Conversation Guide - Industry Partners

5/30/2018

# Research Questions

* What types of VA data might be beneficial to you?
* What is the process by which you currently access VA data?
* How would access to VA data positively impact you? What about Veterans?
* How willing would you be to integrate with VA APIs?
* What types of resources, materials and engagement do you need from the VA to integrate with VA APIs?
* How can we best communicate the availability of APIs to you?
* What factors could hinder the success of VA API integration/adoption?
  + Data accuracy
  + API availability
  + Outreach strategy
  + Compliance risk that we aren’t aware of
* How does your org make decisions about API partnerships?

# Targeted Users

* USAJobs (Rachel, USDS connection)
* Indeed (Lindsay - email sent, 5/9/18)

Participant Criteria

* C-Suite level (CTO, CEO)
* Developer
* Platform end-user (maybe VSO, if possible)

# Script

## Welcome and Opening Remarks (5 minutes)

[When the participant is ready, the moderator will begin the session with the following introduction.]

Thank you for joining us today. As we talked about before, the VA is considering providing VA data in the form of APIs. We’re working with the VA to explore this option and talk to potential users of this API to better understand how the VA could implement an API solution that satisfies the needs of consumers of VA data.

Are you familiar with APIs? (Application Programming Interfaces)

*An API, or Application Programming Interface, is a flexible way to give and receive information by allowing software systems to communicate with each other. In this case, the VA could provide a set of tools for providing appeals data that gives your developers all the building blocks necessary to automate collection of appeals data directly from VA’s system to your own.*

Before we begin, I’d like to make a few things clear and explain how the session will work:

* There are no right or wrong answers — and I won’t be offended by any opinions you express.
* [NAME] will be taking notes. We have to share what we learn from you with the rest of our team.
* This conversation will last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour.
* Your participation in this discussion is voluntary. You may stop at any time. Your name will not be shared outside of this research team.
* If it’s ok with you, we’d like to record this conversation today. Recording our discussion will help us capture everything you say accurately.
* Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. We are here to learn from you. We really want to hear what you think. No idea or opinion is incorrect.

Do you have any questions at this stage?

[The moderator will begin audio recording.]

## Warm-up Questions (5 minutes)

* Can you begin by telling me a little bit about the mission of your organization and your role?

**Michelle Early = USA JObs program manager**

**Nicole McIntyre = works on hiring veterans in the federal government and figuring out who gets preferences**

**Matt Dingey, USAJobs Lead Designer, User Experience Specialist for USAJobs Lab**

**Brody = USAJobs data solutions manager**

## Baseline Questions

* Before our team reached out to you, were you previously aware that the VA is publishing APIs?
  + Aware of some APIs, but not relevant. Brody—too general. Being a data guy, knows VA has APIs, but not always looked at as Open Data. Expects everyone to have an API, but is it relevant to our users to make decisions off of. Goes to Open Data site, and doesn’t see list of available APIs.
  + *Michelle—2014/5, last time reached out to VA and DOD. Hadn’t revisited.*
  + Types of data: We look for statement of service, letters from the VA, service dates, types of discharge.
    - All are self-provided right now. When built with USAJobs profile. Upload documents and tag with appropriate tags.
    - People struggle to get access to these forms. Scan upside down. Leave SSNs on the form. Struggle getting the right documents
  + Every time a veteran applies for the job, they will go through the adjudication process each time.
  + Brody—Have not reached out to VA in the past. Disappointed by the lack of information. Must sign up for an account before knowing if the documentation is helpful.
    - Went to google to find. Thinks he ended up in the right place, but it doesn’t seem that way. Doesn’t look like there is anything openly available.
  + CPS Vets (30% or more disabled) or TP Vets
* **(If applicable)** On a scale from 1-10, how has your previous experience been working with the VA?
  + Can you tell me a little bit about the interaction(s)?
  + What communication channels did you use?
  + What was successful or not sucessful about those interactions?
* What veteran focused activities or initiatives do you engage in currently? What type of impact do they have on your organization, mission and veterans?

## VA API Integration Decision-making

* Has your organization ever integrated or tried to integrate with an API?
  + - Whole system built on system integration. Not aware of many other groups they would want to integrate into their system. Expectations are low for government.
  + How did you find out about the API?
  + How do you find out about new data initiatives for your organization?
  + Have you ever actively seeked out API or general data initiatives?
    - Evaluate data they have and look to see if they can get it somewhere else.
    - Matt—Had worked with 18F folks who worked on Vetsgov a few years ago. Skills translator wasn’t great. Planned to iterate on it, and USAJobs might take it on, but as time went on other data was being used. Weren’t able to align. There are also competing ones out there. Don’t have the flexibility to play with something. Things need to be “vetted.” Needs be a larger effort.
      * Nicole—Because veterans preference is a law. You could end up with an illegal selection. The seriousness behind the data is pretty intense.
    - Aware of the need for an API or provide an API themselves. It’s a massive bit of work that is not being tackled.
  + Have you ever actively reached out to organization whose data your interested in using?
  + Where do you look for information on potential API or data integrations for your organization? (Blogs, Twitter)
  + What types of marketing materials and tools did the organization provide throughout the process?
  + What information do you need to make a decision on integrating with an API?
    - Priorities have come out of research being done for USAJobs. Is this a complete data set? Is this being updated frequently? Open source? What are we trying to do with the product? Does this data do something that we can’t do on our own? Can we connect it meaningfully to data we already have? Can we sell this to the larger organization? Does it provide something we can’t create on our own?
      * Is this the right fit?
      * Have to have a plan for maintaining it and relating it to what people are already using.

**In the API experience...**

* + How did you work with the API provider?
  + What types of factors guided your decision to integrate with that API?
  + When determining whether to integrate with that API, what were some of the questions you had for the API provider? What did they provide to answer those questions?
  + What were the major successes and pitfalls of that experience?
  + What could the API provider have done differently?
* How long does it take to make a decision about API integration? When are these types of decisions typically made?
* Are there reasons why your organization might not to want to integrate with an API? What about a VA API?

## Technical Integration (developer)

* During the technical integration, what type of materials and information do you need?
  + How would you expect to get these materials and information?
    - Dept of Labor, documentation data was on ONet.
    - Json is great.
    - Usually work with it on their end with javascript or python
    - Standard industry best practices.
* In your experience, what kinds of tools and learning resources do you think are the most useful when integrating a new API?
  + (Video? Webinar? Example projects? PDF?)
* What type of support (technical, organizational, partner) do you need to implement an API?
  + GSA offered a designer to OPM while working on login.gov. And continues to be available to them
* When integrating with an API, what were some of the questions you had for the API provider? What did they provide to answer those questions?
* In the past, how long has it taken to integrate with a new API on the technical side?
  + Just did integration with login.gov.
    - Few months of talking. Some priority came from WH. Number 1 driver of help tickets from the site.
    - Once it was determined they were doing it—6 months.
    - Idea came last summer. Shipped in January. Would have been ready at end of year.
    - Could have been successful had OPM pushed harder for it. Security slows things down as they reviewed everything. That tends to be long hold.
    - Have to get the right leaders who see value.

## Willingness to work with VA

* Have you ever worked with the VA before? (IRL, VA data, initiatives)
  + If yes, can you tell me a little bit about the interaction(s)?
  + What communication channels did you use to find out about the initiative?
  + What was successful or not successful about those interactions?
    - Try not to roadmap too far into the future. Try to stay Agile.
    - At what point do we stop trading documents, and start using APIs?
    - Veteran verification aligns with USAJobs. Have been conversations about looking into speeding up the process. Higher level interest on OPM side. Want to automate the process.
    - Michelle, Alicia Booth, Diana F\_\_\_? are key stakeholders.Two other people working on employee record who would be interested in talking to the VA.

**Lindsay Notes/transcript**

* Attendees:
  + Mix of Vets specialists and Tech leads
* Aware of VA APIs:
  + Mostly no
  + Brody: “I had heard of some various things that probably weren’t relevant for what my team does...But it’s a very general term.”
    - I guess being a data guy and knowing that the USAJobs has API, but we have a ton of APIs that are not always looked at as open data APIs or data that is going to be consumed...essentially I expect everyone to have an API nowadays, but is it relevant to what we do and is it data that our users can use to make a decision off of. That’s a whole different aspect of the question.”
    - “I’m looking right now on your open data site and I don’t see a list of APIs for example.”
  + Michelle: “It was 2014-15 was the last time we reached out to VA and DOD to find where the source of truth existed of the data put into the DD214 forms. They both didn’t know and pointed at each other, so we’re really excited to hear that there may be something.”

Relevant data:

* Right now our process at USAJobs, Veterans are asked to upload DD214 and HR looks at that document to do adjudication.
* We look for official DD214 statements of service → if not yet out of the military, get tentative preference
  + 30% or more service related disability = CPF Vets
  + TP Vets = Particular medal, served during a particular period of time, particular type of discharge
  + FS15 for 10 point preference, spousal or widow preference, parental preference
  + Data to make sure that the people asking for preferential treatment are meeting the requirements
* Veterans upload the documents themselves to USAJobs profile
  + Tag documents
  + Issues in upload, struggle to get access to forms, scanned them in incorrectly
  + Leave SSN on the form. Try to keep those out of our USAJobs system
  + Quality of documents are bad, hard to read, scanned many times, don’t know what USAJobs need. Struggle with getting the right documents in versions that are acceptable and readable
* Everytime a Veteran applies for a job, they go through the adjudication process. Over and over again. Lot of waste in hiring process.
  + Many agencies don’t trust others’ adjudication process. Again “source of truth” issue
* First hear about VA APIs
  + I went to google, VA.gov/data, developer
  + “I was just, when the APIs came up that there are some that existed, I was referring to In the last five minutes, I was excitedly searching for what APIs are available. And to be honest, I was disappointed by the lack of information. I found out something about the Lighthouse API, but to see documentation, I need to sign up for an account to see if it’s worthwhile yet.” [9:48]
    - Don’t know what data is available clearly on the site. Not clear communication about what LightHouse API is
  + “I think I ended up in the right places where there’s news about the VA going all in for APIs, but it doesn’t really seem that way. There’s nothing that’s really openly available about what APIs are there. It’s just: hey we have APIs.” (10:22)
  + “Well I think the things that we would be interested in probably wouldn’t be publicly available. The things that we’re interested in are like confirmation that somebody is a veteran or their personal PII which wouldn’t be immediately available.”
  + Don’t want to be the guinea pig for data

11:55

When we redid our search experience, we wanted to add classification codes. We often go to ONet first, because they have a lot of data because of the Bureau of Labor and Statistics. And there had already been an effort within the bowels of OPM to map that data, so that mapping already existed, so we took on an effort to finish that. For that API, because it’s not that big, we just grabbed it. We’re not highly dependent on updating it all the time because they only come out every two years anyway.” (16:00)

Generally its in service of, we want to have some piece of data because we have a roadmap of problems we’re trying to solve and functionality we want to offer and features we’re trying to build and as we come to those thigngs, we evaluate whether we have the data, can we get the data from somewhere else? Can we save the users time? (16:27)

“We produce these documents and then we ask for them back from job applicatbts., You join the federal government, you have an SF15, if you’re a veteran, you have a DD214 and then to move to another branch of the federal government, we ask for those forms back...Or even to move within an agency, we ask for a form that we actually generate.” (17:19)

“Sometimes we’re aware that we need an API...but it’s not a small thing of just: oh, we’re just going to do that and get approval for that, it’s part of a more massive bit of work that we’re just not tackling for whatever reason.” (18:40)

“18F was just grabbing the data and I think they got this dataset from Linkedin and the Vets here that we work with, some within our own team, we had them use it with their skill sets and it was like mehh. It wasn’t so great.” (19:20)

“We just didn’t have it prioritized as something we wanted to bring on, so our schedules didn’t align on that.” (19:54)

“The hard thing with OPM is when we put our stamp of approval on something, it has to be government wide and it carries this weight that maybe it doesn’t maybe if you’re just playing with something or prototyping and want to see how it goes. We don’t have that level of flexibility. It would need to be vetted that it’s actually really useful for Veterans, and it needs to be complete, that it would match up with our competencies and other large datasets that we have.” (20:40)

“Because veterans’ preference is a law, the seriousness behind the data is pretty intense.” (21:19)

Priorities:

“We have various road map and impact maps and we’ve done a lot of research on the site and priorities come out of that work. And it’s about evaluating whether its worth the effort. For example with this skills data stuff, it’s kind of bubbled up slowly over time that being able to recommend a job based on skill set is a really powerful tool that we want to provide. And we’ve been looking into lots of sets of data that are out there. So we’ve been doing a fair amount of evaluating whether this is a complete dataset, whether its being updated on a regular basis.” (23:36)

“Then we have things we want to do with the product and does this new piece of data enable something that we can’t do on our own. And then also a little bit, how much work is it going to be to convince the larger organization that we can use this data and that we can connect it meaningfully to data we already have. That’s a huge deal to folks. If we were using DOL codes, but we hadn’t matched them to OPM series, it would be a tougher sell to say: oh we have this integration off on this side, instead it’s: oh, this fits.” (24:57)

“And if this isn’t something we want to create or maintain on our own.”

“I have to do a fair amount of selling that we’re not trying to reinvent a new wheel over here, we’re trying to relate this to stuff we’re already kind of...a source of truth for some of these things.”

“For sure, we will use an API if it’s there and there’s a need. We’re gungho to use more live data, but there’s sort of this responsibility. If OPM is going to say this data is good, we have to have a plan for maintaining it and relating it to stuff we’re already using and that maybe slows down the process a little bit.” (26:36)

The documents come as PDF and they simply adjudicate them. But they don’t transcribe into data elements.

Use case: Documents have mistakes or are scanned upside down

There have been some definite conversations done recently on speeding up this process. Online applications are great, but that means number of applicants are through the roof. So if we get 3,000 applicants which is common and 1,000 are Vets, that’s a lot of documents to go through. So there’s definitely high level interest on our side in seeing what we can do to make the process easier for the Vets but also how we can more automate the process, so we’re not looking at it over and over again.” (38:10)

Critical stakeholders:  
USAJobs: Michelle

USAStaffing: Alicia Booth

Their report: Diana Saxman

Michelle will send other critical stakeholders

How long have these integration partnerships taken in the past?

Few months of talking before it became a priority. WH made it a priority. Login was a driver of helpdesk tickets. To get CIO’s blessing, WH mandate gave it necessary urgency.

At most 6 months to get rolling

Security slows things down

“The org needs to be bought in to it to move quickly.”

* Critical to happen, is going to stick around as a service
* USDS offered a designer to work with us
* Having successful examples to point to would be good