial screens in consultation with other staff members using PowerPoint.

Design time: 3 months

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## Testing

In the spring of 2009, a team of three, as part of implementing a Wiki as a knowledge management system, used the Wiki capabilities to create a functioning model. During the summer the Benefits Navigator was partially populated with content using links to existing legacy enterprise systems to ensure the content is always up to date. In September 2009, the Benefits Navigator went live operationally with staff and management continuing to update the tool using the collaboration features of the Wiki. Note that the implementation of the Benefits Navigator was done as an additional duty by staff members.

Testing time: still on-going

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## Implementation

### Tools used:

- Spring of 2011: the Office of the Ombudsman convinced Veterans Affairs Canada that they should adopt the Wiki.
- Summer of 2011: the Benefits Navigator was modified and translated. Name was changed to Benefits Browser.
- Fall of 2011: Veterans' Affairs Canada piloted the Benefits Browser at a number of locations.
- Winter of 2012: the Benefits Navigator was made available to all staff.
- Oct 2012 a modified version of the Benefits Browser was made public.
- Veterans Ombudsman Office is pushing to have full version of Benefits Browser made public.

### Resources used:

- No upfront costs (Three staff members were involved with the development of the tool and that development was done incrementally to their existing duties).
- The Wiki platform on which the tool was developed costs less than CAD 5 000 a year (a number of enhancements to the Wiki were bought to enhance the functionality of the tool, but they would have been bought regardless as part of the overall Wiki development and those costs were just a few hundred dollars).
- Dedication of some existing staff to enhance the content and functionality.
- Departmental resources.

Implementation time: 2 weeks

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## Diffusion

The entire project morphed on a daily basis as new functionality was identified and other sources of content that were not initially considered were requested. Once the requests for changes stabilised, the Ombudsmans Office then started to provide briefings to the Department on the potential utility of the tool. When senior management was briefed on the potential of the tool to meet not only operational needs but also help mitigate the challenges presented by the Clerk of the Privy Council, an agreement to transfer the tool to the Department was put in place.

Diffusion time: Immediately with implementation

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## Partnerships

### Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) and the Canadian Forces

Other Public Sector

Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) and the Canadian Forces were involved in contributing the content links for the Benefits Navigator. After tool was transferred to VAC, VAC was involved in enhancing the functionality and content for both departmental staff and public distribution. VAC also did all the testing for the internal and web based versions.

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## Lessons Learned

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### Lessons Learned

- Don't let the naysayers stop you from moving an idea ahead. Transformational ideas are especially difficult to push forward in a bureaucracy that is content with its self.
- Don't focus on program needs (the department's perspective) when developing a tool to serve clients; rather, focus on what the citizen needs for engagement and drive the development of the service from their perspective.

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