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The Need for Occupational Information

Our disability claims policy and the process to implement this policy require that we evaluate

medical, and, in most cases, work information. When we evaluate work information, we take into account work in the national economy to determine whether a claimant can do his or her past work or adjust to other work. The Department of Labor (DOL) developed our main source of occupational information, the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT), in 1938. However, the DOL stopped updating the DOT in 1991. In order to make accurate decisions, we must have information that reflects current occupations and their requirements. As a result, we are developing a new Occupational Information System (OIS), which will replace the DOT as the primary source of occupational information SSA staff use in our disability adjudication process.

Our Vision for the New OIS

Our new OIS is a collection of occupational data from multiple sources that will be housed, accessed, and operationalized through an online platform called the Vocational Information Tool (VIT). Once completed, the new OIS will provide updated occupational information measured and defined in a way that meets the following SSA program needs:

- The OIS will broadly describe the requirements of occupations in the national economy; it will describe the ranges in how workers within occupations carry out critical tasks associated with their critical job functions.
- The Bureau of Labor Statistics' (BLS) Occupational Requirements Survey (ORS) data will be the OIS' primary source of information on the requirements of work.
- The OIS will also incorporate data from other government surveys, including the DOL Occupational Information Network (O*NET), military occupations from the Military Occupational Classification (MOC), data from BLS' Occupational Outlook Handbook , and other sources, into a web-based, publicly available, information technology platform known as the VIT.
- We expect to update OIS data every five years.
- We plan to expand beyond DOT information by including descriptions of the basic mental and cognitive requirements of work. The earliest we would anticipate including information about the mental and cognitive demands of work is in the second release of the OIS in 2024. We are analyzing these elements for usefulness in disability adjudication.

The Occupational Requirements Survey (ORS)

In July 2012, we entered into an interagency Agreement (IAA) with the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) to test the feasibility of using their National Compensation Survey (NCS) to collect new occupational data for use in our disability adjudication process.

BLS used the NCS infrastructure to develop the ORS. Following three years of successful testing and improvements to the survey and methods, BLS began production data collection in 2015.

- We worked closely with BLS to: 1) identify the job requirements most important to us in our disability adjudication process, such as strength and other physical requirements and necessary

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disability adjudication process, such as strength and other physical requirements and necessary vocational preparation requirements, and 2) to collect and report those elements to mirror, as closely as possible, what adjudicators currently use in the DOT. However, the ORS classifies occupations more broadly than the DOT. The DOT created its own taxonomy that includes about 12,000 detailed occupations. No other Federal agencies use the DOT's taxonomy.

- BLS is using the O*NET Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) to classify the data. The SOC is the OMB-mandated classification system for Federal statistical agencies, and its use will facilitate sharing research and information among federal agencies. The SOC reflects the occupational structure of the US economy and classifies all occupations in which work is performed for pay or profit. The 2010 O*NET SOC, which BLS used for the first set of ORS data, contains 974 occupations.
- As a result, the ORS will classify occupations at a more aggregated level than in the DOT.

After 3 years of data collection, BLS published data on 397 SOCs in February 2019 collected from approximately 26,500 establishments and accounting for 90 percent of workers in the economy. BLS will not be able to capture the job requirements of all 974 SOC codes because some of the occupations are rare.

Ongoing Data Collection

Based on BLS research on the shelf life of occupational data, BLS began a five-year data refresh wave in September 2018. BLS is using a new sample design that will result in more publishable SOC-level occupations at the end of the five-year period. BLS will provide us with updated data on a continuous five-year cycle.

OIS Implementation Plan

Initially, OIS development started with the goal of supporting current policy with minimal change. However, as we analyzed and learned more about the data, SSA determined that larger changes to policy would be necessary.

In order for disability adjudicators to use the new OIS in our program, we need:

- 3 years of production data from BLS
- The Vocational Information tool (VIT)
- Revised policy and regulations

Vocational Information Tool

The OIS will combine BLS ORS data with task information from O*NET, MOC, and data from BLS' Occupational Employment Statistics into a web-based, information technology platform called the VIT.

Enhancing Occupational Data with Mental and Cognitive Work Demands

The DOT contains discrete and well-established descriptions of the physical demands of occupations, but it does not provide information on the mental and cognitive requirements. Our work with BLS allows us the unique opportunity to consider including descriptions of the mental and cognitive requirements of work in the new OIS.

To ensure that BLS collects the mental and cognitive data elements that are most useful in disability adjudication, we contacted disability program experts for help. We organized an internal workgroup of disability vocational policy experts and contracted psychiatric and psychological consultants to identify the mental and cognitive occupational descriptors that we need to adjudicate disability claims. We started with a long, all-inclusive list of job requirements and worked it down to a manageable and collectible set.

BLS started testing the collection of the new mental-cognitive elements in 2014. Following testing, we responded to feedback from BLS field economists who collected the data and worked with BLS to revise the questions. The new set of questions were developed, then tested by SSA to better define cognitive concepts, definitions and thresholds needed for adjudication.

BLS conducted a wide-scale test collection of these new questions during the third year of production data collection, which started in the fall of 2017. The testing was successful and the new questions debuted in the first year of the five-year refresh wave of data collection in Fiscal Year 2018. After BLS collects two years of the mental and cognitive data, we will evaluate how we can use the data in disability adjudication.

Our Activities in Fiscal Year 2012-2020

FY 2012

- In July 2012, we entered into an interagency Agreement (IAA) with the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) to test the feasibility of using their National Compensation Survey (NCS) to collect new occupational data for use in our disability adjudication process.

- In FY 2012 and FY 2013, we identified data elements that capture the physical demands and environmental conditions of work along with the necessary vocational preparation. We also organized an internal workgroup of disability vocational policy experts and contracted psychiatric and psychological consultants to develop data elements that describe the mental and cognitive requirements of work, which is information not contained in the DOT.

FY 2013

- In FY 2013 BLS designed and carried out a series of tests to assess the feasibility of using the National Compensation Survey (NCS) platform to collect the occupational data we need.

- BLS conducted three phases of testing which started with a small proof-of-concept collection in the Washington, DC Metro Area and expanded to a broader-scale collection across six cities.

FY 2014

- In FY 2014, BLS performed additional testing to refine protocols and methods and to ensure that they accurately and consistently capture the occupational data.
- BLS also tested the collection of the new mental and cognitive requirements of work.

FY 2015

- In FY 2015, BLS conducted a nationwide pre-production test to evaluate all aspects of the survey in preparation for production data collection, and released a limited amount of data to us. BLS also conducted further testing of the new mental and cognitive data elements and directly observed a select number of occupations to help determine the reliability and validity of the data collection methodology.
- In September 2015, BLS began the first year of ORS production data collection.

FY 2016

- In FY 2016, BLS finished collecting the first year of occupational data, started collecting the second year of production data in May, and continued analysis of the pre-production test data to improve collection methods and ensure data quality.
- BLS conducted research into the shelf life of occupational data to help us identify an appropriate update cycle that will keep our OIS current while maintaining cost efficiency.

FY 2017

- On December 1, 2016, BLS published the first year of production data.
- After extensive testing of the mental and cognitive data elements, a new set of questions were developed, to better define cognitive concepts, definitions, and thresholds needed for adjudication. BLS tested the wide-scale collection of these new questions in the third year

  (production data collection) beginning in the fall of 2017. The testing was successful and the new questions debuted in the first five-year refresh wave of data collection in FY 2018.

FY 2018

- On November 29, 2017, BLS published the data from the second year of production data collection.
- BLS completed the third year of production data and began collecting the first year of the first five-year refresh wave, which included the new mental and cognitive demands of work questions.

- BLS continued ongoing sample design research.
- We used the first two years of data to inform decisions about modernizing the medical-vocational regulations.
- We continued software development activities for the VIT platform.

FY 2019

- In FY 2019, BLS completed the first year and begin the second year of production data collection as part of the first five-year refresh wave.
- BLS published the data from the initial three-year data collection wave.
- We continued software development activities for the VIT platform.
- We continued analysis of the ORS data to determine regulatory and policy changes needed to implement it.

FY 2020

- BLS will complete the second year and begin the third year of production data collection as part of the second wave five-year update.
- BLS will publish the data from the initial year of the second wave.

More Information on the OIS project

For more information regarding the development of the OIS, please contact us at ordes.ois@ssa.gov.