



Veterans Benefits  
Administration

*Evaluation Report of VBA Transformational Initiative*

# **Impact of VBA's New Challenge Training Program**

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The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has developed a comprehensive and integrated Transformation Campaign Plan to achieve our 2015 goal of eliminating the disability claims backlog and processing all claims at a 98 percent quality level. Along with improved processes and technologies, investment in our people is a key component of VBA's transformation to a 21st Century organization.

## BACKGROUND

### Comment from a recent Challenge graduate:

I would recommend this training to my peers because it is very applicable to the job. I have been through some training that did absolutely nothing for me in relation to my jobs. This is actually pertinent to what we will be doing as VSRs. The live cases are the most important part of the training because they showed us what a real case looks like. . . . There were some odd and difficult cases that really helped to prepare me for what I will see in the future.

Since the beginning of fiscal year (FY) 2010, VBA has hired more than 3,300 new employees to address the significant increase in the number of disability compensation claims being received. VBA provides specialized training, known as "Challenge" training, for all newly assigned claims-processing employees. The legacy Challenge training curriculum was designed to provide standardized instruction in basic technical skills that newly assigned claims processors need to demonstrate in order to perform their duties, with extensive follow-on training conducted by the local regional office staff.

Under its comprehensive Transformation Campaign Plan, VBA redesigned and enhanced the Challenge training program. The curriculum was significantly revised to improve the productivity and accuracy rates for students who participate in the training. More than 1,300 of Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs) and Rating Veterans Service Representatives (RVSRs) have been trained under the new enhanced Challenge program that extended and redesigned the curriculum. This report provides the impact of that curriculum change on accuracy and productivity after nearly one year of implementation.

## DEVELOPMENT OF TRAINING

Redesign of the centralized Challenge program grew out of VBA's need to make new claims processors more proficient and productive at the start of their careers, while minimizing the impact on experienced staff called on to provide follow-on training at the local regional offices. The redesign incorporated various stakeholder and employee input provided to our senior leadership. VBA also conducted inspections of Challenge implementation at seven Regional Offices (ROs), representing a cross-section of RO size and

### Comment from a recent Challenge graduate:

I think adding four weeks of live case work was a brilliant idea. We had instructors at our disposal and did not have to worry about production standards while gaining valuable 'hands on' experience.

performance, to evaluate requirements and to identify improvements needed.

The inspections confirmed an environment wherein local resources could not meet the follow-on requirements for effectively delivering long, complex curricula while also balancing production requirements. Local constraints inherent in decentralized execution of significant portions of the new employee training curricula included factors such as competition for training space to serve both new and more experienced case processors, availability of instructors who are both knowledgeable and effective teachers, and the difficulties in coordinating the right type of casework required by the carefully sequenced curricula.

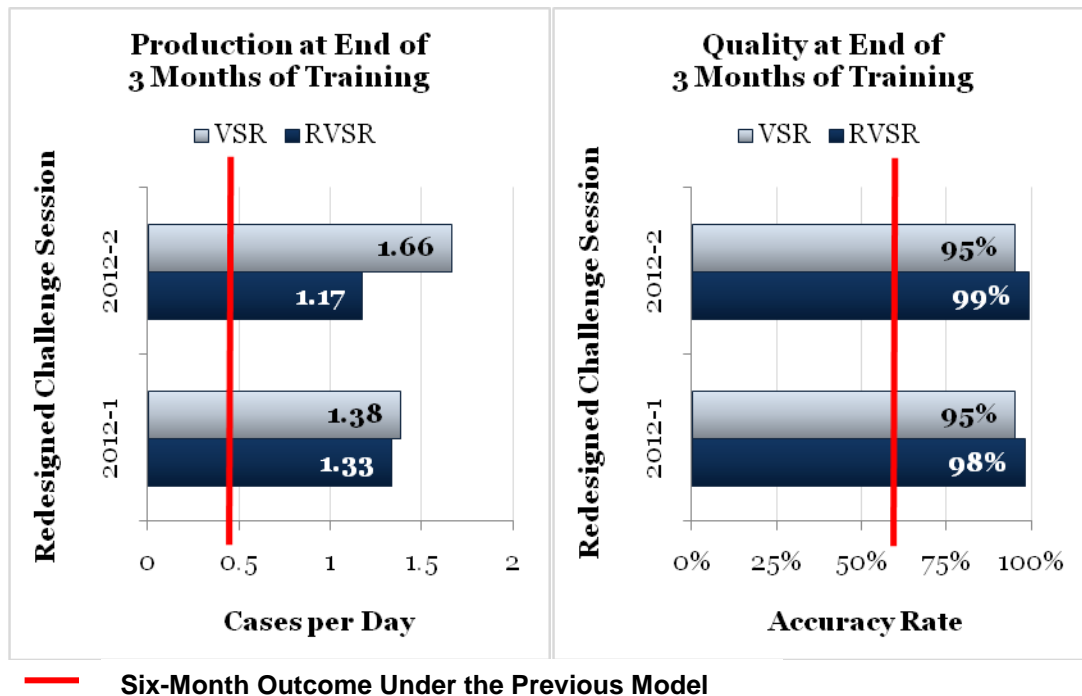
As a result of these findings, the Challenge training program was redesigned in 2011 by extending the training period and incorporating hands-on practice previously conducted within regional offices into the centralized training.

### IMPACTS OF TRAINING

Table 1 summarizes the differences between the legacy traditional Challenge training model and the redesigned model.

Under the legacy model, at the end of the six-month training period trainees averaged one-half case per day and 60% accuracy prior to review. In contrast, by the end of just over three months under the revised Challenge model, graduates were able to produce more than a case per day with greater than 95% accuracy, as shown in Figure 1. These improvements are expected to increase productivity by 15-20% and accuracy by 4-6%.

**Figure 1 – Production and Quality by the end Phase II for recent Challenge classes**



**Table 1. Differences between the legacy training model and the redesigned Challenge training model**

Component	Previous Model	Redesigned Model
Phase I: Prerequisite Training	Conducted at the employees’ regional office, this phase provided them with basic knowledge of the claims process. It lasted 10 days for VSRs, 20 days for internally hired RVSRs, and 35 days for externally hired RVSRs.	Essentially the same as the previous model, but with a Phase I posttest designed to help Phase II instructors evaluate incoming trainees’ knowledge acquisition from Phase I.
Phase II: Centralized Training	Conducted at a centralized location, this phase taught employees the methods and procedures required for claims processing. Versions of the phase have lasted from two-and-a-half weeks to four weeks as various content has been incorporated. Trainees were not required to demonstrate their learning and job-related competence.	Conducted at a centralized location, this phase both teaches employees the methods and procedures required for claims processing and includes extensive hands-on supervised practice both with training cases and then with actual cases. This phase lasts 8 weeks for RVSRs, and 4 weeks each for pre-development and post-development VSRs. Trainees are required to demonstrate their learning and job-related competence.
Phase III: Home Station Training	<p>Conducted back at the employees’ regional office, this phase lasted 25 weeks for RVSRs and 20 weeks for VSRs. It was intended to teach trainees the unique processes of various claim types while they practice with live claims under the supervision of a more experienced mentor.</p> <p>However, regional offices routinely struggled to dedicate the resources and personnel necessary to implement this phase as designed, resulting in reports of inconsistent and unstructured mentoring and practice experiences for trainees.</p>	Trainees leave Phase II ready to process basic cases. After returning to Home Station, employees continue learn through regular professional development as well as feedback from the Quality Review Teams.

**CONCLUSION**

VBA continues to strengthen the expertise of the workforce by changing the way it is organized and trained to accomplish its mission of delivering timely and accurate benefits and services to our Nation’s Veterans, their families, and survivors.

Under its Transformation strategy, VBA is increasing the productivity of the workforce and the quality of rating decisions through development and redesign of national

training programs and standards. The redesigned and expanded 8-week centralized Challenge Training Program for new claims processors has achieved positive results.

**Comment from a recent Challenge graduate:**

Never stop doing Challenge. I believe this is a great program that emphasizes the importance in our duties as VSRs and Teaches a Team environment.

Upon completion of the training, employees work significantly faster and at a higher quality level. By the end of their resident Challenge courses, on average, trainee RVSRs increased production to 1.25 cases rated per day at a 98.5% quality level, and trainee VSRs completed development on 1.52 cases per day at a 95.0% quality level at the three-month point, compared to the legacy Challenge curriculum, following which trainees averaged one-half case per day and 60 percent accuracy at the six month point. VBA's training and technology skills programs continue to deliver the knowledge and expertise its employees need to succeed in a 21st Century workplace, already contributing to a four-percent improvement in quality.