

# Change Management in VHA: Why People, Not Technology, Determine IT Success

Decades of industry research point to a consistent finding: most large IT deployments succeed or stall not because of the technology itself, but because of how thoroughly the people who will use that technology are engaged before, during, and after the rollout. This insight has particular weight inside the Veterans Health Administration, where IT systems support the daily work of more than 400,000 dedicated employees and the care of over 9 million enrolled Veterans. The scale and complexity of VHA's mission make thoughtful, context-aware change management not just a best practice, but a meaningful lever for delivering even better care to those who served.

## Why the VHA Environment Deserves a Tailored Approach

VHA is not a typical enterprise. It is a national clinical operation that balances federal acquisition requirements, labor partnerships, accreditation standards, congressional oversight, and a deep commitment to Veterans. A new scheduling system, EHR module, or identity platform doesn't just change a screen — it touches how a nurse triages, how a clerk verifies eligibility, how a physician documents, and ultimately how a Veteran experiences care. Industry experience across both public and private health systems shows that when frontline staff help shape these changes, adoption is faster, data quality is higher, and patient experience improves. When that engagement is lighter than it could be, organizations tend to see informal workarounds emerge, slower realization of benefits, and added strain on the very teams the system was meant to support.

## A Common Pattern Worth Avoiding

Across large health systems and federal agencies alike, IT programs often follow a familiar arc: a heavily engineered technical solution, a compressed pilot, and a “go-live” milestone treated as the finish line. In this pattern, change management is sometimes scoped narrowly — training videos, town halls, and a help desk — even when leaders recognize the need for something more. The stronger model, well established in both healthcare and federal practice, treats change management as a parallel program — funded, staffed, and measured — that is shaped early, runs alongside the technical work, and continues for years after deployment. Given its mission, scale, and the depth of clinical expertise on its workforce, VHA is well positioned to set the standard here.

## A Practical Framework for VHA

- Engage early, engage specifically. Invite real end-users — not abstract personas — into design decisions while those decisions are still flexible. A VA nurse manager contributing to a design council in month three can save significant rework in month thirty.
- Map the workflow, not just the system. Document current-state clinical and administrative workflows before configuring the new tool. Many issues reported after go-live trace back to workflow nuances that were never made explicit during configuration — surfacing them early avoids that friction.
- Invest in site-level champions. National training is essential, and it works best alongside trusted local voices. Funded, protected time for facility-level super-users is one of the highest-leverage investments in adoption, and it builds on the strong local leadership VHA already has in place.
- Measure adoption, not just deployment. “Sites live” is a useful milestone, but the fuller picture comes from tracking utilization depth, workflow fit, safety signals, and staff sentiment for at least 18 months post-deployment — and tuning the program based on what those measures reveal.

## The Bottom Line

VHA's mission gives every IT deployment unusually high stakes — and also unusually high upside when change management is done well. The technology itself is rarely the deciding factor. What most often determines success is whether clinicians, administrators, and support staff are engaged as co-designers of the change, by partners who understand the particular cadence, culture, and clinical reality of VHA. Programs that resource change management as a first-class workstream — with executive sponsorship, dedicated staffing, and meaningful adoption metrics — consistently realize benefits faster and more fully. The opportunity for VHA is to invest in that engagement early and intentionally, so the technology can do exactly what it was meant to do: help VHA's people deliver the best possible care to those who served.