

Section 4.

The Issues of RFW Training

In the Spring of 1997 as delivered by William Platt of VBA Employee Development and Training, the original request for evaluation of VBA training in Reader Focused Writing identified the following goals:

1. To review the original need, the program plan, and the goals and intended outcomes of the RFW training program.
2. To assess the impact of training that has been conducted to date on field units and their clients, the veterans who are being served.
3. To determine the effectiveness of the training method.
4. To assess the impact of the VBA infrastructure on the process of changing writing habits of its work force.
5. To provide information required to continue the program and adjust program management plans and program organization.

Before opportunity to review plans, instructional materials and video tapes of the training which had concluded seven months earlier, the evaluation team was asked to sketch an evaluation plan (see Section 5), taking into account the funds (\$30,000) and time (90 days) available. Emphasis was given to data from Regional Office staff personnel who had participated in the satellite RFW training sessions. After presenting the CIRCE plan in person to VBA officials on August 12, 1997, the evaluation team created a list of issues for acquainting itself with RFW training and for seeking and recognizing its quality. The first seven questions below were considered essential and the last nine might or not become important. The following wording was in use on August 21 and remained largely the same during the data gathering and analysis.

Essential Issue Questions

1. What are the effects of the training on trainees? Are their letters better? Adoption rate within changes over time?

2. What are the effects of the RFW program on the Regional Offices? Are aspects of effectiveness attributable to infrastructure, or culture of site, or agency?

3. What is the quality of the training package? Is the medium of the training appropriate?

4. Are the trainees favorably impressed with the training? Are RO administrators favorably impressed with the training?

5. What are the side effects? Does productivity drop? Is simplicity sought at the expense of important complexity of topics? Is there drop in concern of writers to protect the legal standing of vets?

6. Are veteran needs increasingly considered? Which needs? Are literacy level, non-English speaking conditions considered?

7. How good is the ordinary supervision of the work of the writers? Is there a problem with the writers not understanding their content well enough? How do Regional Offices monitor this?

Possibly Important

8. Are there important differences among writing needs of staffers in the several VBA business lines (i.e., Compensation and Pension, Education, Loan Guaranty, Veterans Assistance, Vocational Rehabilitation, Insurance)?

9. Is there special effort to know who in VBA most needs this training and to get them involved? Is attrition of staff an issue?

10. Is there a special skill in reading the needs & circumstances of the vet? Is it part of training?

11. Are voice counseling and mail counseling tied together?

12. Are there aspects of the training that are seen as bureaucratic knob-twisting rather than really helping writers do their job better?

13. To what extent should training be standardized across sites or adapted to the region?

14. To what extent should letter writing be standardized or built on local needs, strengths?

15. Has VBA central office support for improved writing been vigorous, well thought out, and implemented? Is it systemic? Are both technical and strategic reform pursued?

16. Are writers apprehensive about the legal aspects of their work, particularly in providing all the legal information or guidance that the veteran needs? Does this training help the writer balance between providing too little and too much legal information?

These issue questions do not exactly match the original goals proposed, expanding some and diminishing others, but were examined by VBA officials and, given the limits identified above, were accepted as suitable for the study.

