Albert Chou:

This is IT Visionaries, your number one source for actionable insights and exclusive interviews with CIOs, CTOs, and CISOs, and many more. I'm your host, Albert Chou, a former CIO, former sales VP, and now podcast host.

Welcome everybody to another episode of IT Visionaries. And today, we have a special guest. He is the chief technology officer at the US Department of Veteran Affairs. If you don't know what that is, he's about to tell us, Charles Worthington. Charles, welcome to the show.

Charles Worthington:

Thanks so much, Albert. It's great to be here. I'll start off just by giving a little bit of an overview of the Department of Veteran Affairs, which some of your listeners may not be familiar with. The VA basically has the mission to care for veterans who fought or served in the military as well as their families and their children. The reason why this mission is so important is there are over 19 million veterans in this country and obviously they also have families and we owe an obligation to them to help pay back some of their service. To carry out that mission, the VA provides healthcare to over 9 million veterans that are enrolled in America's largest integrated healthcare system.

We've got over a hundred big medical centers across the country as well as another number of hundreds of clinics and smaller facilities spread across America. And then we also provide benefits. Over $100 billion of benefits are distributed every year. Things like the GI Bill to pay for education as well as disability compensation for people who were injured while serving. And the VA has over 400,000 employees. So it's the second largest agency in the government after the Department of Defense.

One way that I sort of think about that number is about one in a thousand Americans works for the VA, to give you a sense of the scale. We have an awesome mission to provide great technology services both to the veterans themselves as well as the employees that are serving the veterans at the VA.

Albert Chou:

Yeah. It's a bananas number when you really think about it. You mentioned before the size, scope, and scale, also the breadth of services. So I think for example, for myself when I was growing up, my uncle is in the military and then I was loosely familiar with what was going on with the VA because he had to go when he had to go to the hospital and stuff. But like you mentioned before, the GI Bill, financial services for veterans, there's a lot of different services baked in.

For our audience to get a picture here, we did some homework and we saw in a conversation that you said there's 10 million monthly unique users that use the VA website every month. And of course they're not there for checking out cat pictures. These people are typically doing something quite serious. Give us an idea of the scope, scale and load that is on your systems.

Charles Worthington:

Yeah. That's right. So the VA's digital services provide a way for veterans to learn about, apply for and then use the services that VA provides. And we get over 10 million unique users a month. Sometime that number grows as high as 12 or 13 million and people are doing things like messaging their doctor, refilling a prescription or maybe checking on the status of their disability benefit, either a claim that they have in progress or trying to figure out when is the next disability payment coming.

All sorts of things. It's really a pretty diverse set of needs that people have and we have really taken a lot of steps to try to modernize this online experience, over the past five years. The VA's website has really undergone a transformation. Before 2018, the homepage of the agency was, I sort of think of it as a

brochure. It was like a brochure about the VA, but where we have gone since then is trying to make the website a place where you come and do things.

You're learning about it. You're applying for and you're using your benefits. And obviously, then we have complimented that now with a mobile application that launched last year which I'm really excited to talk to y'all about.

Albert Chou:

Yeah, I want to get to that too. But before we dive into that portion, give us an idea of what the focus was. You mentioned it was meant for brochure like to more like, I would describe that as executions, right? I'm going to be able to execute actions that I need. We read in your interview there's three specific points that you guys wanted to tackle and address that things were hard to locate, that things were hard to navigate. They couldn't find what they were wanting to do or couldn't go where they wanted to go. Give us an idea of what it took to start transforming this.

Because when I think of doing a website rebuild, because I've been in e-commerce before, I've helped build websites with a hundred pages, a hundred SKUs. That was hard. I don't even want to know how many pages you're dealing with and tools and functions and web applications. Give us an idea of what that process looked like. How did you transform this website?

Charles Worthington:

The process of transforming the va.gov website was a couple years in the making quite honestly. And the way that we started was first by asking users, what do you need VA's digital properties to do? And they really gave us that feedback. They want to quickly be able to, complete the task that they came there for. They're coming for a reason and they wanted just to be able to quickly complete that reason. Whether it was applying for something, asking a question, checking on something, they had a problem in mind that they wanted the product to solve.

What they told us is they were frustrated by all the myriad ways in which the VA was presenting itself online. Your listeners are probably familiar with Conway's Law. Basically, the idea that the communication structure of an organization reflects itself in the systems that organization builds. And so for an organization as big as VA where there's 400,000 employees organized into these different program offices, the way that the VA had approached building veteran facing technology was basically every program office wound up building its own kind of part of the website or maybe even a different website.

Albert Chou:

That's dangerous.

Charles Worthington:

So to access your benefits, you would go to one portal with one login. To access your healthcare services, it was a different portal with a different login. And veterans just told us, "Hey, enough. This is too confusing. Why are you presenting yourself in these different program offices?" What we learned is veterans don't think of the VA as a series of program offices, they think of the VA as one entity and it really frustrates them when one part of the VA doesn't feel like it knows about the other part.

And to make that org chart, if you will, invisible to veterans, took a lot of work. Basically, we had to work with all the different stakeholders in the VA to understand what did they need their digital products to be able to do. Was it making it easier for someone to apply for something? Was it trying to reduce

volume of a call center? What was the problem that they had? And then we had to show them that by organizing that information into a more logical sort of coherent structure that was focused on connecting veterans to their top tasks that we could do a better job.

The actual way in which we launched this project, it wasn't like one of these big bang on this day everything changes. I think that's one of the biggest lessons learned for the government coming out of things like healthcare.gov where the idea was on one specific day the site was supposed to work for everyone.

Obviously, in the private sector, that's not how we would launch anything. We would ease our way into things. And so similarly for the VA, there was an initial project that had sort of proved this idea of building in a more modern tech stack with a more modern sense of design that had launched as a separate standalone website and that had gained traction.

A lot of veterans said, "Okay, this new website, it was called vets.gov, we liked what that looked like." But in a way that almost made the problem worse because now there was a yet another website that veterans had to learn about. And so what we wound up doing is taking the lessons learned from that vets.gov project and basically saying, "Okay, what if we built the future va.gov homepage, the thing that serves 10 million unique users every month. What if we rebuilt that on the vets.gov tech stack with the vets.gov design sensibilities?"

So we were able to use this kind of breakout innovation project that had gone fast, but kind of gone separate as a building block for the new project. And then even as we came towards the Veterans Day launch, we wanted to have it fully live by Veterans Day in 2018. We launched a preview of the site. We put it up at preview.va.gov and just every day as that project was continuing, new features were being added to preview.va.gov.

So that gave us confidence that the actual new platform, the new site, it was a whole new tech stack that it was working. And we slowly phased traffic into that preview site such that when it was time to actually do the full launch, it was really just flipping a switch from old va.gov to new va.gov. But new va.gov had already been online for months and had already been serving real traffic over that time. So we had more confidence that everything would go well. And of course since then, that was almost, I guess four years ago now. We have continued to add a lot of features to the platform over time. So it's really been an iterative and incremental process.

Albert Chou:

Yeah, no doubt about it. The way you describe it sounds more like you said, consumers are not thinking of a series of services they're thinking of. It's just one entity. Everything should be interconnected. That wasn't how it was engineered. The way you describe it now, it feels like almost like an SSO type functionality where a jumping point to all the different services so that hopefully it's more interconnected.

For yourself, when you joined the VA, this is a big departure. I mean, I think most of our audience knows it's hard to get those quick shifts inside the government. Was this a big culture change that was already permeating throughout the organization they wanted to do this or is this something that you had to lead the charge and of convince others? You mentioned some departments were onboard and there's probably others that were less quick to say, "Yes, we want to do this." Give us an idea of what it was like to transform people's mentality on how this needs to be engineered.

Charles Worthington:

Yeah. The cool thing about public service and why I am working for the government... I never expected that I was going to work for the government. I came from private sector tech doing product design and software development. I joined what I thought was going to be a one year fellowship. And what I found here is you know that everyone is working at a place like the VA for the right reasons.

Almost everyone that works at the VA could easily have a higher paying job in their same industry somewhere else, whether that's a doctor or a nurse or a software designer. And the reason that they choose to work at the VA is that the problems that we work on are really interesting and the people we serve really deserve great technology, great products.

So I don't think that changing people's mind... Everyone is there for the right reason. Everyone has good intentions and they really want to do right by the veterans. I think what the government has yet to fully adopt, although we're getting there at the VA, is really the past decade or maybe even a little more than a decade of digital product development.

There's just new techniques and tactics that we as an industry have really created since the primacy of the cloud, for example, as a hosting platform, more automation tools that allow things to be deployed on a regular basis. These practices just didn't exist when the government first started writing software. So getting the government to embrace those things is a little bit more of a challenge at times because it's just different than the way that the government had done things before.

I think sometimes people forget that the government and other big institutions like the governments, they were really the first entities to embrace software in a really big way. And so most of these organizations, we have systems that date back decades, literally. The VA basically invented the electronic health record system, the very first electronic health record system when the whole rest of the industry was using paper manila folders, the VA had invented a health record system, but that was over 30 years ago.

And so the amount of history that we have, both in terms of the systems as well as the processes to use to adapt those systems wasn't built in this more modern era where we're used to doing frequent deploys, we're used to just shipping something from a server and that's live the next day or just the next minute to a user. So those sorts of things are practices that we need to get better at in government.

I think we are making a lot of progress on that goal mostly because everyone has the same real end goal in mind, which is providing a great experience to veterans.

Albert Chou:

Yeah. And you mentioned it at the top of the conversation, and I want to dive into it because to demonstrate this process, if I told my audience that the government has an app with a 4.8 star rating, they wouldn't say no way. They would say no freaking way because it's just so hard to make a consumer facing application, which is what you're doing. You're basically making consumer facing application. It's not an enterprise login.

It's not like a tool that I have to use for work. I don't really have a choice. If I could rate some of the tools I have to use, I would give them zeros. But you have a mobile app. It's got a million downloads. You mentioned in the top of the conversation this big culture shift effectively. It's like, "Hey, we got to embrace these more modern techniques and modern tool kits. This is how technology's going to be built going forward. This is what our consumers expect." And now you have a mobile app with a 4.8 star rating. And like I said, that is unheard.

No one would assume the government has a 4.8 star rating app. Give us an idea what went into it? Let's start with what does it do and then talk about the engineering behind it.

Charles Worthington:

Sure. Yeah. So the mobile app is basically designed to help people quickly access the most common transactions that they have with the VA. So it's really for our existing users. If they need to come and do something quick like message a doctor or check on the status of their claim, update their profile, we want to make it really fast for them to be able to complete that transaction. Similar to the web project, this really started by listening to our users.

First, we looked at the data. We saw probably like many organizations, the number of people that were visiting our website from their smartphone was increasing every year. In fact, I think this year we're up to over 50% of all of those page visits are coming from a mobile device.

Albert Chou:

It's like a consumer app now.

Charles Worthington:

Yeah. And so that is a strong indication that a lot of people are consuming our products from their smartphone. So that just basically led us to ask, "Are we giving them the best experience that we could or is there a better way to do it?" And 2018, that wasn't that long ago. We were fully into the mobile first web approach. We designed for mobile. It's a fully responsive website. But even so, we hypothesized that a mobile app could provide a faster experience.

We could take advantage of things like the biometric login to make it easier for somebody to drop right into their account once they've already logged in, for example, or the camera to upload a document to the VA. So those sorts of features are a lot harder to implement with a website. And just thinking about our own lives, our team, some of them are veterans, not all of them, but just thinking of our own lives, the way that I interact with my bank or my airline, it used to be all the website and now it's almost all the app.

We thought that's probably something we should test with veterans. So that was really the problem we were trying to solve is for those users that are coming to us with a smartphone, how can we make sure that we're giving them a great experience? And it led us to want to try basically an experiment to see how easily we could ship a mobile app. Because that also just wasn't a skillset that our team had.

So we went through a whole process that I could talk through about testing the idea just with a prototype at first and then gaining confidence that it was something we could achieve without sort of a massive investment that would require a big, even bigger effort. We started down the path of building something that we thought would help veterans.

Similar to that va.gov story, we wound up launching it pretty quietly last year. Basically, we just dropped it into the app store and didn't tell anyone really because there is no way to really... Unlike the web where you could do preview.va.gov, there's no real easy way to pilot a new mobile app. It's either in the store or it's not. And so the way we approached that is we dropped it in the store but without a lot of fanfare.

We started proactively inviting groups and groups of people telling them about it. And then a lot of people just found it by searching VA in the app store. And right away, we got a lot of great feedback from that. Both things that people felt like we needed to add to it, but also a lot of positive reaction. For the features we did have in the app, people said, "Hey, this is what I was expecting for the VA and I'm really happy it's all here."

And that's really just kind of continued this momentum over the past year. We've become a lot louder about the app now that we've gained kind of confidence. We know it works. And as you said, we just crossed a million downloads. We're getting about 500,000 users per month. Unique users using something, using the app for something, messaging their doctor, checking a healthcare appointment, checking on the disability claim status, things like that.

It's been really great to see this growth. One thing I'm proud of is I feel like our team is definitely a web first team. We've got a lot of people that are really into open source, really into web as a platform. But our team was flexible enough to recognize this mobile first way of working, even though we felt like we were doing good responsive design, that a native app might be the way that our users are expecting us to show up.

So we jumped in and learned a whole new skillset, which we're still learning, but we feel proud that we've been able to accomplish that. It's almost like we've been able to cannibalize ourself. We're taking transactions from our web team and now it's this mobile team. But that's okay. I think we always want to be moving to where the veterans are and trying to keep the VA meeting them where they expect us to be.

Albert Chou:

I think that's going to go be beneficial for your recruiting efforts too, because the reality is developers want to work on cool projects. That's the fact. They're not going to be... If I'm a good developer, I'm not... As much as I want to help, don't get me wrong, I also want to do cool stuff. You know what I mean? I'm not trying to work somewhere where I don't get to work on the most modern techniques, the most modern applications to test new technology stacks or frameworks and protocols.

So the fact that you're pushing the culture this way, do you see that potentially helping you get more talented individuals? Because like you said, there has to be two things. You have to be skilled, but you also have to be committed to a level of service because like you said if I were an engineer in the private market, I could potentially make more money. So you got to hit me with something. You got to give me something. And so it sounds like pushing to that culture is key.

Charles Worthington:

Yeah, exactly. It's just like what you said, people are addicted to solving problems I think. That's what good techies want whether that's a developer, a product manager, a designer, a data scientist. They want to solve a gnarly problem. And that's kind of what people get out of bed for. I think that something that the tech industry over the past couple of decades has really failed to develop is a tradition of public service.

I think that's actually kind of unique. I think that the tech industry is different than other professions and that it does not yet have a strong tradition of public service. You think of attorneys for example. The very most prestigious thing you can do after graduating law school is clerk for the Supreme Court. That's a public service job. There isn't the equivalent of that. The most prestigious thing I can do as a data scientist is go help social security administration detect fraud. That's not a concept that exists.

I think that people, as this industry matures, I think we are going to build a muscle of public service, a tradition of public service. And that's been exciting to see. I think there are a lot of people out there that are looking at the past decade or so of tech, especially consumer tech and questioning the problems are interesting, I guess like how can we quickly connect users to the world's knowledge? It's an awesome mission statement.

But at the end of the day, the way that that business is really working is trying to get more people to spend more time in the app so you can sell ads more efficiently against that time. There's a lot of problems like that that exist in our industry that ultimately at the end of it is like a business model that doesn't really... You question if that's really something worth putting all this energy into. And you look at the Web3 past year or two, not that I want to get into that landmine.

Albert Chou:

Past couple months, so 45 days.

Charles Worthington:

It just feels like there's been a lot of technology efforts spent on things that have questionable problems worth solving at the end of them. And if you could imagine that same effort being put towards something like [inaudible 00:20:39] a veteran the benefit that they earned fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan, treated for cancer with world class AI systems just at the bleeding edge of healthcare. Those are problems that are worth solving. I'm kind of guilty of this myself. Before I joined government, what I was working on was a startup idea of my own.

It was a live music discovery service. Basically, you pick your city, you press play. You'd get shown a video playlist of all the bands that were going to come visit your city. I was really excited about it in my twenties and it was fun. But at the end of that, it's helping a pretty well off person have a slightly cooler weekend. It's not really a problem worth solving as much as it was fun to work on. So I think that is a way that we can recruit people to come join the government even though it doesn't quite have some of the same perks as a cushy tech sector job.

Albert Chou:

So I got to ask, what was it that made you have a change of tune a little bit? You're heading down this path. I mean, I get it. I totally understand. I myself, that's why I entered into tech. I think it's fair to say I started off as a teacher. I wanted to do a little bit more. I started working for Department of Health Services and then I found the tech industry and I was like, "All right. Well, I want to earn some income." That's what I chose to do.

At the time, it was all the rage. Of course, there's windfalls of money and technology and that's what I did. But for us, when we sit here at IT Visionaries, one of the things we get and no one really sees is how many pitches we get to join us on the show. Me and myself and my producer, Jen, we always talk about, "Hey, some of these things just don't feel like they're solving a big enough deal." You know what I mean? Yeah, you're an engineer and you can do cool things. And I'm not saying what you're saying is not worthy, but it doesn't feel as good as some of the things that... I guess that's the way I'm getting at. So for yourself, you're making this app trying to help people discover live music. What made you say, "I want to serve the government"? How did you change?

Charles Worthington:

For me, I think it came to... I'll take it back to my parents. My mom was one of the first computer science graduates from Duke and she worked on projects. She programmed some of the programming that went up in the space shuttle working for IBM back in the '80s. My dad worked for the government. He worked for the Fish and Wildlife Service. He just retired a few years ago after over 30 years. So my mom was doing software work. My dad was public service in Fish and Wildlife. And I guess I'm a weird combination of the two, which I guess makes sense.

Back in 2013, that's when I was working on the live music thing. I got an offer to join the government for what I thought would be a one-year fellowship as a part of this program called the Presidential Innovation Fellowship. It was a new program that was designed to bring tech talent into government to work on some of the most gnarly problems that the government has. And so I was weighing, should I take this offer? It's this interesting, really unique opportunity, or should I really go for this startup idea? Which at the time was I was ready to launch in the first cities, but it wasn't something that had already fully launched and was working on.

So I was at this inflection point and I think what it came down to for me was feeling like at the end of the story for the live music app, just thinking through if this is as successful as possible, what does that look like? And then just realizing that at the end of that, I wasn't sure that I would've felt that those couple of years working on it were spent on something important enough compared to what I might get a chance to work on for this one year fellowship.

And really didn't what to expect, but took the leap in. It was about halfway through that fellowship, that first year in 2013 that the healthcare.gov site launched. Your listeners might remember that was pretty epic-

Albert Chou:

It was not good.

Charles Worthington:

... government tech failure. It launched, it crashed, and then a team of folks, including some of the presidential innovation fellows that I was working with as well as other folks from across the tech industry were sort of scrambled together to go fix that website. And they spent that fall basically getting healthcare.gov from a site that was essentially broken, not working for anyone to something that was able to enroll over a million Americans in healthcare.

And coming out of that experience, I think it made people in the government basically... It made the status quo feel untenable because this was a signature policy of the administration that was basically going to fail because they couldn't figure out how to ship a modern website correctly.

And then it was rescued by a team of people that had this more modern set of skills. So it gave momentum to the idea that the government should have a permanent capability of people that have these skills that can help work on some of the most important services. I got the chance to join the White House working for the federal CTO at the time, who was Todd Park. He led the healthcare.gov rescue effort. And when Todd got back from the fixing it, it basically gave us the ammo we needed to pitch the idea that there should be something called the US Digital Service, which could attract a bigger group of these sorts of people that wanted to come do public service starting to build that tradition of public service in the tech industry that I was talking about earlier.

So I got a chance to move over to the White House, help build the US Digital Service, and then I joke that I had basically every job there was at USDS as we got that organization off the ground. It was really a unique opportunity sort of to build a startup, but within one of the world's biggest bureaucracies, which is the US federal government. But we grew that organization to over 200 designers, engineers, product managers, and other sort of techies.

That was what kept me past that original one year fellowship. It's almost 10 years later now and I'm still working in government. Again, I thought I was going to be here for a year. The reason I'm still here though is it feels like every year we're getting access to more and more important problems and more and more openness to doing things in a better way.

I really feel like that's reflected. If you think back at some of the more high profile tech things over the past couple years that the government has been involved with, it has been a lot better. I think when the tech stuff is just working, you don't really notice it. So it doesn't get a lot of press. But I think back to a couple years ago when the administration announced that there'd be COVID tests available for free. Just come on to this website, sign up for a COVID test and we'll ship it to you.

That has all the trappings of possible healthcare.gov style meltdown. But because we have had a couple of years building this capability in government, the launch went off without a hitch. The postal service wound up running that website. The digital service was involved giving them some advice to make sure that things would work and the site just worked.

That's what people expect from the government. They want it to just work. I think more and more we're able to deliver on that assuming we can continue to attract more tech talent to want to spend some of their career in public service.

Albert Chou:

When Kennedy said we're going to put a man on the moon, he was able to convince engineers the development of NASA. Everyone is working on some of the biggest most audacious problems. When the birth of aviation, the FA obviously created the radar system was going to track planes. It does seem like there was a gap of bureaucracy where... So to your point, it used to be the forefront of the biggest problems, the biggest tech innovators, best engineers were 100% willing to raise their hand and say, "I want to solve that."

And there was this gap like you suggested of possibly... For whatever reason bureaucracy took over and innovation slowed to a pace. Now, you're talking about we're pushing into new frontiers. What's interesting about what you talked about in the last... We joked about the 45 days, the Web3, I can say it. You might not be able to comment, but I'll say it, this idea that everything should be deregulated, people are finding out that that's not a good idea. That's the biggest thing. They're finding out, "Wow, we need a source of truth that says this is how things work."

Because without that, you have what's happening at FDX. I'm public. I've lost some money on FTX. I want my money back SBF. I don't like how he's getting a public platform to just kind of say what he wants to say. But to your point, we need great engineers, great talent, great people to solve because that's how it used to be. They used to solve for the public sector and then private sector could follow some of the learnings. It went away from that more recently, but it's changing again.

Charles Worthington:

I almost questioned that premise a little bit because I do feel like that innovation is actually something the government continues to be excellent at. We just launched the James Webb Space Telescope. That was not a private sector endeavor. We've got cancer treatments are coming out of our national health systems. The COVID vaccines were in part developed with the support of the federal government with a really innovative way of financing vaccine development and these speculative approaches.

At the VA ourselves, we have a big healthcare system that's really at the forefront of a lot of clinical research. So I think innovation is something the government is actually pretty good at. The thing that the government is not as good at is keeping up with best practices in digital delivery. I think that gap in particular, there's a difference between shipping a website and shipping a rocket.

You're still pretty good at shipping rockets. The websites require basically adopting the current set of standards and practices, which the government was a little slow to do, but we're catching up. But I agree

with you that the tech can only get you part of the way there. And thankfully, I'm getting these a lot less now, these pitches from blockchain type companies.

But the past couple years it'd be like, "Hey, we've got this great idea to solve health data interoperability. We'll put it on the blockchain and problem solved." I'm like, "Well, I think you're skipping a few steps. The problem with health data interoperability is the incentives of the industry, the lack of standards, all these structural barriers that if we could solve all those, then we can get it on the blockchain. But at that point, why not just put it in a big Postgres database with the consortium of healthcare workers, which is effectively what we have.

It's just that the reason that those things have not gained momentum is not because we're missing a distributed database technology. It is a more structural problem that I think too often techies are guilty of skipping straight to the tech and thinking that that will solve the problem and missing that there's actually these bigger societal problems.

Maybe it's an organizational problem and a big org like the VA, the problem wasn't that we didn't have a website or a way to do these transactions. The problem was we just hadn't done enough to get the VA to convince itself to put all those things into one solution because that was harder than just letting every program office do it their own way. That was the natural way that it would work. And that wasn't a technical thing to fix, that was just a few of us that were believing in a better way to do it, trying to organize the agency to do things better.

Albert Chou:

It's funny whenever I talk to engineers who work 'cause the way I get a unique place where I get to talk to so many is that a lot of companies when they want to do things bigger, better, move faster, often they simplify or they'll cut services or things like that. It's like the government's duty is not to cut. That's a big challenge. If the service is available, the service is available. They don't have a way to just be like, "Oh, we'll just hide it or we'll just obfuscate it." Like "What?"

Charles Worthington:

One of the challenges we have is we have to serve everyone.

Albert Chou:

That's right.

Charles Worthington:

We can't build an app that's going to work for 80% of the population, but, hey, these 20% that don't have a bank account or that are blind or low vision, we'll get to them later. That's not something that we can do. I think that's a problem that's exciting to solve. Instead of thinking of that as a hindrance, I think it's actually interesting. How can you solve a mobile app that's super accessible for blind and low vision veterans? Which we did from day one of the app. When you thought of it as an opportunity, I think it's actually probably one of the most accessible products that the VA has ever delivered because the smartphone operating systems, both Apple and Android have pretty good native accessibility features built in, screen reader services, a way to navigate the device.

Something we learned is that a lot of blind and low vision people, they primarily experience the internet using those smartphones just because those features have become better than screen readers. Some of those dedicated devices in some cases. And so right away we were able to take advantage of those

native accessibility features to make the app possible to navigate for people that are using assistive features like that.

It is definitely a unique challenge in government. You've got to build for everyone, and digital experiences is just one part of it. There's also a lot of people that are just going to prefer to talk to someone or walk in and get help that way. We want to make that work just as well as the digital stuff. So there's a whole ecosystem of software that's supporting all of those in-person and contact centers, which we probably don't have time to get into all of it, but you can imagine with an organization the size of the VA, there is software behind everything and there's a lot of work to do.

Albert Chou:

No doubt about it. Listen, just as any other company out there, you're really just beginning. This is Bezos's families for saying day one. I mean, you really are like every day, day one for probably what you guys are doing because your breadth of services seems to change. I don't know. How often does the VA offer new services, ad services? It's probably every day someone is probably tapping you on the shoulder, "Hey, Charles. How do we add this?" You're like...

Charles Worthington:

Yeah. You would think it's kind of static. Right? Here's what the VA does. But actually it really has changed a lot. It's been an area of bipartisan focus for the past several congresses, making sure that the VA's benefits are keeping up with the needs of the modern veteran. Just this year, there was a new legislation pass to expand disability benefits. It's called the PACT Act. And basically it expands benefits available to a number of conditions that are caused by toxic exposures of various kinds.

Albert Chou:

Okay.

Charles Worthington:

Burn pits is kind of the most notable of those, but basically changes the way that VA rules work such that more veterans are just assumed to be eligible for these benefits depending on when they served. And so that's an example where we are expecting a lot more disability benefit applications to come in from these veterans that are newly eligible for the benefits because of this law. And so right now we are working on looking at how can we streamline the way that VA processes these claims? How could we get a veteran a decision in days instead of months because this decision unit requires reviewing a lot of evidence.

There's some really interesting things that we're doing on that side as well, looking at connecting data that we and the Department of Defense already know about the person connecting that data to their claim to see if there are opportunities to streamline things, to make a decision faster than we would traditionally be able to make one so that as we get more and more of these claims, we would be able to still deliver the decisions in a really quick manner without sacrificing the speed of a decision.

You might think government is kind of static. The VA's been around for a long time, but the things the VA offers actually does change quite a bit, mostly because of these bipartisan bills that are coming out of Congress over the past couple of years. So they keep us on our toes, which we appreciate.

Albert Chou:

No doubt about it. There's probably never going to be a day where you get to go to work whereas I was like nothing is changing. You know what I mean? You guys have something all the time. Well, Charles, man, it was great having you on the show. For whatever the impression of what's happening in the public sector, most people, they throw it off, but you're absolutely right. It does lead in innovation and now we're going to lead in delivery. This is fantastic. I'm glad that you're on the mission.

But Charles, before you go, I want to say something. We got to do something for our sponsors and that is, it's time for the lightning round. The lightning round is brought to us by Salesforce Platform, the number one cloud platform for digital transformation, your experience, Charles. This is where we ask you questions outside of the realm of work so our audience can get to know you a little bit better. You ready?

Charles Worthington:

All right. Let's do it.

Albert Chou:

You had to have been a music lover. What kind of music do you like?

Charles Worthington:

I like all kinds of music and building that app made me actually just realize that I really did. There was genres that I had never tried like metal or country, things that I didn't get into as much in my normal taste. Building that app, it made me realize that all music is basically awesome. And so I feel like I'm pretty open to anything. These days though, I wind up the Spotify top list. It winds up being pretty depressing. There's a lot of Moana, Frozen. I've got a five-year-old and a three-year-old, so I feel like most of my music consumption these days is kid music of some kind.

Although, this is a tip for parents out there. We got my five-year-old on to '90s alternative, so she's a huge fan of Weezer, Green Day. Basically going back to my classics of the high school era. She has her own playlist that she's obsessed with now that does not include kids' music on it. So recommend trying to do that.

Albert Chou:

Smart move. It's funny you brought that up because I was as joking about how... I don't understand how the number one song on my Spotify playlist or top two was Olivia Rodrigo. And it's like, "Well, my eight-year-old daughter and I share an account."

Charles Worthington:

That'll do it.

Albert Chou:

That'll do it. So you got a chance to experience all types of live performances. If you were a musician, what style of music would you play based on how the audience reacts?

Charles Worthington:

Oh, man. Well, I'm going to take this seriously and literally, and I would say that if I had time to become a musician, I think I would attempt to become a fiddle player.

Albert Chou:

Really?

Charles Worthington:

One of those fiddle players that's like on stage at a honky-tonk in Nashville and you're like, "Oh my God, I never knew I liked the fiddle." But they're just totally crushing it. I feel like that would be really fun to become good at. Last time, I was in Nashville, I actually had that epiphany, and so I bought a fiddle, which turns out a fiddle is just a violin. That's something I learned.

So I now have a violin, but I'll tell you a thing that is not pleasant to hear is somebody that has never played the violin trying to learn the violin. So far the violin is under my bed and maybe one day when I get a house out in the country and I have a separate studio away from my wife and kids, I'll learn how to play that thing.

Albert Chou:

Hey, listen, your neighbors will thank you. My neighbor kid is learning how to play trumpet. And I'm all for kids learning how to play music, but I'll tell you right now, he's not good.

Charles Worthington:

Well, pretty soon we probably won't even need instruments. There'll be a new open AI model probably that will just write all the music for us and that'll be taken care of.

Albert Chou:

That will not be a good day. I agree. For yourself, it sounds like you're a dad. What do you like to do with your family? Are you outdoors people? Do you guys go to... I'm assuming you live near Washington DC so there's a breadth of museums. I grew up in the DC area. Fun fact, growing up in the DC area, the first time I had to pay to go to the museum, I didn't understand. I was like, "What do you mean? It's not free?"

Charles Worthington:

Yeah. We live near Rock Creek Park in DC. I'm looking out at it right now actually out my window, so we're out there all the time in one of the big... It's a big national park right here in central DC. And one kind of cool thing is the zoo is also right by us, which is free, like you said. So my kids are growing up thinking that zoos are, A, free and B, something you can walk to from your house, which is not really a thing in most cities that you'll get to live in. But it is always a fun day when we can... On a spring morning, we'll have the windows open and you'll hear the lions roaring from outside our window as they wake up. It's charming in a way. But yeah, we get outside a lot. I like to run, so that's my big thing is going running in the park.

Albert Chou:

Yep. We saw that you're an avid Peloton user, runner. Hey, listen, growing up outside DC or right in DC, it's such a unique experience. I'm telling you, your children will have the same oddity when they leave and they're like, they're told they have to pay to go to museum or zoo. They're going to be like, "What do you mean?"

Charles Worthington:

Yeah, we try to soak it up. It's when you drive to the airport and you're driving by the monuments and you've just done it so many times. It starts to just be like, "Oh yeah, it's just another day." But then it's always when people come and visit, you remember how cool of an experience it is to get to... I work across the street from the White House and I just look at it every day. It's kind of neat.

Albert Chou:

Yeah, it is. Well, Charles, it was awesome having you on IT Visionaries today. Thanks for joining us. Thanks for sharing some of the things you're up to. I mean, I think this mobile app is proof positive that things are moving in a great direction and a place where your constituents and your consumers would want to you to be. And if anyone out there listening to the show right now, one of the fun things that we do in the show is we obviously have a lot of audience members that are getting into or new to the world of tech.

If you're wanting to do some innovative things, do a little public service for a huge, big hairy, audacious mission that directly benefits the veterans who have served the country of the United States, give Charles a call. Send in your resume. He's looking for great talent.

Charles Worthington:

Yeah, that's right. I'll just specifically say oitcareers@va.gov is an email inbox we set up that is specific for people that are just considering, "Hey, I might want to take this plunge into public sector." Maybe you don't know much about it. It can be complicated. There's a big ecosystem. Send us a note, we'll help you out. You can also look up programs like the US Digital Service or more mid and late career folks for the US Digital Corps, which is geared towards early career techies.

There's a lot of interesting ways for people to come in and make an impact. Yeah, we'd love to have more of you on our team. So if you're thinking about, what's my next thing, hit us up at oitcareers@va.gov.

Albert Chou:

Awesome. Charles, thanks again for joining us today on IT Visionaries.

Charles Worthington:

Thank you so much. It's great to talk to you.