How Acquisition Reforms Are Improving VA's Digital Modernization

The agency is overhauling its procurement methods to keep pace with IT transformation efforts.

In light of the demands of federal IT modernization, the Department of Veterans Affairs has made considerable reforms to its technology acquisition process.

Much of the VA’s overhaul in its acquisitions process has centered on a combination of training reforms and knowledge sharing, with a particular emphasis on the newly launched Digital Information Technology Acquisition Professional (DITAP) training program. A product of the U.S. Digital Service’s broader efforts to modernize and streamline acquisitions across the federal government, the VA has emerged as one of the most comprehensive adopters of DITAP methodologies within its own Technology Acquisition Center (TAC) — with the majority of DITAP-certified federal workers
The central goal of the DITAP program, as outlined in the USDS mission statement, is to encourage greater flexibility and responsiveness within the broader U.S. federal government acquisitions process — one that has periodically been criticized for not keeping pace with the expeditious demands of modernized digital services. In response, the DITAP program has emerged as a solution to train procurement officers in the methods needed to guide acquisitions along a more flexible rollout with the ultimate goal of sending newly certified contracting officers to major federal agencies.

With a critical mass of DITAP graduates now settled within the VA, the agency has emerged as one of the federal institutions most quickly reshaping its acquisitions process while also transforming into a knowledge hub that is sharing best practices with partner organizations.

One of the reforms that has proven most successful at VA has been asking potential vendors to submit technical demonstrations for their products, particularly with the intent of determining how effective and responsive the potential acquisition would be in practice. For more infrastructure-focused products, like those used to accelerate cloud adoption, vendors are often asked to submit a prototype staged through a private GitHub repository or other demonstrative proxy. This has come to replace the older process of submitting technical writings for evaluation, a more prolonged review process that engages less directly with the practical impact of a given acquisition.

“The VA would be in a very different place if it hadn’t taken advantage of the new and creative ways of evaluating contractors and structuring contracts as taught in DITAP. The biggest benefit for us is the change from the ‘tell me’ methodology in written proposals to the ‘show me’ methodology,” said Jeffrey Barnes, a digital services expert within the VA’s Office of Information and Technology.
The VA’s technical experts have expressed considerable satisfaction with the agency’s reformed acquisitions process, particularly as a means of keeping pace with the rapid changes in cloud adoption, data processing, and internet of things capacities. Consequently, VA’s success in DITAP adoption and pioneering of new acquisitions methods has transformed the agency into a knowledge hub in its own right — with DITAP graduates who have gained practice and experience at the VA beginning to share their learnings with other federal agencies looking to accelerate their digital modernization process.

The greater outcome appears to be further streamlining of the U.S. federal government’s digital modernization program, with America’s largest civilian poised to take a more decisive role.

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