United States Government Accountability Office

Report to Congressional Committees

USAJOBS WEBSITE

OPM Has Taken Actions to Assess and Enhance the User Experience

GAO Highlights

USAJOBS WEBSITE

OPM Has Taken Actions to Assess and Enhance the User Experience

Why GAO Did This Study

The USAJOBS website, which is managed by OPM, is the entry point to the federal hiring process for most agencies. It facilitates hiring of new employees as well as the movement of talent across government through merit-based promotions and transfers. OPM uses USAJOBS to help achieve the agency's mission to recruit and retain a world-class government workforce. OPM is responsible for ensuring the usability of USAJOBS and collecting feedback on the user experience. Hiring agencies are responsible for the content of job opportunity announcements.

Report language accompanying the Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Bill, 2020, and the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020 included provisions for GAO to review the user experience on USAJOBS. This report examines (1) the extent to which OPM assesses the user experience with USAJOBS and the results of OPM's assessments; and (2) actions OPM has taken to improve the user experience with USAJOBS.

GAO reviewed OPM data and documentation, interviewed OPM officials, and compared OPM's assessments of user experience to OMB guidance for federal service providers and selected guidance from Digital.gov on performance measures for federal websites.

What GAO Found

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) uses a variety of sources to assess the user experience with USAJOBS, the central website for posting federal job openings. GAO found that OPM's assessments generally track key measures in accordance with selected government-wide guidance. Specifically, OPM collects data on most of the website performance measures recommended by selected guidance from Digital.gov, including the number of times pages were viewed, the percentage of users who use the USAJOBS search box, and overall customer experience. Additionally, consistent with guidance from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), OPM surveys USAJOBS users about their experiences with the site. OPM also assesses user experience through usability testing, focus groups, and analysis of data on questions submitted to the USAJOBS help desk. Through these assessments, OPM found variations in user experience across the job search and application process, including variations in how people find job announcements and how long it takes them to complete job applications.

Since the agency's redesign of USAJOBS in 2016, OPM has taken a number of actions in an effort to address feedback from these assessments and improve the USAJOBS user experience. For example, in 2017, OPM created a set of categories, called Hiring Paths, that describe who is eligible to apply for specific federal jobs and guide job seekers to positions for which they are eligible.

Other OPM actions taken from 2016 to 2020 include

- implementing a new process for logging in to the system to improve website security;
- updating job search filters and adding a keyword autocomplete function, which suggests search terms as a job seeker types in the search box;
- revising its job announcement template for hiring agencies to help eliminate duplicative language, increase clarity, and avoid jargon;
- adding guidance to help job seekers complete federal applications and understand federal hiring authorities; and
- highlighting jobs related to COVID-19 response.

OPM continues to update and refine these efforts. OPM also expects to take a number of additional actions intended to help enhance the USAJOBS website. For example, according to OPM officials, in early fiscal year 2021 they expect to add a "job status" indicator for each job announcement posted on USAJOBS. The job status indicator would provide information such as the number of applicants and when the job has been filled. According to OPM, this would improve transparency and accountability and also provide applicants with updates at each stage of the hiring process.

GAO provided a draft of this report to OPM for review and comment. OPM stated that it did not have comments.

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Contents

Abbreviations

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
TAS	talent acquisition system
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs

October 13, 2020

The Honorable John N. Kennedy
Chairman
The Honorable Chris Coons
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable Mike Quigley
Chairman
The Honorable Tom Graves
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

The USAJOBS website, which is managed by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), is the primary source for information about federal jobs and employment opportunities. It provides interested citizens with information on federal job opportunities and allows them to submit applications for these jobs. USAJOBS is a tool OPM uses to help achieve its mission to recruit and retain a world-class government workforce for the American people.

USAJOBS is the entry point to the hiring process for jobs at most federal agencies. It facilitates hiring of new employees as well as movement of talent across government through merit-based promotions and transfers. OPM is responsible for ensuring the usability of USAJOBS and collecting feedback on the user experience. Given the widespread use of USAJOBS, it is important that the website is technologically sound, accurate, and user friendly.

Various factors, such as unclear application processes and long wait times for job offers, have been identified as contributing to the federal government's workforce deficiencies in certain areas and job categories. In response to concerns about the length and cumbersome nature of the federal hiring process, a report accompanying the Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Bill, 2020, and the Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020

included provisions for us to review the user experience on USAJOBS.[1]
This report examines (1) the extent to which OPM assesses the user
experience with USAJOBS and the results of OPM's assessments; and
(2) actions OPM has taken to improve the user experience with
USAJOBS.

To address the first objective, we reviewed OPM documents and reports
detailing its assessments and results and interviewed OPM officials to
obtain information on OPM's assessment efforts. We evaluated OPM's
actions against two sources of government-wide guidance on federal
websites and digital services. We selected these measures for our review
of USAJOBS for consistency with our past work on other federal websites
and because they provide a clear minimum set of performance measures
related to the assessment of user experience.[2] First, we used Office of
Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-11, Section 280, which
directs certain federal service providers to obtain and use feedback from
members of the public who use their services.[3] Second, we used
Digital.gov guidance that identifies 24 minimum baseline measures of
website performance and customer satisfaction that agencies should

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[1]165 Cong. Rec. H10994 (daily ed. Dec. 17, 2019); Consolidated Appropriations Act,
2020, Pub. L. No. 116-93, 133 Stat. 2317; H.R. Rep. No. 116-122 (2019). The House of
Representatives committee report, No. 116-122, accompanying the Financial Services
and General Government Appropriations Bill, 2020, also included a provision for OPM to
report to Congress on USAJOBS. OPM issued its report in May 2020.

[2]We have previously reported on efforts to improve the user experience on certain federal
websites. In December 2018, we identified key practices for transparently reporting open
government data on a centralized website and assessed how USAspending.gov aligned
with those practices. We also reviewed Performance.gov against selected requirements
for federal websites and made recommendations to OMB to improve the website's user
experience. See GAO, *Open Data: Treasury Could Better Align USAspending.gov with
Key Practices and Search Requirements*, GAO-19-72 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 13, 2018);
Performance.gov: Long-Term Strategy Needed to Improve Website Usability,
GAO-16-693 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 30, 2016); and *Managing for Results: Leading
Practices Should Guide the Continued Development of Performance.gov*, GAO-13-517
(Washington, D.C.: June 6, 2013).

[3]In July 2020, OMB issued an updated version of Circular A-11, Section 280, which
includes new guidance for federal service providers on measuring customer experience.
According to OMB, most of the changes in the update are technical revisions and
clarifications, and the policy requirements are largely unchanged. We evaluated OPM's
actions against the 2019 version of Section 280, which was in effect at the time of our
review.

track, analyze, and report for websites they operate.[4] We focused on assessing whether OPM tracks each of the 24 measures, because the guidance specifies the data elements to be collected but states that agencies may take different approaches to analyzing and reporting the data depending on their goals.

To assess the reliability of the data we collected for this objective, we reviewed relevant documentation and consulted knowledgeable OPM officials. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of determining the variables that OPM collects and the time periods OPM's data collection covers, and for describing selected examples of the results of OPM's assessments.

To address the second objective, we reviewed documentation of OPM's changes to USAJOBS and interviewed OPM officials about these changes. We focused on changes beginning with the agency's redesign of USAJOBS in 2016. We also interviewed human resources staff from four federal agencies to obtain agencies' perspectives on USAJOBS. We selected these agencies—the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Education, and Justice, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission—by dividing the 24 Chief Financial Officers Act agencies into two groups based on the number of full-time equivalents in fiscal year 2019 and randomly selecting two agencies from each group (i.e., two larger agencies and two smaller agencies). Appendix I provides additional details on our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from January 2020 to October 2020 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Since 1996, USAJOBS has helped agencies fill civil service job vacancies by informing job seekers about job openings they may be eligible for and how to apply for them. OPM uses the website to fulfill its statutory

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[4]Digital.gov, an executive branch source of guidance on requirements for government websites, was developed by the General Services Administration's Technology Transformation Service to help agencies provide digital services and information for the public.

obligation to establish and keep a comprehensive list of all announcements of vacant positions in the competitive service.[5] OPM intends the website to provide a single point for job applicants to store resumes and other documents, prepare applications, and receive communications from agencies.

OPM is responsible for ensuring the usability of USAJOBS and collecting feedback on the user experience. Hiring agencies are responsible for notifying OPM of their competitive service job opportunities as well as providing the content of job opportunity announcements and communicating with applicants. OPM has updated USAJOBS numerous times over the years as part of its ongoing effort to improve the user experience.

According to OPM, more than 500 federal agencies use USAJOBS to post job opportunities covering more than 600 occupations ranging from student and entry-level jobs to federal executive positions. OPM reported that in fiscal year 2019 the USAJOBS job search function was used more than 1.4 billion times, agencies posted more than 325,000 jobs, and approximately 17.5 million job applications were started on USAJOBS.

Agencies use third-party talent acquisition systems (TAS) that are integrated with USAJOBS to post job opportunity announcements on the website and to record decisions about which applicants are deemed qualified and which are referred to the hiring manager and selected.[6]
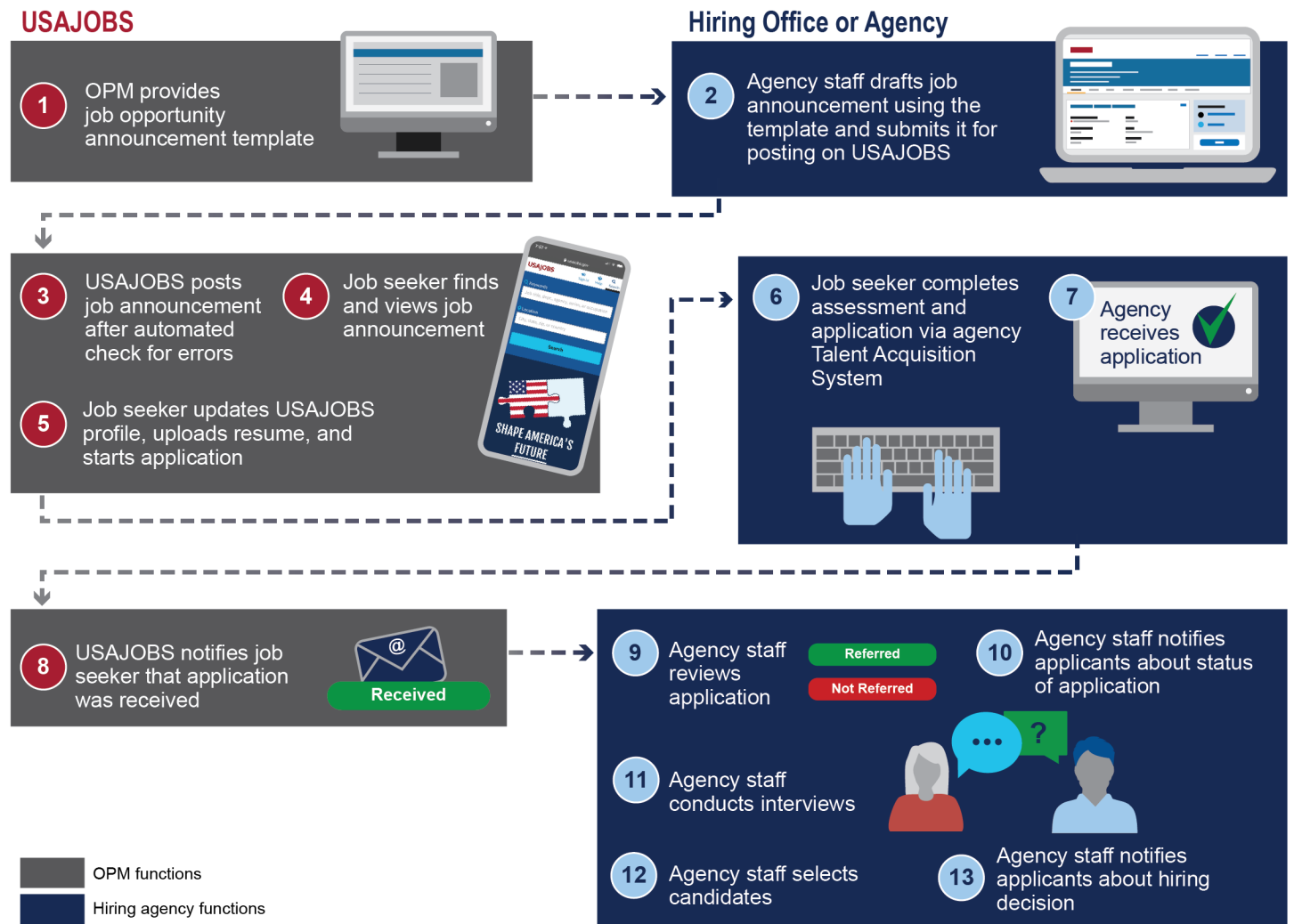
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[5]Under 5 U.S.C. § 3330, OPM "shall establish and keep current a comprehensive list of all announcements of vacant positions in the competitive service within each agency that are to be filled by appointment for more than one year and for which applications are being (or will soon be) accepted from outside the agency's work force." 5 U.S.C. § 3330(b). The statute also requires that this list be made available to the public. 5 U.S.C. § 3330(d). Federal civil service employees, other than those in the Senior Executive Service, are employed in either the competitive service, 5 U.S.C. §2102(a), or the excepted service, 5 U.S.C. § 2103(a). For the competitive service, the hiring process is known as competitive service examination and is one of the processes intended to ensure that agencies' hiring activities comply with merit principles. Excepted service positions are those positions which are excepted from the competitive service by or pursuant to statute, by the President, or by OPM. 5 C.F.R. § 213.101. OPM may except positions from the competitive service, for example, when it determines that appointments into such positions through competitive examination are not practicable or for recruitment of certain types of students or individuals who recently completed qualifying educational programs. 5 C.F.R. § 6.1(a) and §213.102(b).

[6]These include a system run by OPM—USA Staffing—and systems offered by private sector contractors or created in-house by federal agencies.

Agencies also use their TASs to notify applicants about these decisions via email.

Agencies' TASs also serve as a mechanism to obtain applicant information to support the process of selecting and onboarding job seekers. In particular, after applicants complete their profiles and resumes in USAJOBS and select documents to attach to their applications, they are redirected to the agency TAS to complete assessment questionnaires designed to gather additional information regarding their prior experience and skills. After completing these tasks, applicants submit their final applications via the TAS. Figure 1 illustrates the roles of the various parties in the USAJOBS application process.

Figure 1: Role of USAJOBS and Federal Agencies in the Federal Job Application Process

USAJOBS

Hiring Office or Agency

1. OPM provides job opportunity announcement template

2. Agency staff drafts job announcement using the template and submits it for posting on USAJOBS

3. USAJOBS posts job announcement after automated check for errors

4. Job seeker finds and views job announcement

5. Job seeker updates USAJOBS profile, uploads resume, and starts application

SHAPE AMERICA'S FUTURE

6. Job seeker completes assessment and application via agency Talent Acquisition System

7. Agency receives application

8. USAJOBS notifies job seeker that application was received

@ Received

9. Agency staff reviews application

Referred
Not Referred

10. Agency staff notifies applicants about status of application

11. Agency staff conducts interviews

12. Agency staff selects candidates

13. Agency staff notifies applicants about hiring decision

OPM functions

Hiring agency functions

Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management (OPM) information. | GAO-21-31

OPM Uses Key Measures Included in Federal Guidance to Assess User Experience with USAJOBS and Has Identified Variations

OPM Tracks Most Key Measures of USAJOBS Website Performance

OPM collects data on 22 of the 24 baseline measures of website performance and customer satisfaction described in the Digital.gov guidance. Digital.gov states that agencies should track these 24 metrics to provide an overall picture of how well they are delivering digital services.

Web Analytics
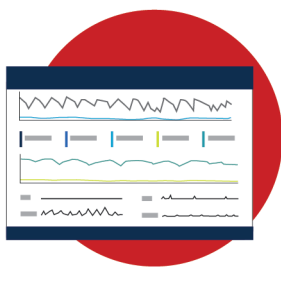
Web analytics is the collection, reporting, and analysis of website data, such as the number of users who visit the website.

Source: GAO. | GAO-21-31

Many of these metrics can be tracked through web analytics; however, some require data from user surveys. The guidance states that while all agencies should collect data on these metrics, agencies may have varied approaches to using and interpreting the data based on individual agency and website goals.

As shown in table 1, OPM tracks 22 of the 24 metrics, including all of the metrics in the website performance and customer satisfaction categories. According to OPM officials, OPM analyzes data on these metrics to monitor the performance of USAJOBS from a technical standpoint and to identify where changes are needed to improve the user experience.

Table 1: The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Tracks Most Performance Measures Recommended by Digital.gov for USAJOBS (as of July 2020)

Metric	Description included in Digital.gov guidance	Tracked for USAJOBS
Performance Metrics		
Total visits	Visit is an interaction by an individual viewing one or more pages on your website	✓ [b]
Total page views	Page view is number of times a page was viewed during the designated time period (e.g., monthly)	✓
Unique visitors	Unique visit is one person (or a computer/IP address) who visits your website at least once during a designated time period (e.g., monthly)	✓
Page views per visit	Number of page views in a reporting period divided by number of visits in the same reporting period	✓
Average visit duration	Length of time in a session (activity on a website during a specified time period)	✓
Time on page	Time visitors spend on individual pages	✓
Bounce rate	Percentage of visitors who looked at only one page and immediately left the site	✓
New vs. returned visitor	Ratio between first-ever site visitors to returning visitors, a user that visited the site prior to the reporting period.	✓
Visits per visitor for a given time frame	Number of times a visitor visited your website during the designated time period (e.g., monthly)	✓
Total number of on–site search queries	Total number of times site search was used	✓
External Search		
Top referring commercial search engines	The search engines (e.g., Google, Bing, Yahoo) that send the most traffic to your site	✓
Top referring search terms	The most-used words and phrases people type into commercial search engines to find your content	✓ [a]
Top referring search terms with low click through rates	The most common links followed for specific search terms that don't lead to clicks on your website	✗
Internal/Site Search		
Top search terms/phrases	The most-used words and phrases people type into your site's search box	✓
Top "no results" queries	Most popular, valid searches that don't return any results on your site's search results page (e.g., because you don't have the content on your site, or the content isn't findable by the person's search term)	✓
Top searches with low click through rates	Most popular search terms that people generally don't act (click) on	✓ [b]
Top changing search terms (movement up/down)	Shows trending topics, what's hot or not	[c]
Percentage of visitors using site search	Percentage of people who visited your site and used the search box on your site	✓
Top clicked URLs for specific queries	Most common results that searchers found most relevant or appealing, for specific search terms	✓ [b]
Speed		
Page load time	How quickly pages (including your search results page) load on your site	✓

Metric	Description included in Digital.gov guidance	Tracked for USAJOBS
Customer Satisfaction Metrics[d]		
Overall customer experience	Customer's perception of the experience of their visit.	✓
Completion rate of intended task	The customer's perceived ability to get the information or service they came to accomplish.	✓
Percent of visitors likely to return	A customer's perceived willingness to choose your service for the same or similar task in the future.	✓
Percent of visitors likely to recommend	A customer's perceived willingness to recommend your product or service	✓

Legend: ✓ = yes; ✗ = no

[a]OPM collects data on top referring search terms, but these data are incomplete. According to OPM officials, OPM is considering upgrading its analytics tool to capture more complete data on this metric.

[b]According to OPM officials, OPM began collecting data on this metric in April 2020.

[c]In July 2020, OPM officials told us that they were not routinely tracking this metric but planned to begin tracking it by September 30, 2020.

[d]The Digital.gov guidance identifies the four metrics in the customer satisfaction category as "beta."

The two metrics OPM does not track, which are in the categories related to external and internal searches, are (1) "top referring search terms with low click through rates," which OPM officials told us they do not track; and (2) "top changing search terms," which OPM officials told us in July 2020 they occasionally reviewed but planned to track more regularly by September 30, 2020. Of the 22 metrics that OPM tracks, one metric, "top referring search terms," is only partially tracked. OPM officials told us that they are only partially able to track this metric and are not able to track "top referring search terms with low click through rates" because the web analytics tool they use, a version of Google Analytics provided by the General Services Administration's Digital Analytics Program, does not allow them to collect the needed data.[7] According to the officials, OPM is considering obtaining its own separate instance of Google Analytics to better measure external search data, including the external search metrics listed in table 1.

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[7]OMB guidance directs federal agencies to participate in the Digital Analytics Program. OMB, *Policies for Federal Agency Public Websites and Digital Services*, OMB Memorandum M-17-06 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 8, 2016). According to OPM officials, the General Services Administration has recommended that OPM use separate web analytics tools in addition to the Digital Analytics Program.

OPM Collects User Feedback Specified in OMB Guidance

Consistent with OMB guidance, OPM surveys USAJOBS users and focuses on customer experience when designing and delivering services.[8] Section 280 of OMB Circular A-11 directs designated High-Impact Service Providers, including USAJOBS, to measure customer experience in the following domains: overall satisfaction with the service; confidence or trust in the agency or program; effectiveness of the service; ease, efficiency, and equity or transparency of the process of interacting with the service provider; and helpfulness of employees. In response to OMB's guidance, OPM added questions to its USAJOBS user survey in 2019.
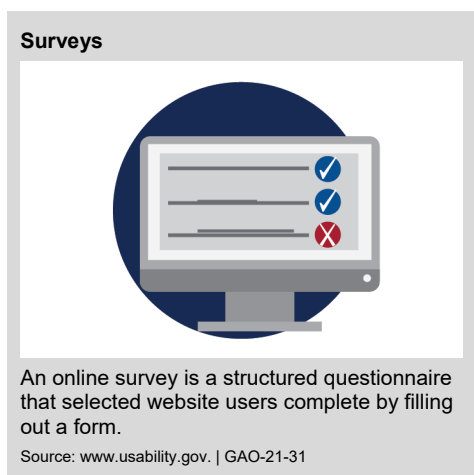
OPM used survey questions recommended by OMB in all of these domains except two: equity/transparency and employee helpfulness. For those two domains, OPM used alternative questions that asked users to rate how easily they were able to access USAJOBS on their devices and how well USAJOBS helped them do what they needed to do. OPM officials told us that OMB's recommended questions are primarily geared toward human interactions with federal service providers, and that OPM modified the questions to reflect the online, digital experience of USAJOBS users. According to OPM officials, OPM submitted the full set of survey questions it uses to OMB in March 2019 as part of a requested data call.

In addition to measuring satisfaction with USAJOBS, OPM's surveys aim to collect specific information about challenges job seekers and applicants experience. For example, the USAJOBS user survey asks respondents whether they were able to accomplish what they wanted to do and requests a description of any difficulties for those who answer "no."

Separately from the USAJOBS user survey, OPM works with the Chief Human Capital Officers Council to survey people who complete job applications, people who start job applications but do not finish them, and

Surveys

An online survey is a structured questionnaire that selected website users complete by filling out a form.

Source: www.usability.gov. | GAO-21-31

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[8]OMB defines federal government customers as individuals, businesses, and organizations that interact with a federal agency or program. OMB, Circular A-11, pt. 6, § 280.2 (2019). User is a more specific term commonly applied to individuals who visit a website. In this report, we focus on the user experience with USAJOBS, and therefore generally refer to users, rather than customers.

Usability Testing

Usability testing refers to evaluating a product or service by testing it with representative users. Typically, during a test, participants will try to complete typical tasks while observers watch, listen, and take notes. The goal is to identify any usability problems, collect qualitative and quantitative data, and determine the participant's satisfaction with the product.

Source: www.usability.gov. | GAO-21-31

hiring managers at federal agencies.[9] These surveys provide additional information about job seekers' and hiring managers' experiences with the federal hiring process. OPM officials review the survey results to identify issues related to USAJOBS.

We found that OPM also conducts customer research consistent with OMB's guidance that directs High-Impact Service Providers to use customer-focused practices when designing and delivering services. Section 280 of OMB Circular A-11 includes examples of such practices, recommending that agencies conduct qualitative and quantitative customer research and test program elements with customers.

For USAJOBS, OPM recruits participants from within and outside the federal government for usability tests. OPM staff observe how users interact with the site and assess how well it allows users to complete specific tasks.

OPM has also conducted focus groups aimed at understanding the USAJOBS experiences of groups such as veterans, students, and federal human resources managers. According to OPM officials, OPM held 12 focus group sessions in 2015 with these groups of participants before redesigning USAJOBS. More recently, OPM hosted co-design sessions with stakeholders, including sessions in July 2019 and February 2020 in which stakeholders provided input on improving how adjudication of veterans' status is handled, according to OPM officials.[10]

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[9]The Chief Human Capital Officers Council supports OPM in the strategic management of human capital at federal agencies and provides a forum for senior management officials to exchange human resources best practices. The Director of OPM chairs the council, and its members include Chief Human Capital Officers from federal agencies.

[10]Adjudication refers to the process of verifying the veterans' preference to which an individual is entitled.

Help Desk
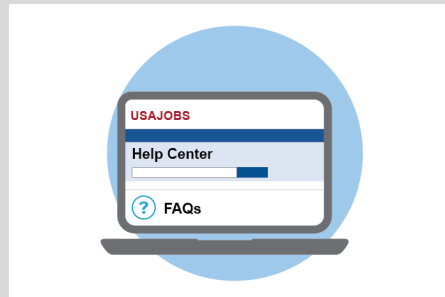
USAJOBS users can submit questions and report issues to OPM's help desk using a form accessed through the help pages on the site.

Source: www.usajobs.gov. | GAO-21-31

OPM also uses additional sources of information to assess user experience, including data on requests submitted to the USAJOBS help desk, operational data on USAJOBS usage, and data obtained from social media sites. Help desk requests are assigned to topical categories such as "Application status" and "How to apply," and OPM tracks data on the numbers of inquiries by category. OPM monitors these data to identify multiyear trends in user experience as well as incidents that require an immediate response. OPM also tracks data on how agencies and applicants are using USAJOBS, including the numbers of job announcements posted and applications started and the length of time job announcements are open.

According to OPM officials, they consider feedback from social media users when planning improvements to USAJOBS. USAJOBS maintains pages on social media platforms including Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook. OPM officials told us that from 2014 to 2019, USAJOBS regularly created social media campaigns to promote articles from the USAJOBS help center and share federal job opportunities, and also responded to individual requests for assistance via social media.

According to OPM officials, staffing and resource challenges have prevented OPM from updating the public social media pages for USAJOBS since September 2019. The officials explained, however, that they continue to review feedback provided by users on social media platforms to identify potential needs for improvements to USAJOBS and that they plan to resume social media campaigns by the end of calendar year 2020.

OPM's Assessments Identified Variations in User Experiences with USAJOBS

Using the data sources described above—including online surveys, help desk requests, and usability testing—OPM identified variations in user experience across key functions of USAJOBS, including job search, job announcement content, and job applications.

Searching for jobs. OPM identified advantages and disadvantages of various design options for the USAJOBS job search function through usability tests it conducted in 2017.[11] For example, OPM found that some users had difficulty using filters to search for jobs at specific agencies, and that the placement of filter options on the search page affected the

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[11]OPM officials told us that they conducted seven usability tests with 58 participants as part of the design and development of the search upgrade deployed in spring 2017.

usability of this feature. According to OPM officials, they used the results of these usability tests to help redesign the USAJOBS search function.

Reading and understanding job announcements. According to OPM officials, using web analytics, they determined that many users follow links from other websites directly to job announcements on USAJOBS and therefore need those announcements to be understandable on their own. Specifically, web analytics data show that more than half of users do not use the search function on USAJOBS. These users likely view the job announcement without reading other USAJOBS content such as the home page, and thus, their experience with the site depends on the quality of the job announcement pages.

Applying for jobs. OPM found variation in the amount of time it takes applicants to apply for jobs through USAJOBS. According to data from OPM's survey of applicants who completed applications for federal jobs, in fiscal year 2019, 62 percent of respondents indicated that it took them less than 1 hour to complete an application, 28 percent 1 to 2 hours, 6 percent 3 to 4 hours, and 4 percent more than 4 hours.[12] OPM officials told us that to understand this variation, OPM conducted user research and developed profiles of applicants with different levels of preparation for the application process. For example, an applicant who already has a USAJOBS account and has uploaded a resume may be able to complete applications more quickly than an applicant who does not have a resume on hand or has not created a USAJOBS account.

Checking the status of submitted applications. Hiring agencies are responsible for providing status updates to applicants, but OPM has reported that applicants express frustration about a lack of communication after submitting applications. According to OPM, survey results indicate that this is a persistent problem. Additionally, help desk data show that the number of inquiries about application status remained stable between fiscal year 2015 and fiscal year 2019, while the total number of help desk inquiries in other top categories declined. The help desk received about 15,000 inquiries in the application status category in fiscal year 2019, making it the third-largest category of help desk inquiries in that year.

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[12]As discussed above, this survey is a joint initiative of OPM and the Chief Human Capital Officers Council.

OPM Took a Number of Actions in an Effort to Improve the USAJOBS User Experience and Expects to Take Additional Actions

OPM Has Taken Several Actions in an Effort to Improve the USAJOBS User Experience

OPM took a number of actions, some of which were in response to its assessments of user experience, with the goal of enhancing the user experience for job seekers on USAJOBS. These actions align with various stages of the job search process, including logging in to the website, searching for jobs, and applying for jobs.

Implementation of Login.gov. To help improve website security, OPM changed how users log in to USAJOBS. In February 2018, OPM replaced the USAJOBS password management system with the General Services Administration's Login.gov service. Login.gov uses two-factor authentication: after entering a username and password to sign in, the user must confirm identity using another method, such as a code sent by text message to a mobile phone or generated by an authentication application installed on a user's device.[13] According to OPM officials, the switch to using Login.gov for USAJOBS has reduced the number of users contacting the USAJOBS help desk for assistance with logging in.

However, some users have experienced difficulties with Login.gov. OPM officials told us that in response to one agency's concerns, Login.gov changed its requirements to make it easier to create an account.

Hiring Paths. OPM created a set of eligibility categories in 2017, called Hiring Paths, that describe who is eligible to apply for specific federal job openings so that job seekers can search for jobs by eligibility category. As of July 2020, the USAJOBS home page lists 12 main paths (see figure 2). Some paths are broken out further into subcategories. For example,

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[13]As of July 2020, the other methods Login.gov offers for two-factor authentication are physical security keys, phone calls, backup codes that are printed or written down, and—for military and federal employees—Personal Identity Verification cards or Common Access Cards.

"Federal Employees" includes separate paths for specific categories such as competitive and excepted service employees, among others.

Figure 2: Hiring Paths on USAJOBS
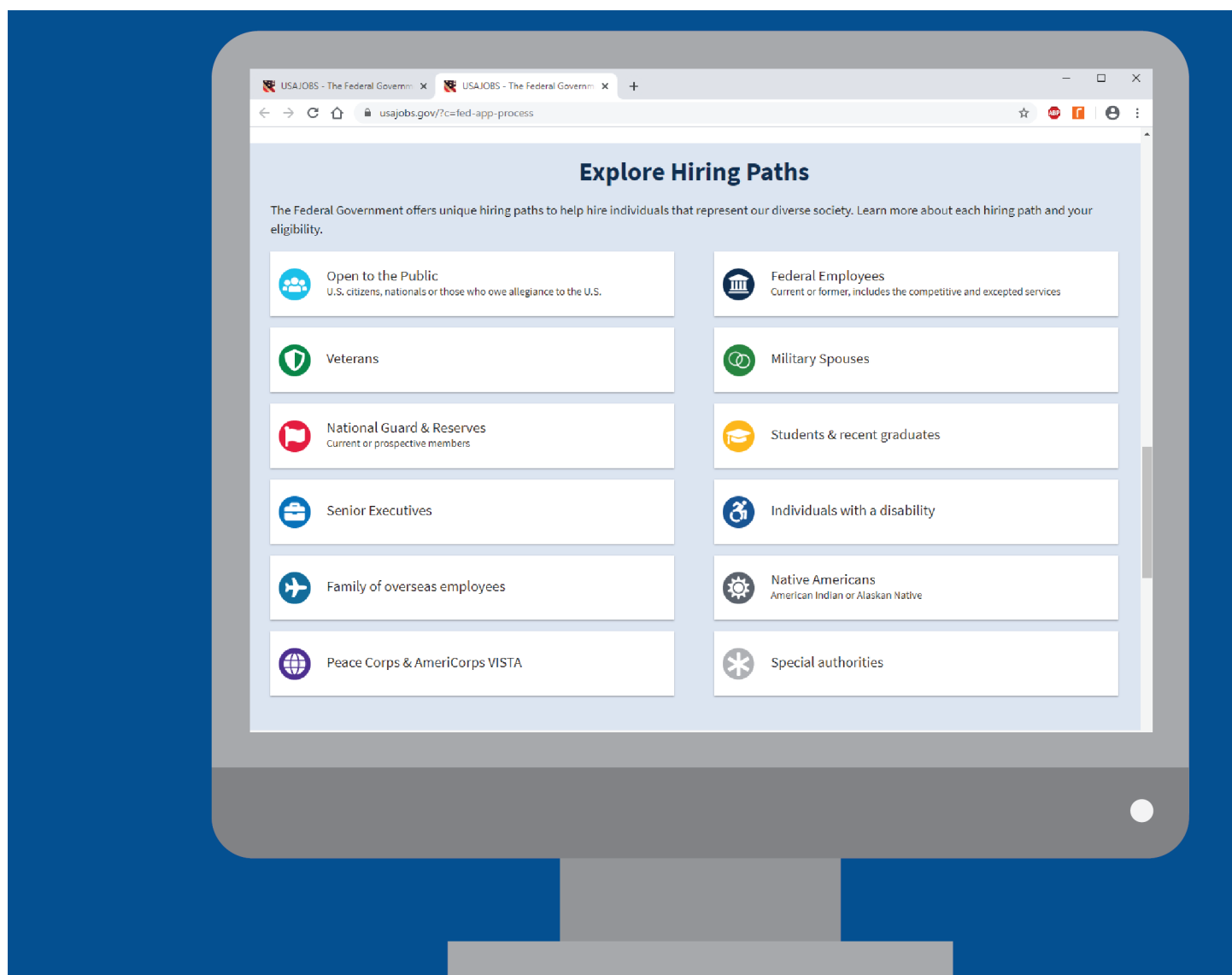
Source: GAO presentation of information from www.usajobs.gov. | GAO-21-31

According to OPM officials, OPM added Hiring Paths to improve confidence in the federal hiring process by guiding users to relevant jobs. Previously, human resources staff used a free-text field in the job

announcement to describe eligibility for each job. OPM officials told us that OPM had identified more than 1,600 different descriptions of eligibility in job announcements before Hiring Paths was implemented. In addition, OPM's user research showed that applicants wanted to find the right job quickly but could not do so when eligibility descriptions were unclear. By creating Hiring Paths, OPM officials sought to reduce the number of instances where applicants applied for positions for which they did not meet basic eligibility requirements, thus saving time both for applicants and agency human resources staff who would have to review the applications.

A Department of Education official told us that OPM's addition of Hiring Paths has made applying for jobs significantly easier and has reduced the number of questions the department receives from applicants regarding eligibility. However, the official explained that the incorrect use of Hiring Paths by agencies could cause confusion for applicants (for example, when agencies select multiple Hiring Paths for the same announcement, such as "Open to the Public" and "Competitive Service").

OPM officials said they are exploring options to incorporate business rules to reduce the likelihood of an incorrect combination of Hiring Paths being displayed for a single job announcement. OPM officials also told us that OPM has provided guidance to agencies not to use Hiring Paths for advertising to specific categories of job seekers, such as veterans, but rather only for describing job eligibility.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission told us that the Hiring Paths are confusing for applicants and suggested reducing the number down to three paths, two for internal agency postings and one for external. However, Department of Agriculture officials suggested a conflicting approach by calling for some Hiring Paths to be further broken out into more specific paths.

According to OPM officials, to inform the Hiring Paths feature they evaluated agency feedback and conducted extensive user testing. They told us that successful implementation of Hiring Paths requires participation from human resources staff across federal agencies and that OPM continues to work with agencies to manage the transition.

Search function. OPM took several actions in 2017 to update the job search function on USAJOBS. OPM added keyword autocomplete, which suggests search terms as a job seeker types in the search box, and redesigned the search result card or display to only promote the most

important details about the job. OPM also moved search filters to a vertical bar next to the search results that allowed side-by-side viewing; replaced its advanced search with a new user interface that continued to provide for custom filters including pay, work schedule, security clearance level requirements, department, appointment type, and the ability to search by location; and allowed users to leverage their profile information to filter their search results based on their profiles.[14] Figure 3 depicts several of the search filters that USAJOBS provides to aid applicant job searches.

Figure 3: Search Filters on USAJOBS
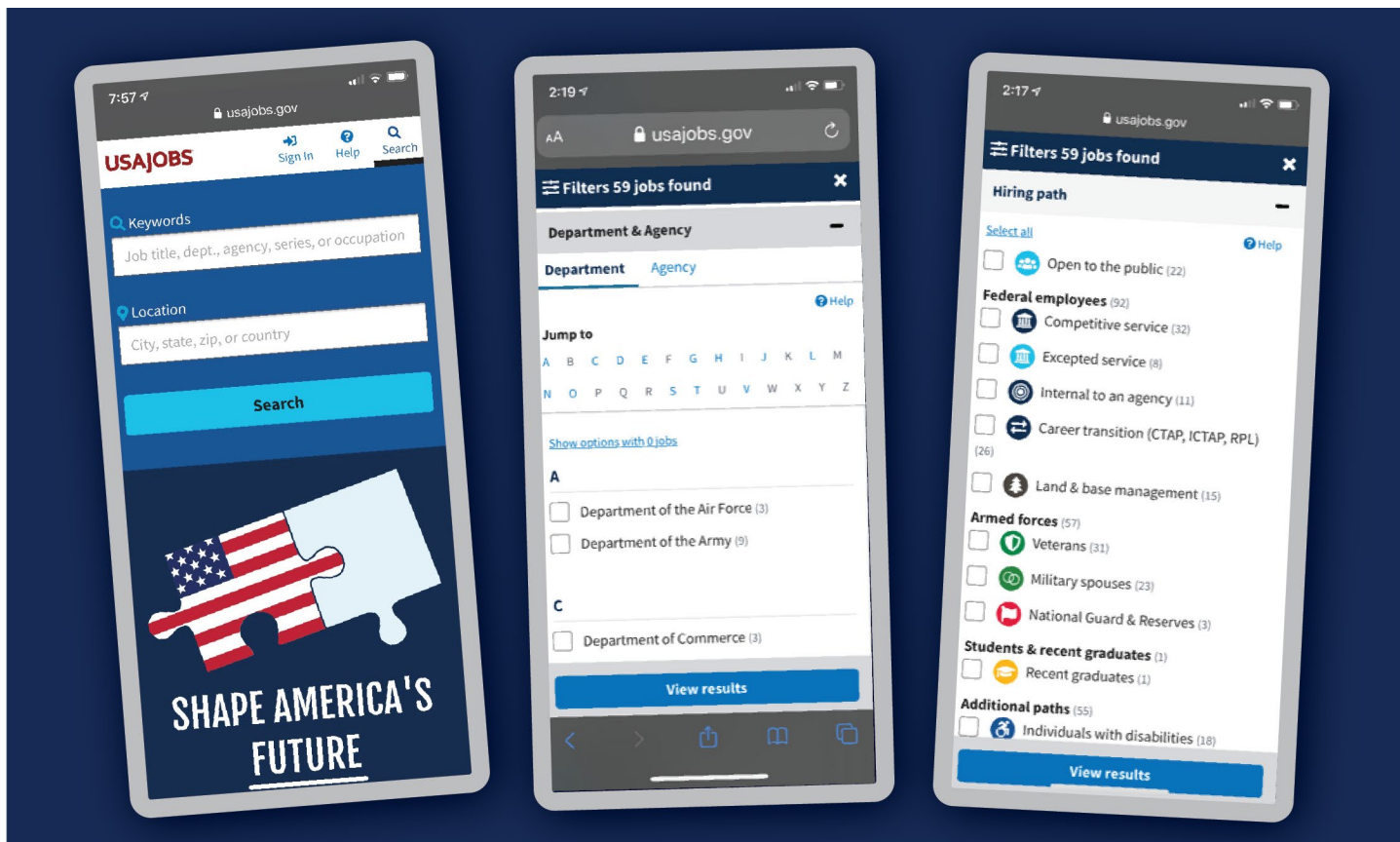
Source: GAO presentation of information from www.usajobs.gov. | GAO-21-31

[14]Under the prior advanced search feature, users would navigate to a separate page to use the search engine and select one or more criteria for the search from among the following: keyword, title, location, agency/subagency, and occupational series. This was a single page with an exhaustive list of all of the options for search filters, and OPM officials said that it was primarily used by current federal employees who were more familiar with the different search filters. When OPM redesigned and relaunched the website, the search filters were incorporated into the search function, which is no longer divided into a basic and advanced search.

Job Announcement Updates. In 2017, OPM revised its job announcement template and created a Job Announcement Playbook for agency human resources staff aimed at improving the content of job announcements and the process for creating them. According to OPM officials, revisions to the template addressed problems with job announcements related to determining eligibility, eliminating duplicative information, and highlighting job duty information.

The revisions also addressed user feedback that indicated that agencies' announcements sometimes lacked clarity, used complex language, and displayed agencies' information in inappropriate fields. In addition, OPM incorporated Hiring Paths into the template, reorganized the template based on feedback from usability tests, and revised the description and allowable length of the agency narrative for each section of the job announcement.

The Job Announcement Playbook provides guidance to agencies on the content of job announcements and includes best practices for creating effective announcements as well as the latest USAJOBS updates. Among other things, the playbook recommends that agencies write in plain language, consider the perspective of job seekers without prior federal experience, only include content that a job seeker needs, put the right content into the designated fields, and organize the content logically. OPM has disseminated a link to the playbook among agencies and worked with TAS partners to embed help and resources when creating announcements.

To help ensure that agencies use the job announcement template correctly, USAJOBS requires agencies to input information into the designated fields. Department of Education officials told us that USAJOBS makes it easy to comply with the regulatory requirements for job announcements. They explained that USAJOBS prevents posting of job announcements without the required opening and closing dates.

OPM's Merit System Accountability and Compliance division also audits selected previously posted job announcements and proposes corrective actions if warranted. According to OPM officials, these audits aim to ensure that job announcements are free of jargon, do not have redundant information, and are streamlined. According to OPM, due to a reduction in staff within its Merit System Accountability and Compliance division, its audit coverage of job announcements has been reduced. However, they

explained that agencies are required to conduct their own internal evaluations of job announcements.[15]

Guidance for Job Seekers. OPM updated the help pages on USAJOBS in 2016 and has added additional content as recently as April 2020. The help pages provide guidance on a wide range of topics, including technical issues related to user accounts, suggestions for what to include in a federal resume, how to set up notifications about job openings, how to create a Login.gov account, how to save a job announcement for future viewing, and information about common misconceptions in hiring. This guidance takes the form of answers to frequently asked questions, a five-step guide on how to apply for a job, responses to federal hiring myths, and a "How To" page for job seekers' use of the website.

Nuclear Regulatory Commission officials told us that USAJOBS contains a large volume of information to assist applicants in applying for federal positions and understanding the different hiring authorities. Department of Justice components, on the other hand, suggested to us that more could be done to improve user guides and provide robust online training tools to help applicants better understand USAJOBS, noting that taking such steps would help reduce the number of questions directed to agencies.

OPM officials told us that the USAJOBS help pages are intended to describe policy accurately in plain language, but sometimes its guidance does not provide all the details contained in more specific hiring guidance from individual federal agencies. They explained that OPM encourages agencies to include agency-specific contact information or help information in the job announcement to drive online traffic to agency-specific content. OPM also offers monthly webinars for job seekers on resume writing, navigating USAJOBS, and interviewing. According to OPM officials, OPM collaborates with agencies on the content of these webinars.

COVID-19 Job Opportunities. In April 2020, OPM added a link to the USAJOBS home page for job seekers to view all job opportunities related to the federal government's response to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). OPM says it took this action to help agencies meet critical hiring requirements for personnel needed to respond to the pandemic.

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[15]OPM regulations require federal agencies to maintain independent audit programs to review periodically all human capital management systems and the agency's human resources transactions to ensure legal and regulatory compliance. 5 C.F.R. § 250.204(d)(5).

The job opportunities include positions in a wide range of career fields. To include additional job announcements, agencies can "tag" them as being related to COVID-19. This enables agencies to elevate positions related to the government's COVID-19 response on the site and also track progress with COVID-19 hiring. As of September 16, 2020, agencies had posted 2,726 announcements with the COVID-19 tag; 569,079 applications had been started for these announcements.[16]

OPM Expects to Take Additional Actions to Further Enhance the USAJOBS User Experience

OPM officials told us about several actions the agency expects to take to further enhance user experience with USAJOBS, including updates to the job application process and changes intended to make it easier for individuals to find and apply for relevant jobs.

Updates to Job Application Process. OPM officials stated that a top USAJOBS priority is to complete an evaluation and usability testing of the interface between USAJOBS and agencies' TASs to streamline and unify the applicant experience, regardless of which system an agency is using. To accomplish this goal, OPM says it may work with TAS partners and agency staff to determine which information or documents should be collected through USAJOBS and which should be collected through agency systems. OPM officials told us they are gathering quantitative and qualitative data, including reports from USAJOBS user surveys, to better understand applicants' experiences with uploading and using documents.

OPM officials explained that issues with uploading documents is one of the most common reasons applicants contact the USAJOBS help desk. Department of Justice officials told us that sometimes there is redundancy when USAJOBS collects information that a TAS also collects, including resumes, human resources forms, and veterans' discharge papers, and that applicants in such cases do not understand why they must provide the same information twice.

OPM officials acknowledged that for some applications, applicants are required to provide the same information or to upload the same documents in USAJOBS and in the agency TAS, and sometimes the agency might require additional documents that are not required by USAJOBS. OPM officials said that they have given this issue a lot of attention and that reducing redundant documentation requirements to enhance user experience is an ongoing effort. OPM expects to continue

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[16]Because applicants start applications on USAJOBS but complete and submit them using agencies' TASs, OPM does not have data on the number of completed applications.

working on these changes and to deploy incremental changes as part of regular updates to USAJOBS.

Skills-Based Job Matching Pilot. In fiscal year 2021, OPM expects to test a new search capability that would allow job seekers to view results for recommended job opportunities based on their skills. OPM officials told us that they plan to test this capability on its Open Opportunities program website, which offers professional development opportunities to current federal employees, before eventually using it on USAJOBS.[17] In addition, OPM has begun developing and testing to determine how matching algorithms could potentially be used to create effective job recommendations based on entering a skill or job title in a search engine. As of July 2020, OPM expected to continue testing the algorithms by asking users in Open Opportunities to identify their skills using a list of skills from the central skills inventory.

Changes to Veterans Preference Adjudication. According to OPM officials, OPM is working with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to develop a strategy to reduce the burden on veterans and streamline the veterans' preference adjudication process for agencies. The officials told us that USAJOBS will be updated to allow veterans to import data on military service and disability from VA into their USAJOBS profiles. Veterans would review the imported data to verify their accuracy.

This update would also provide for automated assessment of veterans' eligibility for specific categories of preference. Also according to OPM, veterans would be informed about the positions for which they are eligible, and if they decided to claim veterans' preference for their application for federal employment, then the results of the automated assessment would be sent to the agency with the job application, reducing the need for manual adjudication by hiring agencies.[18] OPM expects these changes to be implemented during fiscal year 2021.

Display of Job Status. According to OPM officials, in early fiscal year 2021 they expect to provide a "job status" indicator that applicants could access on USAJOBS at any time after applying for a job. This job status

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[17]Open Opportunities provides an opportunity board and marketplace for agencies to showcase experiential learning opportunities for current federal employees, including details or short-term projects.

[18]While the majority of veterans preference types are covered by the VA data, there may be some categories that will still require discharge forms to be uploaded (e.g., spousal preference), according to OPM.

indicator would be publicly displayed on the job announcement page and would indicate the date the announcement closed, the number of applications submitted, the date the vacancy was filled, and the number of people selected. "Application status" is currently provided directly to applicants and shows the status of applications at several touch points, such as "Received," "Reviewed," or "Referred." Agencies would continue to be responsible for providing application status in addition to providing job status. According to OPM officials, the addition of the job status indicator will improve transparency and accountability and provide applicants with updates at each stage of the hiring process.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this product to OPM for comment. OPM told us that it had no comments on the draft report. In addition, the Department of Justice, one of the four agencies we met with to obtain perspectives on USAJOBS from federal human resources staff, requested the opportunity to review the full draft report.[19] After reviewing the draft report, the department also told us that it had no comments.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Acting Director of the Office of Personnel Management, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at https://www.gao.gov.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-6806 or rosenbergm@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix II.

Michelle B. Rosenberg
Acting Director
Strategic Issues

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[19]We provided all four of these agencies an opportunity to confirm the key information we obtained from them and used to formulate our analyses and findings.

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report examines (1) the extent to which the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) assesses the user experience with USAJOBS and the results of OPM's assessments; and (2) actions OPM has taken to improve the user experience with USAJOBS.

To examine the extent to which OPM assesses the user experience with USAJOBS and the results of OPM's assessments, we collected documentation from OPM on the methods used to assess user experience and the findings of OPM's assessments.

We selected two sources of government-wide guidance for federal websites and service providers: (1) Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-11, Section 280, which directs certain federal service providers to obtain and use feedback from members of the public who use their services; and (2) guidance from Digital.gov that identifies 24 performance measures agencies should track, analyze, and report for websites they operate.[1]

Digital.gov includes many other requirements and recommendations for federal websites in addition to these baseline measures. We selected these measures for our review of USAJOBS for consistency with our past work on other federal websites and because they provide a clear minimum set of performance measures related to the assessment of user experience. We assessed whether OPM tracks each of the 24 measures specified by Digital.gov, because the guidance specifies the data elements to be collected but states that agencies may take different approaches to analyzing and reporting the data depending on their goals. We obtained and reviewed data OPM collected on the Digital.gov performance measures and observed a live demonstration of the systems OPM uses to collect these data. We compared the data and documentation OPM provided and our observation of the demonstration with the OMB and Digital.gov guidance.

We also interviewed OPM officials and obtained written responses from OPM about efforts to assess user experience with USAJOBS, including feedback OPM has received on USAJOBS and OPM's use of that feedback. We collected and reviewed documents and data from OPM on

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[1]In July 2020, OMB issued an updated version of Circular A-11, which includes new guidance for federal service providers on measuring customer experience. According to OMB, most of the changes in the update are technical revisions and clarifications, and the policy requirements are largely unchanged. We evaluated OPM's actions against the 2019 version of Section 280, which was in effect at the time of our review.

the results of its assessments of user experience, including questions used in surveys of USAJOBS users and job applicants, agendas from focus groups, a report summarizing the results of usability tests, and data from the USAJOBS help desk and OPM surveys.

To assess the reliability of the data we collected for this objective, we reviewed relevant documentation and consulted knowledgeable OPM officials. Specifically, we requested information from the USAJOBS program office about the processes they have established to ensure that data are created or entered accurately and to review data for completeness and accuracy. We also requested information about sample design and response rates for the survey data we reviewed. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of determining the variables that OPM collects and the time periods OPM's data collection covers, and for describing selected examples of the results of OPM's assessments.

The information and communication component of internal control—the organization's use of information to communicate within the organization or with related parties—was significant to this objective, along with the related principles that management should use quality information to achieve the entity's objectives and externally communicate the necessary quality information to achieve the entity's objectives.[2] We assessed OPM's use of quality information to achieve its objectives for USAJOBS by reviewing the timeliness and relevance of data OPM collects through its various methods for obtaining feedback from USAJOBS. We assessed OPM's external communication of information about USAJOBS by reviewing documentation of OPM's communication with federal agencies and the public regarding the USAJOBS user experience.

The risk assessment component of internal control—the organization's definition of objectives or identification or analysis of risk—was also significant to this objective, along with the related principles that management should define objectives clearly to enable the identification of risks and define risk tolerances and that management should identify, analyze, and respond to risks related to achieving the defined objectives. We assessed OPM's definition of objectives and identification of risks by reviewing documentation related to OPM's strategic goal of transforming hiring, pay, and benefits across the federal government to attract and

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[2]GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO-14-704G (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

retain the best civilian workforce as well as the cross-agency priority goal
on improving customer experience with federal services.

The control activities component of internal control—the organization's
policies, procedures, actions, or information systems that have been
established to achieve its objectives and respond to risk—was also
significant to this objective, along with the related principles that
management should design control activities to achieve objectives and
respond to risks, management should design the entity's information
system and related control activities to achieve objectives and respond to
risks, and management should implement control activities through
policies. We assessed OPM's control activities by interviewing OPM
officials about policies and procedures for reviewing and comparing
information from different sources relating to performance measures for
USAJOBS. We also reviewed examples of the implementation of those
policies and procedures, such as dashboards used to monitor the
performance of USAJOBS.

To describe actions OPM has taken to improve the user experience with
USAJOBS, we reviewed documentation of changes to USAJOBS and
interviewed OPM about these changes, focusing on changes beginning
with the redesign of USAJOBS in 2016. We also interviewed human
resources staff from four federal agencies to obtain agencies'
perspectives on USAJOBS. We selected these agencies—the U.S.
Departments of Agriculture, Education, and Justice, and the Nuclear
Regulatory Commission—by dividing the 24 Chief Financial Officers Act
agencies into two groups based on their number of full-time equivalent
staff in fiscal year 2019 and randomly selecting two agencies from each
group.[3] We excluded two agencies from selection—the U.S. Department
of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of the Treasury—to
avoid adding to the audit burden at those two agencies in light of their role

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[3]The 24 agencies are those identified in the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990, as
amended (31 U.S.C. § 901(b)), which generally are the largest federal agencies. The 24
agencies are the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education,
Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban
Development, the Interior, Justice, Labor, State, Transportation, the Treasury, and
Veterans Affairs, as well as the U.S. Agency for International Development, Environmental
Protection Agency, General Services Administration, National Aeronautics and Space
Administration, National Science Foundation, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Office of
Personnel Management, Small Business Administration, and Social Security
Administration. 31 U.S.C. § 901(b).

in the initial response to the national emergency caused by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 pandemic.

We conducted this performance audit from January 2020 to October 2020 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact	Michelle B. Rosenberg, (202) 512-6806 or rosenbergm@gao.gov.
Staff Acknowledgments	In addition to the contact named above, Clifton G. Douglas, Jr. (Assistant Director), Theodore Alexander (Analyst-in-Charge), Amalia Konstas, Hannah Laufe, Steven Putansu, Wesley Sholtes, James R. Sweetman, Jr., Peter Verchinski, and Alicia White made key contributions to this report.