New USAJobs site for federal job seekers continues to frustrate many

By Lisa Rein, Published: October 27

Within hours of its debut, the federal government's ballyhooed new jobs board was on the fritz: USAJobs crashed repeatedly, error messages popped up over and over, résumés disappeared, passwords were obliterated.

It even got basic geography wrong, with searches for Delaware, for example, turning up jobs in Germany.

"It's now a mess," Donna Walli wrote on the site's Facebook page on Oct. 13, two days after it went live after a costly 18-month redo. "Hopefully I'll finally get a job soon and I won't have to deal with USAJobs anymore."

USAJobs 3.0, the next step in the government's effort to make finding federal jobs easier and faster, was looking more like USAJobs 1.0.

It was 48 hours before frustrated applicants stopped getting this cheerleading message: "USAJOBS 3.0 is here and you're not the only one excited about it!" Any "unexpected errors ... have now been resolved."

Sixteen days later, problems have ebbed somewhat as the Office of Personnel Management, which took over the system from Monster, has raced to add servers and bandwidth and troubleshoot other problems.

But the biggest board for federal work remains riddled with bugs that are frustrating desperate candidates in one of the country's few employment bright spots. Thousands of job-seekers and hiring managers have turned to Facebook and Twitter to complain, with some begging for the old system back.

"I'm really, really hoping someone has a rollback plan in place," Daniel Rothman, an IT manager who does hiring for the Federal Air Marshal Service, wrote on Facebook on Sunday, "because frankly USAJobs. 3.0 needs to go back for some extensive rework."

Personnel officials have blamed USAJobs' poor performance on what they call an unanticipated spike in traffic to the site.

Much of America now looks for employment online, with widely used technology. But the federal government's failure to get it right has embarrassed a tech-proud White House, where even the president has an iPad and is on Tumblr.

"If a private contractor was delivering this, the government would have terminated them for cause immediately," said Adam Davidson, general manager for human capital management at Oracle, which provides payroll and other systems to federal agencies.

The botched rollout is now becoming political fodder for conservatives critical of government and reviving a debate over whether private companies or the public sector do a better job.

The USAJobs launch follows a crash last summer at USAStaffing — also run by federal the personnel agency that routes applications to hiring managers. During a four-day outage in August, résumés, essays and other information for 70,000 candidates was lost.

Since USAJobs went live, it has accepted 381,000 applications without a glitch, officials say. But they acknowledged that it is hard to know whether that number reflects any change over the old system because not all openings have been relisted and the number of open positions fluctuates.

"Whenever you stand up a new system, you have complexities," said Matthew Perry, the personnel agency's chief information officer. "If you think you're going to get something running perfectly out of the box, I'm sorry, but it doesn't happen."

Perry said some visitors are still learning how to use the site's enhancements and might mistake a flawed search for a software glitch. He said the spike in traffic is not just from new users, but also from old ones logging in to change their passwords.

But industry experts say the government should have been better prepared to handle the increased traffic and question whether the load on the system is the only problem.

"If you can't click back on your browser to maintain your search parameters, those are the types of problems that are not caused by increased traffic," said Evan Lesser, founder of ClearanceJobs, a search engine that advertises national security positions for federal contractors.

Federal hiring is handled by a complex patchwork of systems that recruit at one end and route applications to agencies at the other. Most federal jobs are posted on USAJobs, although many intelligence agencies advertise their own openings. USAStaffing competes head to head with contractors for much of the back-end work — some of it done by Monster.

Rivalries are fierce. Some contractors say the personnel agency is moving to quash competition by requiring agencies to post positions on USAJobs, then persuade them to sign up for its back-end service.

"The concern is that vendors will be locked out," said Davidson, who manages an online group of federal personnel contractors.

One of them, Avue Technologies, helped test the site before the launch and says its own tests afterward showed dramatically higher failure rates than the government is acknowledging.

Perry said Avue's claims could not be verified because the company is no longer an authorized tester.

The government announced in 2009 that it would not renew its $6 million contract with Monster, the job search engine that had managed USAJobs since 2004. OPM would rebuild, develop and host the new system for about $20 million over two years, budget figures show. Within five years, the government would save money.

Job seekers had long complained that the old system was clunky. Personnel chief John Berry, focused on reforming the federal hiring process with more communication and less red tape, wanted a more sophisticated recruiting tool.

His staff promised new features that would allow candidates to drill down for listings within a few miles of their home, submit their résumés once instead of every time they apply for a job and track the status of their application.

Another reason for going in-house, Davidson said, was cold feet from a botched, multimillion-dollar project at the Department of Homeland Security. The agency signed a $100 million contract for a Web-based system to speed up recruiting and hiring, but TalentLink was canceled last year after three years in development.

Jeffrey Neal, the agency's chief human capital officer at the time, said it had not been properly designed for federal hiring.

Berry's staff was so confident about the USAJobs revamp that the site debuted a day early after a week-long shutdown for testing and transferring data. The relaunch was hyped for weeks to hiring managers and the media.

Like many job seekers, Janet Barbour found her résumé gone when she logged in recently from Las Vegas,where she is a program specialist for the Environmental Protection Agency. She's looking for a higher-paying administrative job as she heads into retirement.

Barbour limited her search to three states, but the new site has not sent her a single e-mail alert with openings, she said. "It's driving me insane."

After the problems surfaced with USAJobs, Avue and Monster offered free listings to federal agencies. Monster said in a statement that "issues with the new USAJobs site may be impacting the government's ability to hire at a time when accelerating hiring is a national priority." Avue said it has had no takers. A Monster official said the company is still talking to agencies.