



Modern Claims Processing Project

Human-Centered Design Research Report



ATLAS
RESEARCH

+

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs



How might we modernize the VA's disability claims process by designing solutions to empower Adjudicators to deliver efficient, effective, and easy disability ratings that build trust and improve the Veteran Experience?

“

Human-Centered Design helps us to understand what our customers really need so that we can create solutions that are relevant and important to them. It gives us the tools to put [users] at the start and the center of our work. This means that we prioritize our efforts how [users] would want them prioritized, and helps us make sure that when we invest in something, we're investing in the right projects, ideas, or technologies for [users].

”

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS CENTER FOR INNOVATION,
“DESIGNING FOR VETERANS”

Table of Contents

MCP Project Overview

Employee Impact

Adjudicator Mindsets

Adjudicator Journey: Insights & Opportunities

Veteran Journey: Insights & Opportunities

MCP Project Overview

A Vision of the Future

Modern Claims Processing (MCP) vision is a future service delivery that:

- **Cares for Veterans** in a timely manner
- **Streamlines the claims process by harnessing computable medical data** allowing Adjudicators to spend less time with repetitive administrative tasks and reducing the number of tools they use
- **Connects employees with Veterans** which is key to motivating quality work in a timely manner



MCP Project

The focus of the MCP Project is to develop a [Modern Adjudicator Portal](#) informed by customer and employee unmet needs and designed *with* them, not for them

GOALS

Co-create a tool for Rating Veteran Service Representatives (RVSRs) to use while processing Benefits Delivered at Discharge (BDD) claims that:

- Improves the [efficiency](#)
- Improves the [accuracy](#)
- Improves [satisfaction and engagement](#)

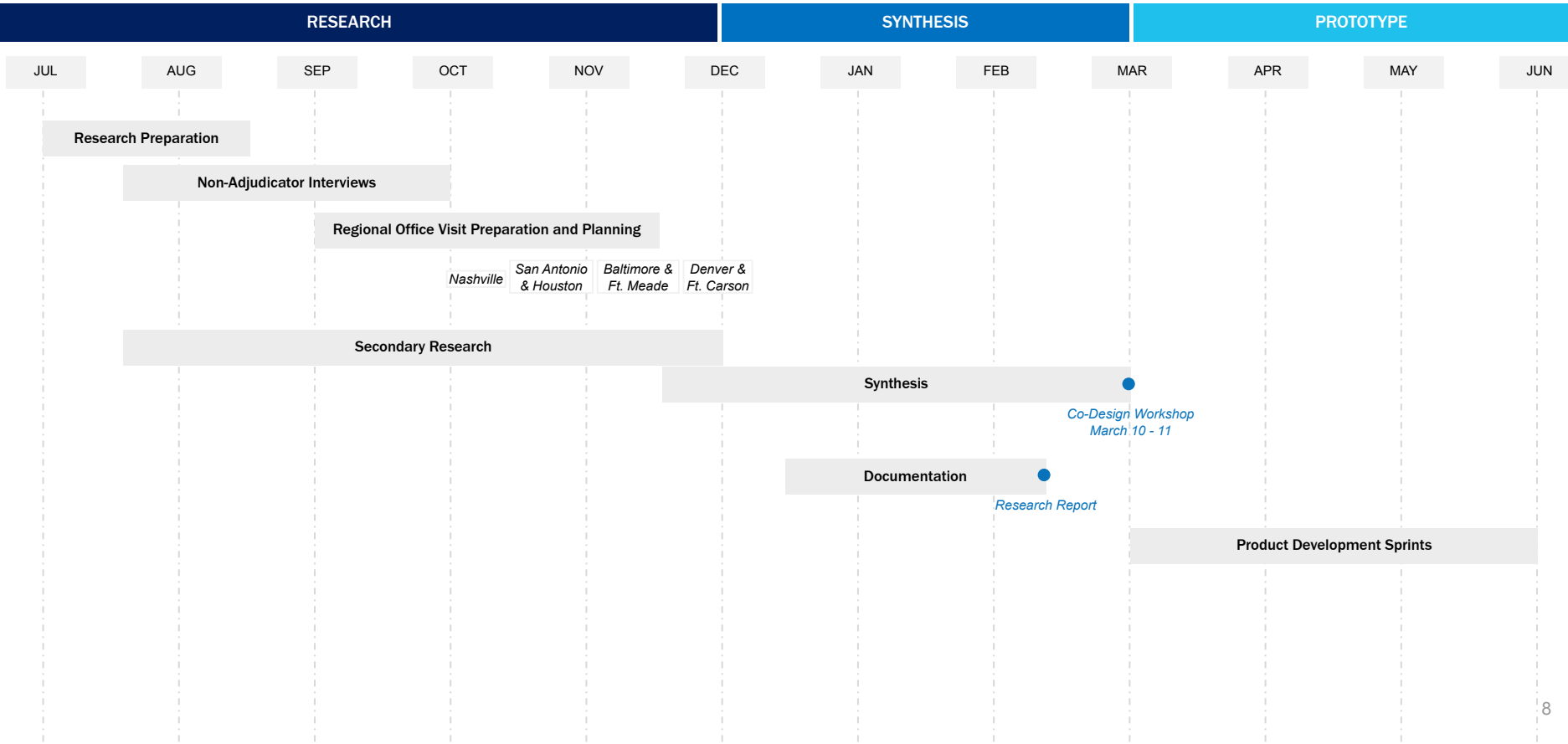
WHY?

Annual enrollment in the BDD program by Servicemembers is expected to increase significantly over the next two years

200,000 Servicemembers separate every year



MCP Human-Centered Design Project Roadmap



MCP Project Approach

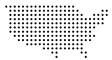
Over the course of 5 months, qualitative research methods and co-design workshops helped us understand Adjudicators' challenges to delivering the best customer experience for Veterans



88 Adjudicators
21 VBA Leaders



46 Interviews
23 Guided Observations
10 Co-Design Workshops



4 Regional Offices
3 Military Bases



Human-Centered Design Research Plan

Perspectives We Need to Understand



People Who Inform Adjudicator's Work

- Separating Service Members (SSM)
- Veterans
- Military Service Coordinators (MSC)
- Veteran Service Representatives (VSR)
- Veterans' Caregivers
- Veteran Service Organizations (VSO)
- Medical Professionals (DOD, Civilian, VA)
- VBA Adjudication Trainers



VBA Medical Claim Adjudicators

- Rating Veteran Service Representatives (RVSR)

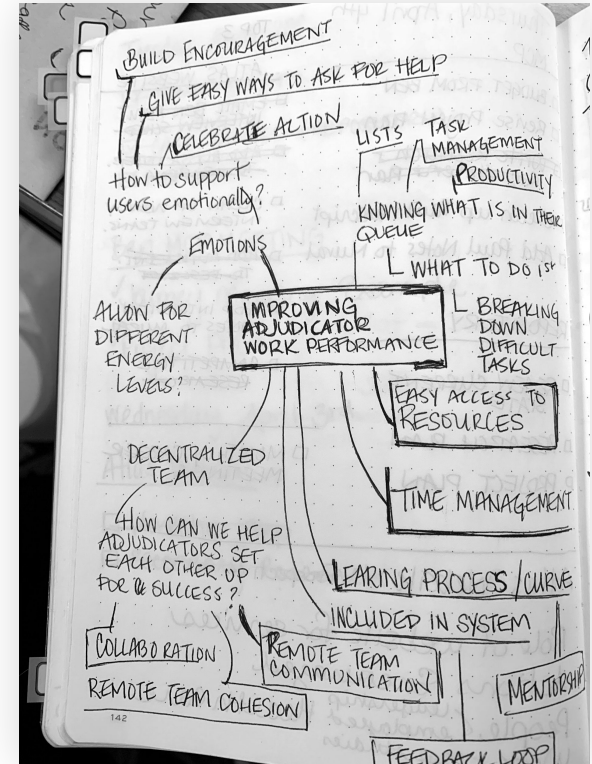


People Informed by Adjudicators' Work

- Post-VSR
- Decision Review Officer (DRO)
- Coaches
- Appeals
- SSMS
- Veterans
- Veterans' Caregivers

Objectives & Methodology

- Understand the current journey of disability claims process
- Better understanding of Adjudicator's workflow, their role in the claims process and environment
- Identify claim processing challenges
- Insight into how they actually do their work
- Involve stakeholders in the process of designing future state journeys
- Use findings as the foundation for prototypes of the Modern Adjudicator Portal





Employee Impact

Improving Productivity

These are four factors that impact productivity which we observed during our qualitative research and believe we can impact through organizational change, systems, and tools to support the workflow



Motivation

General willingness of someone to do something



Attention

Concentration on a task



Psychological Safety

A shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking



Playful Orientation

Intentional reframing of a situation or a task to make it more enjoyable

Motivation

Motivation is the general desire or willingness of someone to do something. Motivation is enhanced when:

- Employees feel in charge of their future, their successes, and their failures
- Employees perceive that their work has meaningful impact on others



“

Often our productivity struggles are caused not by a lack of efficiency, but a lack of motivation.

At the heart of meaningful work is the belief that your job makes other people's lives better.

”



ADAM GRANT,
ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY
PROFESSOR AT WHARTON

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is feeling free from the fear of ridicule, judgment, or punishment for asking questions, sharing ideas, and creative work

- Psychological safety is both fragile and vital to success in uncertain and interdependent environments
- Employees thrive in environments and teams where they feel they are safe to make decisions, creatively solve problems and freely raise issues
- Psychological safety is fundamentally threatened in organizational cultures where making mistakes or errors in work has severe punitive consequences which, in turn, hinders employees' productivity and motivation

“ *Google’s data indicated that psychological safety, more than anything else, was critical to making a team work.* ”



CHARLES DUHIGG,
PULITZER PRIZE WINNING REPORTER
& NYT BEST SELLING AUTHOR



Attention

Attention management is the art of focusing on getting things done for the right reasons, in the right places, and at the right moments

- Interruptions and workflows that require employees repetitively to switch back and forth among various tools or tasks has a significant negative impact in their productivity due to dividing their attention
- It takes on average 23 minutes and 15 seconds to return to the original task after an interruption



“

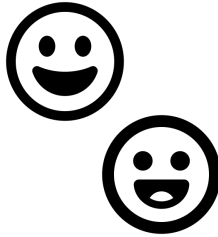
Design has the power to control the human mind during and even beyond the interaction with the product.

”



MARTIN JANCIK,
PRODUCT DESIGNER AT KIWI.COM

Playful Orientation to Work



A playful orientation to a task increases attention, persistence, positivity, and overall productivity

- A behavioral orientation superimposed on work tasks
- Celebrating and positively reinforcing task completion and desired behaviors

“

Some think of “play” as frivolous - a distraction, or worse, a waste of time. In the office, play is often regarded as a break from “real work”. But what if the opposite of play isn’t work, it’s boredom? What if work could actually benefit from play?

”



BRENDAN BOYLE,
IDEO PARTNER



Adjudicator Mindsets



Adjudicator Mindsets

Approach to Production Goals

Reaching production goals is about:

Strategist

Having a strategy that balances large, small, simple, and complex claims, then maximizing points per claim whenever possible

Assembly Line

Just taking the next claim in the queue and getting as many points out of it as possible

Response to Claim Problems

When problems arise on a claim, like conflicting information:

Team

Attempts to connect directly with the person to solve the issue. This could mean calling the Veteran or messaging a fellow VA employee

Manual Protocol

Will defer a claim over attempting to solve a problem over the phone or email first

Response to Change

When discussing change to the process and tools:

Cost of Change

Wants to be convinced of how this change makes a positive impact on Veterans and on their ability to do this work well. Sees it as a negative thing and a disruption to the workflow

Benefits of Change

Recognizes the need for improvement and expresses open-mindedness at trying new features or tools

Adjudicator Mindsets

Approach to Work

Performance Review Driven

Knowing production goals are tied to performance reviews a specific is the primary motivator for Adjudicators with this mindset to progress claims.

“I think it's good because I think I had some sandbaggers I think I had some folks that could have given me more. And I think that they knew that there was no production standard.” - Local Quality Review Specialist

“I know why we need production because we have people that won't get the work done unless they have these goals.” - Rating Veteran Service Representative



Adjudicator Journey: Insights & Opportunities

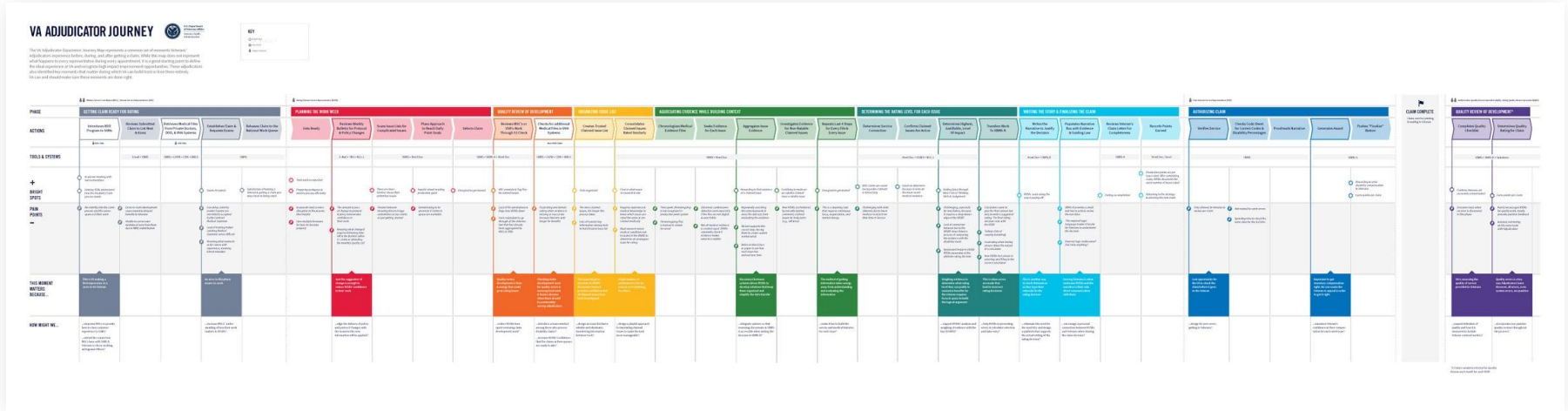
“

In a sense, the claims process is easy: a vet files a claim, they are verified as a vet, and evidence is gathered, and a determination is made based on evidence (DD214 or complete file).

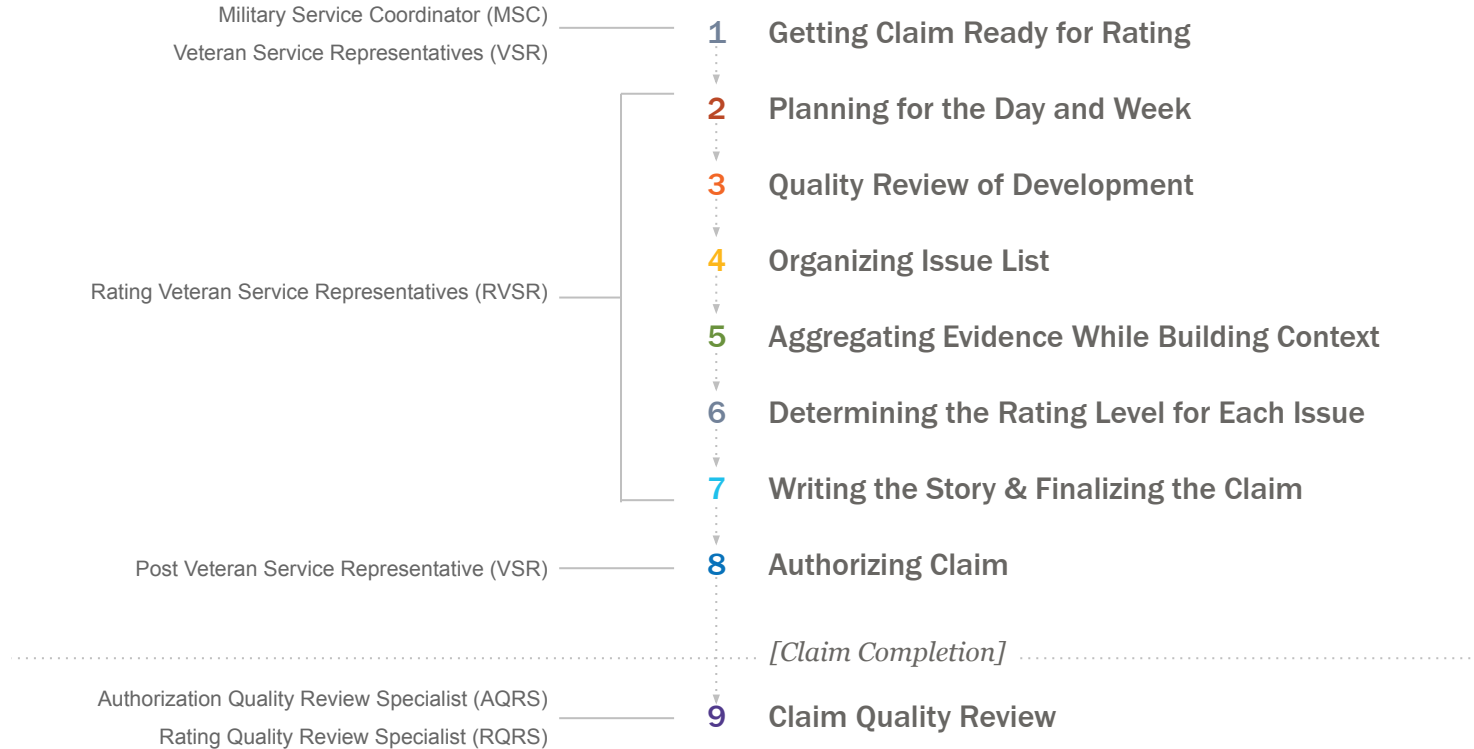
”

VBA LEADERSHIP

Adjudicator Journey Map



Adjudicator Journey Phases



1

PHASE:

Getting the Claim Ready for Rating

“

“There are few other positions within VA that don't end up in a complete abstraction of real people's needs. As a MSC, I still have that connection to real people.”

”

MILITARY SERVICE COORDINATOR

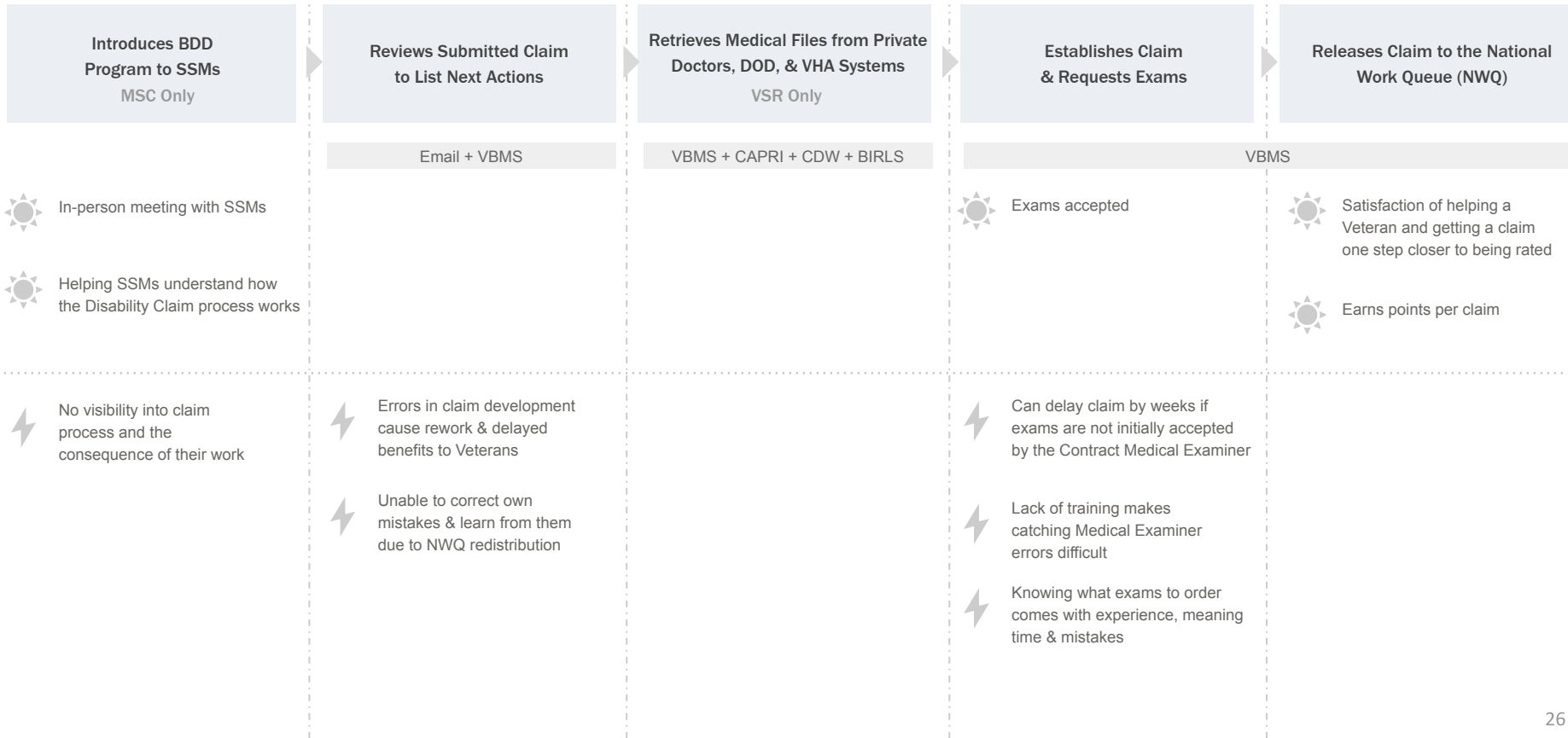
ACTIONS IN THIS PHASE



BRIGHT SPOTS



PAIN POINTS



INSIGHT

Serving Veterans gives MSC's work purpose

"A good day is when a servicemember comes in and they might be negative at first, but when they leave, they know that they can rely on you, and they thank you." —MSC

"I am here for the Vet and I love my job." —Decision Review Officer (DRO)

"MSC get to both process claims and got to talk to the service members directly and assist them and encourage them." —MSC Coach

*"It's a really fulfilling job because you get the full breadth of everything."
—MSC*

"You get to interact with the members and, you know, help them understand how the VA process works. A lot of them are confused." —MSC



Team Mindset

MSC broke protocol and called an RVSR who deferred a BDD claim because the Veteran status was Active Duty. Explained BDD to the RVSR and the RVSR corrected his decision.

INSIGHT

Lack of understanding and connection to how their work matters to RVSRs

Claim development work determines the success or failure of that claim

"A little time invested in the front that saves time in the end of the process is worth it." - Quality Leadership

*"We can't learn if we don't know the mistakes we've made."
- RVSR*

"Everybody complains about MSC's mistakes, but we have no visibility into the longevity of a claim & the consequences of our work." - MSC

"At least once a day will come across claim where service isn't right. I used to ask a VSR but it's just easier for me to do it myself now." - RVSR



MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

This is the VA making a first impression on a soon-to-be Veteran

How might we empower MSCs to provide best-in-class customer experience to SSMS?

How might we extend the connection MSCs have with SSMS and Veterans to those working at Regional Offices?

MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

An error in this phase means re-work

How might we increase MSCs' understanding of how their work matters to RVSRs?

2

PHASE:

Planning the Work Week

“

*“What’s in my best interest as an employee?
What can be turned that day?”*

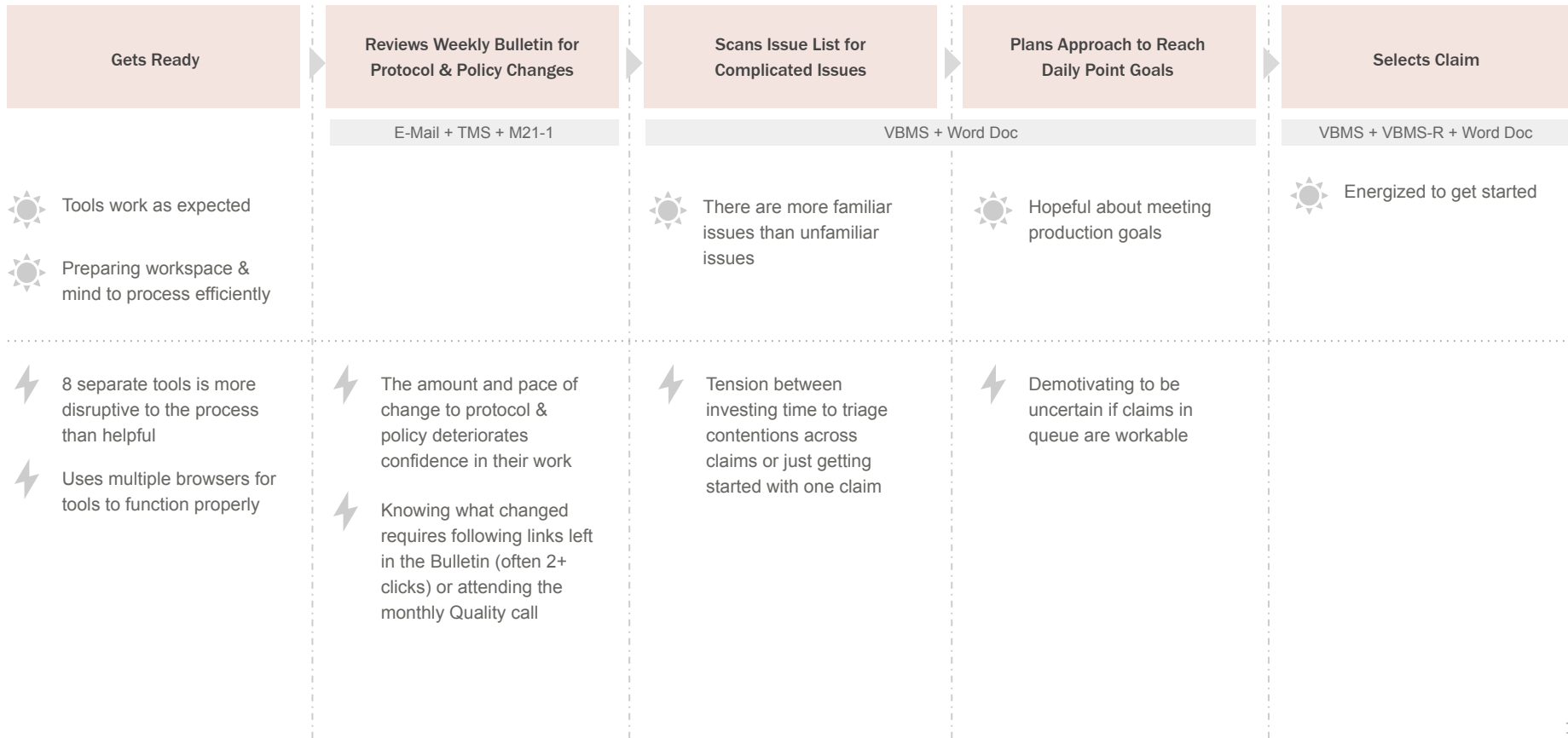
*“It comes down to how many of those issues
I can actually rate.”*

”

RATING VETERAN SERVICE REPRESENTATIVES

ACTIONS IN THIS PHASE

 BRIGHT SPOTS  PAIN POINTS



INSIGHT

Preparing tools provides a sense of control and preparedness to handle the messy work of processing claims

“Takes discipline to split up time spent on a complex claim over a week (balanced with easier claims to make your production target).” - RVSR

“So I gotta strategize like how I can get points. And I think that I’ve worked here for so long, I know how to do that fairly well. And I won’t let a claim sit too long in my queue. It’s not fair to that veteran, but I definitely will prioritize a list and say, let me knock out three cases first before I worked this more difficult one.”

- RVSR



Locus of Control

“Productivity begins with motivation; and motivation begins with control — or more precisely, the location of control.” - Charles Duhigg

Assembly Line Mindset

This mindset takes the claim at the top of their queue and works it as long as they can instead of investing time and energy in planning out how to reach their point goals.

INSIGHT

Changes to policy, protocol, and tools deteriorates RVSRs' confidence

"Updates happen, you log in, and you're like "what's this, where did this go?" - RVSR

"Changes mean stress on employees because errors are a big deal." - DRO

"I have received 5 different fixes to items already changed in this video. Example MST. We were told that the dev [sic] letter is not to be sent by our RO. I am over quality and how no matter what you do you're doomed to fail. It's a punishment system and quality is never there for questions. So learn on your own or fail. Guess most of us will just fail." - Quality Call Feedback

Cost of Change Mindset

"Change is a problem because everyone has to learn." – DRO

Benefit of Change Mindset

"With so many changes always occurring, we appreciate these updates, reminders, and explanations of tough issues."
– Quality Call Feedback

MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

Just the suggestion of change is enough to reduce RVSRs' confidence in their work

How might we align the delivery of policy and protocol changes with the moment this new information will be applied?

3

PHASE:

Quality Review of Development

“

*You're always having to go through
and recheck everything.*

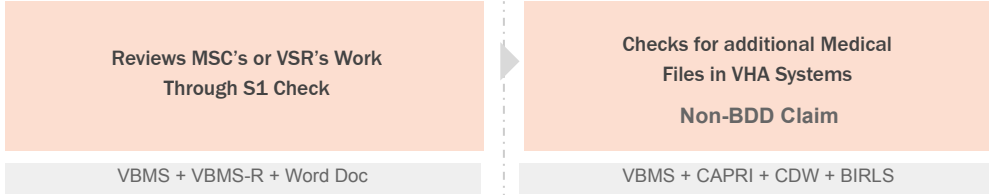
”


RATING VETERAN SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE


ACTIONS IN THIS PHASE


 BRIGHT SPOTS


 PAIN POINTS



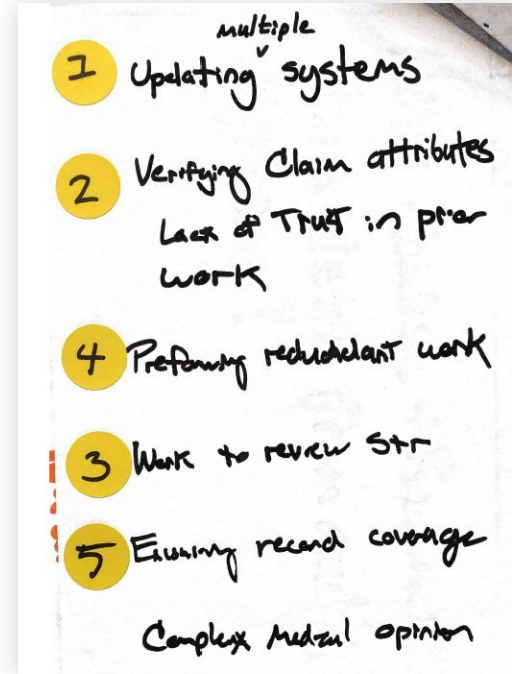
 MSC annotate & flag files for claimed issues

 Lack of file annotations & flags slows RVSRs down

 Feels redundant to go through all the information that has already been aggregated by MSCs & VSRs

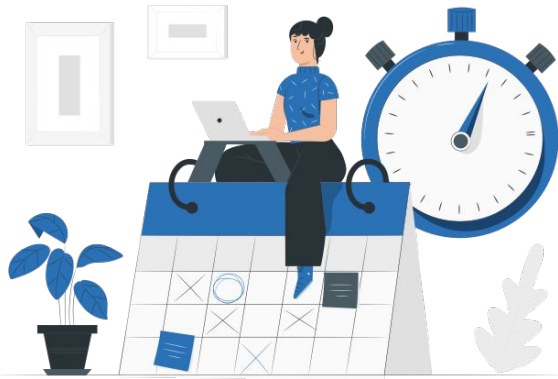
 Frustrating and demotivating when evidence is missing or inaccurate because Veterans wait longer for benefits

Top Challenges When Processing Claims



INSIGHT

When development is thorough and neat, RVSRs feel set up for success



“I had a great RVSR. She sat me down and explained what happens. ‘Here’s how you make your points. Here’s how you help me make my points.’ And if there was ever a question, it was always my RVSR. [I’d say] ‘Hey, Elizabeth, look at this here. Tell me what you want me to do.’ Because my terminal digits were her terminal digits. So if I was successful, she was going to be successful.” - VSR Coach

“If you had a unified standard for document naming & document types. then I could import and find evidence efficiently for all decisions I make.” - RVSR

*“I had a claim the other day where the VSR had organized all the files, renamed them, and annotated them so it was so easy for me to find all the evidence for each issue. And I was like....I could have just kissed his feet!”
- RVSR*

INSIGHT

When development is incomplete, messy, and inconsistent, RVSRs feel frustrated and let down by their colleague

“VSR gathers information but may not look into details. Will look for a sleep study but not look for things like x-rays or biopsies.”

- RVSR

“Success for VSRs is the least amount of time in queue.” - VSR Coach

“Do your VSRs now have [a partnership with an RVSR] now? No. Do you see people developing that relationship informally? Of course. You have to. How do you see VSRs develop these relationships with RVSRs? Just looking to see who’s in the office.”

- VSR Coach



Psychological Safety

“Studies also show that people working in teams tend to achieve better results and report higher job satisfaction. In a 2015 study, executives said that profitability increases when workers are persuaded to collaborate more.”

- Charles Duhigg

MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

Quality review development is time and energy that could go to rating issues

How might we reduce RVSRs time spent reviewing claim development work?

MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

Checking claim development work for quality errors is unrecognized work and fosters division when there should be partnership among adjudicators

How might we introduce a team mindset among those who process disability claims?

How might we increase RVSRs' confidence that the claims in their queues are ready to rate?

4 PHASE: Organizing Issue List

“ *I've also been doing this for 10 years and I have a process down. I keep notes. I know some people don't keep notes. And I'm like, how do you keep your brain organized and just make sure that you don't forget something? When I take notes, I write down the evidence 'cause we have to list all the evidence. So I make sure that I've not missed any evidence.* ”


RATING VETERAN SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE


ACTIONS IN THIS PHASE


Creates Trusted Claimed Issue List


Consolidates Claimed Issues Rated Similarly


VBMS + Word Doc


 Feels organized

 Clear in what issues to research & rate

 The more claimed issues, the longer this process takes

 Requires experience & medical knowledge to know which issues are rated the same or are related medically

 Lots of transferring information between tools to build trusted issue list

 Must research newer medical conditions not included in the VASRD to determine an analogous issue for rating



BRIGHT SPOTS



PAIN POINTS

Name:	
SSN:	
EP Code:	0
Branch/Dates:	
POA:	
VAE Exams:	
Claim Date:	
Effective Date:	
VCAA:	
VA LTR + extra info:	
Dominant Hand:	L / R
Claiming No Exposure	

Section (§) 5103 Notice, dated
 Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty for periods of
 STR's received
 Military Personnel Records, received
 0995 Decision Review Request: Supplemental Claim
 0966 Intent to file a claim for compensation and/or pension, or survivors pension and/or DIC
 VA Notification Letter, dated XXXXXX, acknowledging receipt of your application for VA benefits
 VA Notification Letter, dated XXXXXX, acknowledging receipt of your intent to file a claim for compensation

1- Claimed Disability:	
VA Disability:	
DC:	
Rating %:	

2- Claimed Disability:	
VA Disability:	
DC:	
Rating %:	

3- Claimed Disability:	
VA Disability:	
DC:	
Rating %:	

4- Claimed Disability:	
VA Disability:	
DC:	
Rating %:	

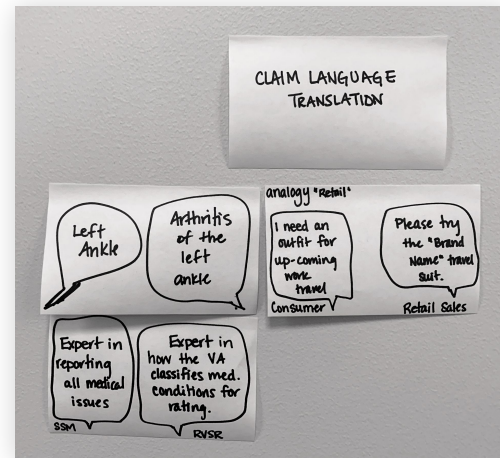
INSIGHT

Issue lists are: “to-do” lists, keyword search lists, and ultimately the ground RVSRs build their decision upon

“Sometimes you need to separate issues: Veteran claims Bilateral knee and I have to separate into left knee and right knee.” - RVSR

“Sometimes you can look in the VBMS-Core issue list and combine them but other times you need a medical opinion.” - RVSR

*“Would be helpful if I could merge issues together for cases where the veteran is filing for the same issue multiple different ways.”
- RVSR*

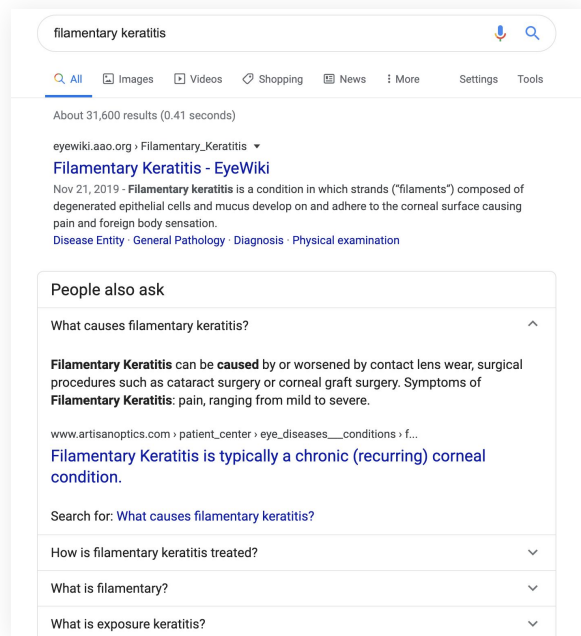


INSIGHT

RVSRs self-educate on medical conditions to choose the correct VASRD and understand how medical contentions might be related

“I have to Google a lot when it comes to eyes. They just, they just are things you've never heard of. Like I'm familiar with diabetes and [...] I know what hearing loss is and I know what knee arthritis is, but when it comes to the eyes, it's just unfamiliar.” - RVSR

“Yesterday on this claim [I had an issue I used Google to understand]. It was, “filamentary keratitis”. So I would just like put it in Google. I'll just type it in and see what it is because we don't have that diagnosis listed in the rating schedule.” - RVSR



The screenshot shows a Google search for "filamentary keratitis". The search bar at the top contains the text "filamentary keratitis". Below the search bar, there are navigation options: "All", "Images", "Videos", "Shopping", "News", "More", "Settings", and "Tools". The search results indicate "About 31,600 results (0.41 seconds)". The first result is from "eyewiki.aao.org" titled "Filamentary Keratitis - EyeWiki". The snippet for this result states: "Nov 21, 2019 - Filamentary keratitis is a condition in which strands ("filaments") composed of degenerated epithelial cells and mucus develop on and adhere to the corneal surface causing pain and foreign body sensation." Below the snippet are links for "Disease Entity", "General Pathology", "Diagnosis", and "Physical examination".

The "People also ask" section is expanded for the question "What causes filamentary keratitis?". The answer provided is: "Filamentary Keratitis can be caused by or worsened by contact lens wear, surgical procedures such as cataract surgery or corneal graft surgery. Symptoms of Filamentary Keratitis: pain, ranging from mild to severe." Below this answer is a link to "www.artisanoptics.com" with a snippet: "Filamentary Keratitis is typically a chronic (recurring) corneal condition." Below the answer are search suggestions: "Search for: What causes filamentary keratitis?".

Other questions listed in the "People also ask" section include: "How is filamentary keratitis treated?", "What is filamentary?", and "What is exposure keratitis?".

MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

The issue list gives structure to RVSRs' document review and provides confidence that all claimed issues have been investigated

How might we design an issue list that is reliable and eliminates transferring information between tools?

MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

A high number of contentions is fun for some and overwhelming for others

How might we design a playful approach to translating claimed issues to make the task more manageable?

5

PHASE:

Aggregating Evidence While Building Context

“

You know, we're working to serve Veterans and get them an answer and get their money right. And if their money is right and we've granted them what we can, I think we've done our job.

”

RATING VETERAN SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE

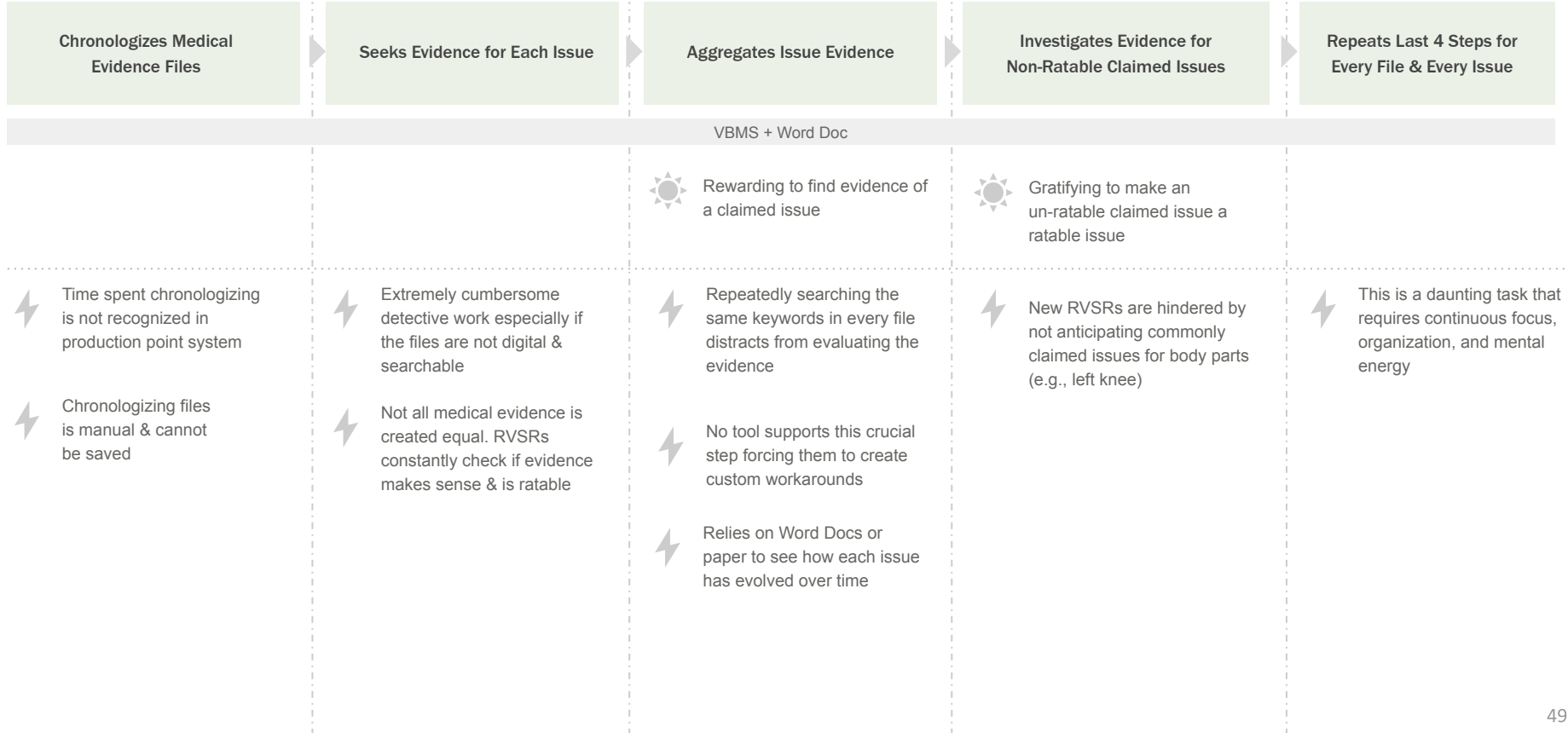
ACTIONS IN THIS PHASE



BRIGHT SPOTS



PAIN POINTS



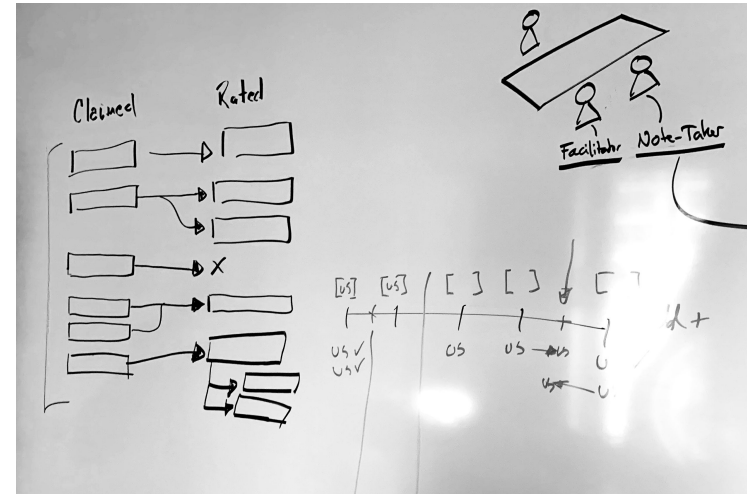
INSIGHT

Translating non-ratable claimed issues into ratable claimed issues is the strategic value RVSRs provide

One issue can become many issues (e.g. SSM claimed "Left Knee"). Rater shared that after reviewing the SSM's STR:

*"I found 3 things I can rate related to his knees."
- RVSR Observation*

*"Diabetes is a disease process with residuals. A SSM might claim Diabetes as well as Residuals as separate line items. The RVSR has to not only nest the residuals as part of Diabetes but needs to tell this translation story to the Claimant when writing the narrative. Additionally, once a residual hits a particular level it's get broken out from under Diabetes and is rated on it's own."
- RQRS*



INSIGHT

Document review is a mountain of unknown size and difficulty since the complexity of the Servicemember's medical history is unknown until all the files are opened and reviewed

"Everything that is mandatory for me to consider, I pull into a word document. It helps me know that I've reviewed it. That way I know that I'm not missing something." - RVSR

"I'm going to just you I'm just going to open them all up first. That way, they're all open. And I'll just start reviewing and close them out." - RVSR

"Right now I'm looking at a 557 page STR on a 9 issues. Actually 10 throwing the last issue in there. So it takes time and and I'm big on detail. I want the examiner to know everything that veterans have. You know if it's just a knee, when and how many times he was treated because I don't want the examiner looking at the exams that were done on this veteran." - DRO



MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

Disconnect between systems drives RVSRs to develop solutions that keep them organized and simplify the data transfer

How might we integrate systems so that reviewing documents in VBMS is accessible when writing the decision in VBMS-R?

MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

The method of getting information takes energy away from understanding and evaluating information

How might we make it fun to build the service and medical histories for each issue?

6

PHASE:

Determining the Rating Level for Each Issue

“

*What makes you feel confident in
your rating decision?*

My knowledge.

”

RATING VETERAN SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE

ACTIONS IN THIS PHASE



BRIGHT SPOTS



PAIN POINTS



INSIGHT

Arriving at a rating decision is as much art as science as RVSRs weight all the evidence with the VASRD providing the legal guardrails

“There's so much evidence and information that can go into making and reading decision--multiple exams and just the level of detail you sometimes have to go through to come to a decision. It seems like thinking you can simplify all that into just an automated decision. It just doesn't compute to me, I guess.” - Business Requirements Analyst, OBPI

“Anything we do with rating has a touch of gray in it.” - Training Leadership



INSIGHT

There is an inconsistency in how RVSRs utilize the calculator outputs. Some regard it as the law whereas others see it as a gutcheck

“We’ve actually given errors when raters just automatically use what evaluation builder says they should.” - Quality Review Coach

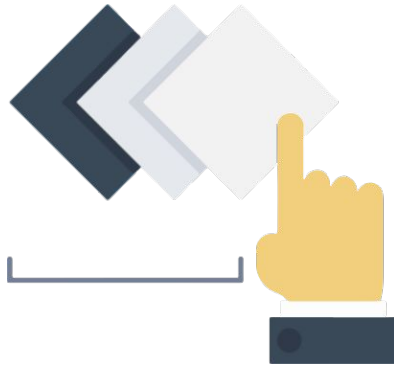
*“We gained efficiency but people are becoming too reliant on programs and are losing the ability to make the decision.”
- Training Leadership and former RVSR*

*“AMA is probably kind of the beginning of getting us or putting us in the sweet spot. As far as the balance between the automation (calculators) and then being able to actually exercise judgment and, and weigh evidence and probative value and stuff.”
- Quality Review Coach*



INSIGHT

Inputting data to VBMS-R is a very monotonous, tedious, and repetitive task that requires constantly switching from one tool to another

**Attention**

Reducing the number of places RVSRs go to get needed information is a key opportunity to improving efficiency and accuracy

"I don't trust VBMS to put them [references] in, I have a word doc and I copy and paste." - RVSR

"Have this (VASRD Manual) reference in a separate word document; copy and paste into VBMS-R." - RVSR

INSIGHT

RVSRs are reliant on programs that hand out decisions and, as a result, are losing autonomy and decision making authority

“Eval Builder is an unfortunate tool. We have made a group of dummies for RVSRs and I hate to say it, but it is true. We put too much automation into the making of a decision.” - Quality Review Specialist

“Yeah, I've actually worked on quite a few automation things. We've tried it several times and it hasn't gone anywhere yet. And the main reason is that the Raters still own the decision. So even if the system automates and populates data and tells [RVSRs] ‘this is what your decision should be’. Ultimately it will be the Rater's signature on that decision. “ - Business Requirements Analyst OBPI

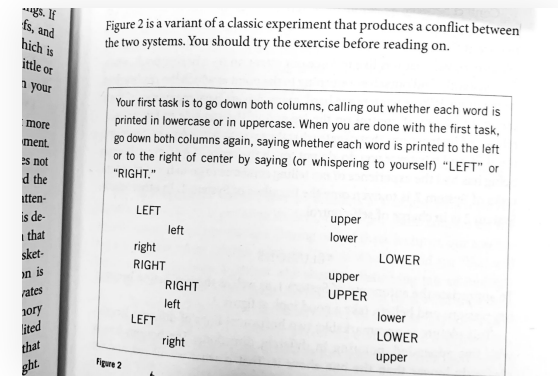
“You shouldn't necessarily go with what Evaluation Builder spits out because there's still the judgment call.” - Quality Review Specialist

INSIGHT

Calculators introduce other pitfalls that lead to rating errors while providing baselines for rating decisions

Key Calculator User Challenges:

- Hard to know what calculator to choose when the issue does not match the calculator name
- Calculators often present incongruent data entry (e.g., where data for left body parts are on the right-side) which slows the process
- It takes time and consulting experienced RVSRs to learn which calculator fields to fill in and which ones to leave blank
- Calculators are challenging for new RVSRs because the user experience assumes a deep knowledge of the VASRD



MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

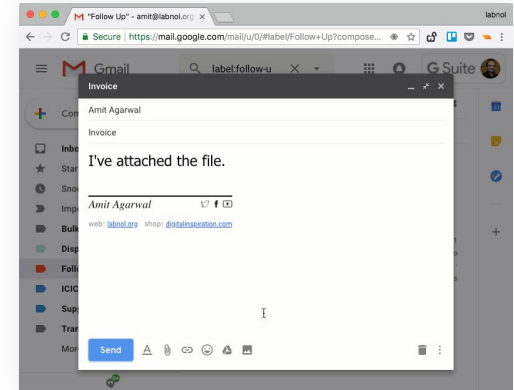
Weighing evidence to determine what rating level they can justify to maximize benefits for the Veteran requires focus & space to build the logical argument

How might we support RVSRs' analysis and weighing of evidence with the law (VASRD)?

MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

This is when errors are made that lead to incorrect rating decisions

How might we help RVSRs prevent errors during calculator selection and data entry?



7

PHASE:

Writing the Story & Finalizing the Claim

“ *When you build a rating you build it? Well, me personally, like I said, I like a lot of meat. I like a lot of detail to the Veteran. I want to explain to the Veteran from beginning to end, why we're service connecting, why we're granting what we're granting, and, why we're denying. Sometimes there is nothing to give but I'll try to explain why we're not giving it.* ”

RATING VETERAN SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE

ACTIONS IN THIS PHASE



BRIGHT SPOTS



PAIN POINTS



INSIGHT

It is extremely motivating to be able to grant a Veteran with the correct disability rating and see how their work matters as they make Veterans' lives better

“As an RVSR, I want the SSMs / Veterans to feel cared for and confident that I reviewed every document in their files and considered all the information when making a decision.” - RVSR Observation Quote

“You know, we're working to serve Veterans and get them an answer and get their money right. And if their money is right and we've granted them what we can, I think we've done our job.” - RVSR

“What helps you feel confident that a claim is ready for review?” “My notes. I make note of all my decisions and annotations of everything.” - VSR Coach

INSIGHT

Veteran Disability Claim letter is an opportunity to have a more personal connection with the Veteran and enhance VA's Customer Service

"I give the Veteran the info that I find to make them confident that I looked through things." - RVSR

"When you build a rating you you build it? Well, me personally, like I said, I like a lot of meat. I like a lot of detail to the Veteran. I want to explain to the Veteran from beginning to end, why we're service connecting, why we're granting what we're granting, and, why we're denying. Sometimes there is nothing to give but I'll try to explain why we're not giving it." - Quality Review Specialist

Sgt. Anne Smith, Claim 12002233456

Dear Sgt. Anne Smith,

Thank you for your 20 years of service in the US Navy.

I'm writing to share the results of the claim you submitted on October 1, 2019. After a thorough review of your claim and all the documents in your file, you are eligible by law to receive \$2, 893.00 monthly support from the VA for the medical issues you live with because of your military service.

Attached to this letter, please find a detailed addendum that describes the process and the laws that guide us here at the VA as well as detailing the evidence used to support each issue you claimed.

We, at the VA, want you to feel confident in understanding these benefits. If you have any questions, please email me at john.doe@va.gov or call our support team at 1-800-123-4567.

From one Veteran to another, it has been an honor to process your claim.

Very Respectfully,

John Doe

US ARMY Veteran

Send Cancel

INSIGHT

While writing the narrative is thought of as the last step, after all the decisions have been made, it is often while writing out their decisions that RVSRs solidify their understanding of the Veteran and catch their own errors

“We are dealing with a complex set of laws and a complex medical system, and trying to get those two to play nice. [It] sometimes helps to talk things out in your head or write it out so that you fully understand what's going on.” - RVSR

“I give the Veteran the info that I find to make them confident that I looked through things.” - RVSR

“Writing out a story of what raters have done, reached their decisions, builds in checks and balances.” - RQRS

MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

This is another way to check themselves as they type their rationale for the rating decision

How might we eliminate the need for the Word document and design a platform that supports the actual writing of the rating decision and the cognitive efforts that go into it?

MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

Serving Veterans is what motivates RVSRs and the narrative is their only direct communication with them

How might we encourage a personal connection between RVSRs and Veterans when sharing the claim decision?

8

PHASE:

Authorizing the Claim

“

If the Post VSR thinks there's an error they should reach out to the RVSR. Almost always done on IM -- you have to be extremely professional and say "Hey, did you mean to do this?"

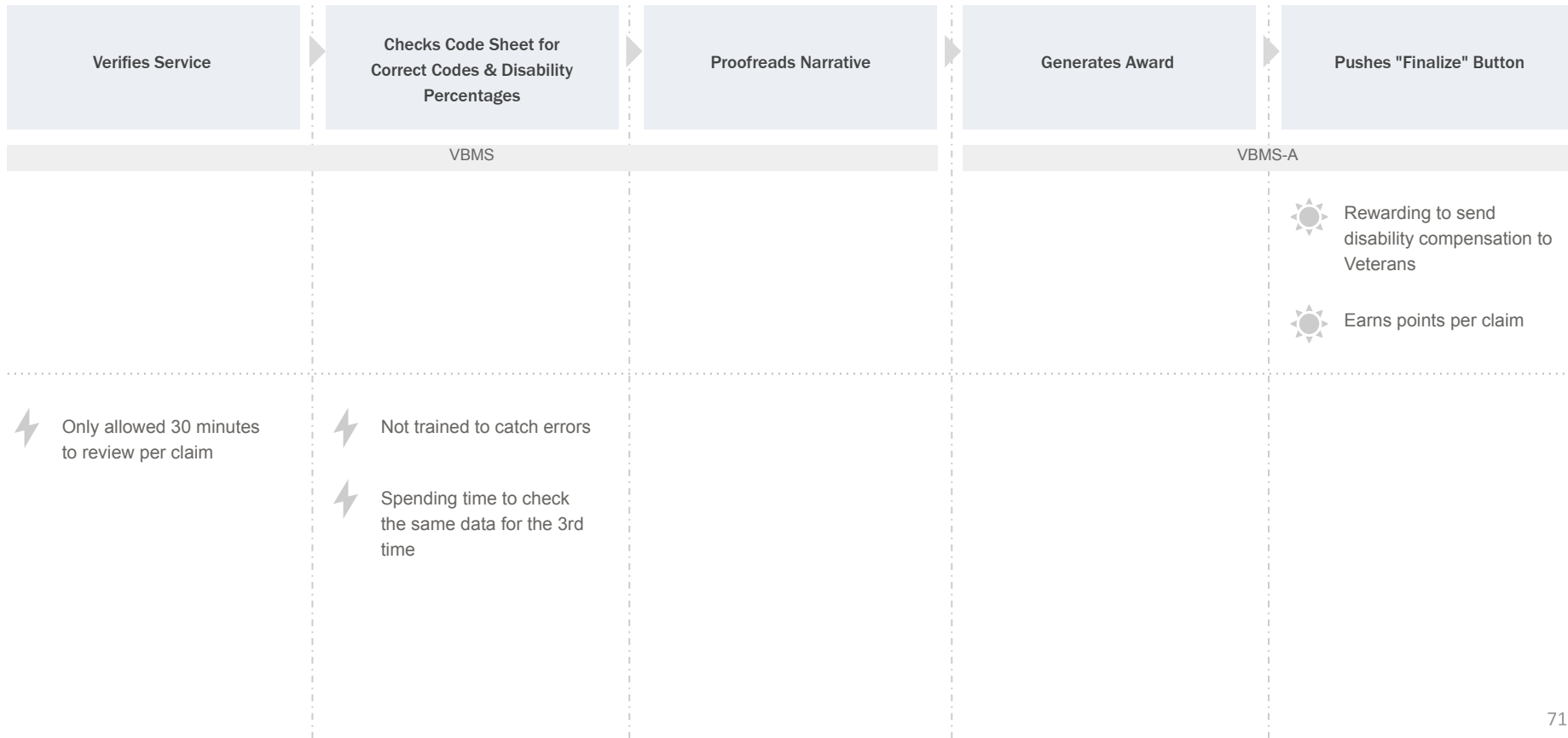
”

VETERAN SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE

ACTIONS IN THIS PHASE

 BRIGHT SPOTS

 PAIN POINTS



INSIGHT

Even though this phase is the last checkpoint to catch errors before they get to the hands of the Veteran, Post-VSRs are not set up for success

This phase is the last opportunity to make sure the rating decision is error-free

However:

- Post-VSRs are not trained to catch rating decision errors
- The allotted time of 30 minutes to check a claim is not enough to thoroughly go through it depending on the complexity of the claim

MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

Last opportunity for the VA to check the claim before it goes to the Veteran

How might we design for zero errors getting to Veterans?

MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

Important to get monetary compensation right. No one wants the Veteran to appeal in order to get it right

How might we maximize Veteran's confidence in their compensation for each rated issue?

9

PHASE:

Claim Quality Review

“

I'll tell you what I know is, is probably the most difficult transition. And that is when we're in training, our focus is on quality. Okay? We've got to teach them where the corners are before they can cut any corners. If you're not saying, um, so, uh, making the transition from being mostly quality based to being quality and production based. That's the hardest part, is teaching someone to be fast and good at the same time.

”

DECISION REVIEW OFFICER

ACTIONS IN THIS PHASE



BRIGHT SPOTS



PAIN POINTS

Complete Quality Checklist

Determines Quality Rating
for Claim

VBMS + VBMS-R + Salesforce

Confirms Veterans
are accurately
compensated

Earns points per claim

Everyone loses when an
error is discoveredRarely encourages RVSRS for
quality work, mostly provides
punitive feedbackIsolated, not feeling on the
same team with Adjudicators

"Did they make the right decision. Did they get all of the evidence, not the technical aspects of the system necessarily. We don't look at too much of that. We look at was the decision correct. And did we provide the right notice to the Veteran?" - Quality Review Specialist

*Now on the quality review team: "we're kind of an audit team. We look at quality and make sure that the Raters are making the right decisions. We're paying the right money."
- Quality Review Specialist*

INSIGHT

The Quality Review Team is seen more as police than as colleagues due to the punitive nature of quality reviews even if the error was not RVSR's fault

“Error can not be in detriment to the Veteran but just wasn't in line with VA's 'best practices.’” - RSVR

“Error will still count against me even if it was incorrectly inputted into the system.” - RVSR

“I just feel like quality a lot of times is working against us. They're literally in contradiction of our goals.” - RVSR

“Been so many years since quality people have rated that they don't even know how to use VBMS-R.” - RVSR

INSIGHT

Being penalized for mistakes and not being rewarded for accomplishments destroys Psychological Safety and being publicly chastised for errors makes it hard to see it as a growth opportunity

“Changes mean stress on employees because errors are a big deal.” - RSVR

“Errors impact employees’ lives - commute, professional growth, and employment.” - DRO

*“I don’t mind an error if I actually learn from it, especially if it’s something that would affect the Veteran’s rating.”
- RVSR*

MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

VA is assessing the quality of service provided to Veterans

How might we expand definition of quality and how it is measured to include Veteran centered metrics?

MOMENT THAT MATTERS:

Quality errors is a key way Adjudicators learn. However, all errors, even system errors, are punitive

How might we incorporate non-punitive quality reviews throughout the process?

Veteran Journey: Insights & Opportunities

“

Customer service must start with each other-not talking at each other but with each other across all office barriers and across all compartments. If we don't listen to each other, we won't be able to listen to our Veterans and their families.... and we won't be able to provide the world class customer service they deserve.

”

VA SECRETARY ROBERT WILKIE

VA Customer Experience Principles

Ease

VA will make access to VA care, benefits, and memorial services smooth and easy

Effectiveness

VA will deliver care, benefits and memorial services to the customer's satisfaction

Emotion

VA will deliver care, benefits, and memorial services in a manner that makes customers feel honored and valued in their interactions with VA. VA will use customer experience data and insights in strategy development and decision-making to ensure that the voice of veterans, servicemembers, their families, caregivers, and survivors inform how VA delivers care, benefits, and memorial services



Deciding to Separate

“

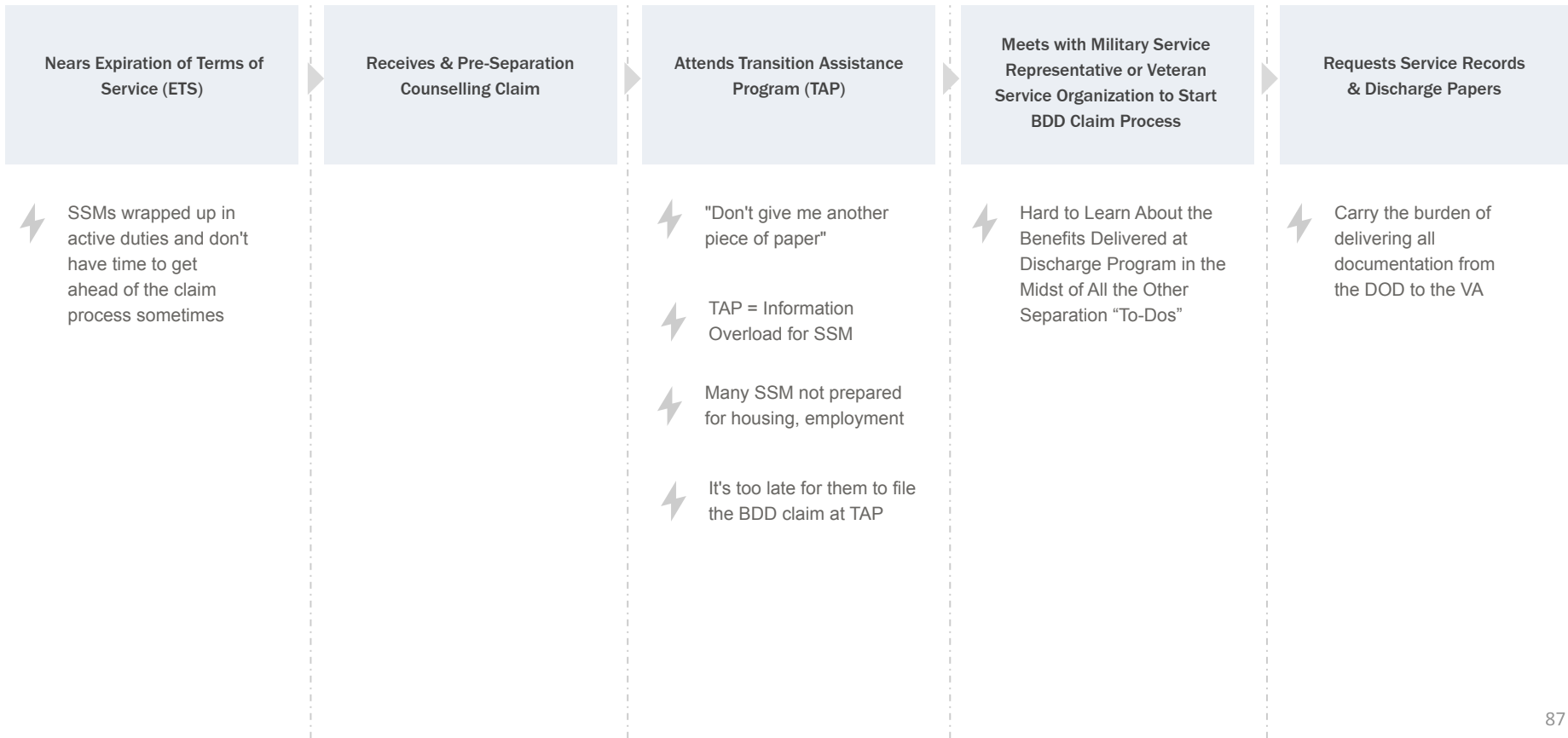
Transition is, first and foremost, a psychological and cultural evolution for which a great many veterans are under-prepared, rather than primarily a basket of economic choices.

”

VACI MILITARY TO CIVILIAN TRANSITION REPORT

ACTIONS IN THIS PHASE

 = PAIN POINTS



INSIGHTS

Transitioning Out of the Military is Stressful Even Under the Best of Circumstances

"They spent 13 weeks training me into a marine, but only 3 days turning me back into a civilian." - VACI MCT

Identifying as “Disabled” Could Deter Servicemembers from Claiming VA Benefits

"I never view myself as disabled. I don't have a handicap parking space [placard] in my car, and I think that if I viewed myself that way I wouldn't be where I am today. [...] to me, the word "disabled" does not match my life, and who I am, and what I've accomplished and the way I go about every single day." - Bethany Hamilton

Separating Servicemembers Don't See the VA as On Their Side

"The VSO set up a table physically on the path to the VA office. They took care of everything for me." - Jim, Retired Army

"Vets tend to go to VSOs first because it's hard to engage the VA." - VA Employee, VEO Multichannel Project

How might we...

...help Separating Servicemembers clearly understand the VA benefit process?

...reduce stress in the transition process?

...take things off Separating Servicemembers to-do list?

...provide a trusted guide through the transition and disability journey?

...support the emotional transition Servicemembers undergo as they become Veterans?

...evolve from being seen as an adversary to an advocate among Servicemembers?



Getting Results

“ *No one would help me. No one would take the time to talk with me. It took me over 10 years to get appropriately service connected. I took this job at the VA because if I can help make sure another Veteran doesn't have to walk a mile that I walked, then it makes what happened to me okay.* ”

NAVY VETERAN, CURRENT CERTIFIED RVSR

ACTIONS IN THIS PHASE



PAIN POINTS



INSIGHTS

Veterans provide the VA highly personal details about their lives. However, communication from the VA doesn't reflect the personal nature of this information and the impact of their decision-making

“Adding laws to the letter, intended to be to the benefit of the veteran but not shared in a way that really helps veterans know and understand the law.” - James, Marine Corps Veteran, Current DRO

“If I see worsening symptoms on a service-connected disability on the exam I cannot invite it. I cannot infer it. I have to suck it up and drive on. [...] Are we really taking care of veterans?” - Luis, 20 year army veteran, current RVSR

Faster claim processing doesn't necessarily mean better service

“To me, it's about the veteran. getting him what he deserves and doing it the right way.” [...] “You can't have quantity and quality at the same time.” If you go for speed, you're not going to get quality.” - James, Marine Corps Veteran, DRO

The explanation of benefits seems more complicated than it needs to be

“It's confusing and hard to understand the results of the claim and what [the Veteran's] benefits will be.” - James, Marine Corps Veteran, DRO

How might we...

...encourage employees to better respond with a level of care that reflects the personal nature of the claim and SSM?

...simplify the explanation of benefits and how these benefits were determined?

...ensure VBA performance metrics are Veteran-centric?

...guarantee no claim processing errors reach the Veteran?

Thank you!