Coding the Law Final Project Biography

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Framing

Problem	The VA benefits system is a difficult system to navigate on your own, especially for those that are not familiar with a lot of the technical terms and procedures. For this reason, many Veterans seek the help of a lawyer to aid them in the process. However, a veterans military service produces an immense amount of complicated information, and law offices have the responsibility of finding an efficient way of recording and organizing that information. Therefore, this project aims to provide a resource for potential clients and law offices to communicate in an organized manner where other resources may not be available or may be less efficient.
Stakeholders	The stakeholders include any Veterans that are looking to apply for Veterans benefits with a law office. Naturally, that also includes any law office that specializes in Veterans benefits as a stakeholder. Finally, the VA itself could be considered a stakeholder. If the office is able to start the application process more efficiently, then the case could proceed to the VA more quickly to render a decision.
Users	The office I work at has a very small staff, so I have recruited one of my coworkers who is familiar with the application process to test my prototypes and provide feedback to help me refine my project.

Research

I started my research by analyzing the Veterans Administration government website, to see what kind of resources were already available to veterans in terms of aid when applying for benefits. I found that although you have the option to apply online, the application process does not simplify any of the material that turns Veterans to law offices in the first place. For that reason, many Veterans are discouraged and lose out on a lot of benefits that they are owed.

In addition, I looked into the resources that our office, among others, have been using to collect information from potential clients. Due to the delicate situation a lot of our clients find themselves in pertaining to their housing, relying on a returned letter or phone call can sometimes delay the process. Also, since the ability to apply for benefits was established many decades ago, technology and the internet are relatively new tools that are being integrated within the process. This means that many offices and government agencies are playing catchup when it comes to using modern technology.

Prototypes

(1) Flowchart	My first prototype involved a flow chart that outlined the eligibility requirements a veteran has to meet in order to be considered for benefits. This was the preliminary "sketch" that would later lead to the QnA markup I created.
(2) QnA Markup: Intake Questions	At first, I was planning to translate the entire guided interview through QnA markup. I had started with the eligibility requirement portion of the interview, and proceeded to attempt an interview using questions we typically ask during the intake process at our office. However, this strategy ended up being rather confusing as there was no constructive flow of the interview and also omitted a lot of information.
(3) QnA Markup: Application	I proceeded but continuing with the QnA strategy, but used questions from the VA application packet instead of our personal intake questions. This did help when it came to improving the flow and organization of the question groups, however, this task was way more tedious than what I ended up deeming necessary.
(4) Guided Interview	As mentioned, using the application packet questions in a QnA markup was messier than I had hoped. For that reason, I looked into splitting the interview up into the eligibility requirement portion and the information retrieval portion. I found that transferring the information retrieval portion to a guided interview via docassmble ended up being a lot more organized and efficient, which is why I ended up with this strategy for my final project.

User Testing

While my office consists of only three employees, I was able to recruit one of them to help test out my project and provide any feedback or criticism throughout the building process. Additionally, my main source of feedback was from myself. As I was tweaking my guided interview in the docassemble playground I was able to make note of any glitches or improvements that were necessary, and could make changes on the spot, run the interview, and repeat the process.

One large decision that my coworker helped me make was whether the use of my QnA markup was necessary or whether it would be more efficient to include the eligibility requirements as a pre-interview information page.

(a) Pre-interview information page

VA Disability Compensation

Hello, please review the following requirements to assess whether you may be eligible for VA disability compensation.

You must have served in the US Military as well as:

1. Met the minimum length of service requirement of 24 months of continuous active duty service; AND
2. Had a discharge characterization of "Honorable"

What if my characterization does not fall under "Honorable"

1. If you were discharged under other than honorable, bad conduct or dishonorable conditions you may be able to upgrade your discharge characterization
2. Please follow this link for further information: https://www.va.gov/discharge-upgrade-instructions/

(b) QnA Markup

Would you like to check your eligibility for VA benefits?

Yes.

No.

Conclusion: It quickly became evident that a pre-interview information page was too similar to the eligibility requirements page that the VA already provided, which was exactly what I was trying to depart from. For that reason, it was decided that keeping the QnA markup would be more beneficial to potential clients than re-formatting what was already available to them.

Refinement

As mentioned, I went through three main phases before I landed on my final format for my project. I consulted with my coworker along the way on whether she thought my decision would produce a more efficient outcome, which she agreed on. In addition she helped me flag and refine more specific parts of the guided interview and fillable PDF:

(1) Wording questions: I had to rework the wording of certain questions in order to make them easier to follow. As I have mentioned, the goal was to create a resource that is easier to use for potential clients than following the PDF itself.

(2) Question requirements: What came along with simplifying the information intake process was also omitting certain aspects of the PDF from the guided interview. Naturally, as someone that has worked in this field for almost a decade, it is easy for me to review the application document and know exactly what information is important to obtain at what stage of the process. However, this is not obvious to a first time applicant that is not familiar with all of these technicalities. For this reason, it was important for me to use the guided interview to block out all the "noise" of the questions that would not be useful to us at the initial intake stage, and would only confuse a potential client.

(3) Textbox input errors: A more technical aspect of the refining process involved glitches within the actual PDF once the guided interview had been completed. In particular, a lot of fields within the document were not lining up with their designated spot. I ended up having to edit the original PDF in the unlocker and re-upload it as a template in the weaver playground, and then input the PDF template as a new source within the code itself.

Efficiency

Process before: If a client wanted to start working with our office they would either have to come see us in person to set up an appointment for an intake interview, or they would have to call us. If we successfully receive the call or voicemail, we may be able to contact them via phone to try and set up an interview that way. All in all, this process resulted in a lot of phone tag, and spread the information intake process over multiple sessions when it could have been completed in one. In addition, there was no designated order in which information was collected and thus there was no uniform organization across every case.

Process after: A client will be able to take charge when it comes to applying for their benefits. They will be able to initiate contact with us in an efficient manner, where we receive a comprehensive packet containing the relevant information needed surrounding their time in the military so that we can set up a more productive meeting. Additionally, every packet that we receive will be uniform, which will facilitate the identification of any gaps that may require further investigation.

Real World Viability and Sustainability

The steps that are necessary before real-world use of this project would be further personalization of the pre and post interview instructions based on the office that is going to utilize this tool.

Additionally, a feedback tool would be included for users to leave their comments or complaints after having utilized the guided interview. This feedback would be closely monitored and would aid in any necessary updates within the code. As the VA reforms their processes our tool would need to keep up with the necessary updated requirements as well.

Final Product

Link to final project:	https://apps-dev.suffolklitlab.org/start/playground404CodingTheLawFinal/CtLFinal/?from_list=1
Link to GitHub repo	https://github.com/yschulkes/ctl
Project Pitch Slide Deck:	https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/12fPXJYM7jzJRO4NFN_qYTlntZtZbmEf KPc7EAyh-YDQ/edit#slide=id.g14802977023_0_10