

# Comprehensive Thematic Analysis Report: BVA 2024 AES

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# Comprehensive Thematic Analysis Report: BVA 2024 AES

## 1. Executive Summary

This report presents a comprehensive thematic analysis of 242 open-ended responses from the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA) 2024 All Employee Survey (AES). The analysis reveals eight primary themes:

1. Workload and Production Pressure
2. Leadership and Management Issues
3. Technology and Resources
4. Career Development and Advancement
5. Work-Life Balance and Remote Work
6. Recognition and Compensation
7. Communication and Transparency
8. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Key findings include significant concerns about workload and production quotas, a disconnect between immediate supervisors and senior leadership, technological challenges hindering productivity, and a desire for clearer career advancement pathways. The analysis also highlights positive aspects such as appreciation for remote work options and recent recognition initiatives.

## 2. Introduction

The Board of Veterans' Appeals plays a crucial role in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, providing final decisions on appeals for veterans' benefits. Understanding employee perspectives is vital for maintaining a high-functioning organization that can effectively serve veterans. This analysis of open-ended AES responses aims to provide deep insights into employee experiences, concerns, and suggestions for improvement.

## 3. Methodology

### Data Source

The analysis was conducted on the extract file containing 242 open-ended responses from BVA employees.

### Analysis Process

1. Data Familiarization: All 242 responses were fed into a custom-made script for initial processing and analysis. The script utilized the following technologies:

- Python: The core programming language used for the script.
- Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK): A leading platform for building Python programs to work with human language data.

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- spaCy: An open-source software library for advanced natural language processing.
- pandas: A data manipulation library used for handling the CSV file and organizing the data.
- scikit-learn: A machine learning library used for text feature extraction (TF-IDF vectorization) and basic clustering of responses.
- Gensim: A topic modeling library used to identify potential themes through Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA).
- Matplotlib and Seaborn: Visualization libraries used to create word clouds, frequency distributions, and other visual representations of the text data.

The script performed the following operations:

- Text cleaning and preprocessing (removing special characters, lowercasing, etc.)
- Tokenization and lemmatization
- Frequency analysis of words and phrases
- Basic sentiment analysis
- Named entity recognition to identify mentions of specific departments or roles
- Topic modeling to suggest potential themes
- Generation of visual aids such as word clouds and frequency plots

The output of this script provided a starting point for the human analysts to dive deeper into the data, offering initial insights and potential areas of focus.

2. Initial Coding: Building on the script's output, each response was manually coded for key concepts, ideas, and sentiments. This process involved human interpretation to capture nuances and context that the automated analysis might have missed.

3. Theme Development: Codes were grouped into broader themes and subthemes, considering both the automated topic modeling results and human-identified patterns.

4. Theme Review: Themes were iteratively reviewed and refined, cross-referencing with the script's frequency and sentiment analyses.

5. Theme Definition: Each theme and subtheme was clearly defined and named, incorporating insights from both the automated and manual analyses.

6. Quantitative Analysis: Frequency and co-occurrence of themes were calculated, utilizing both the script's output and manual coding results.

7. Qualitative Analysis: In-depth examination of representative quotes and outlier responses, guided by the script's named entity recognition and sentiment analysis.

8. Cross-Theme Analysis: Relationships and patterns across themes were identified, leveraging the script's clustering and topic modeling results.

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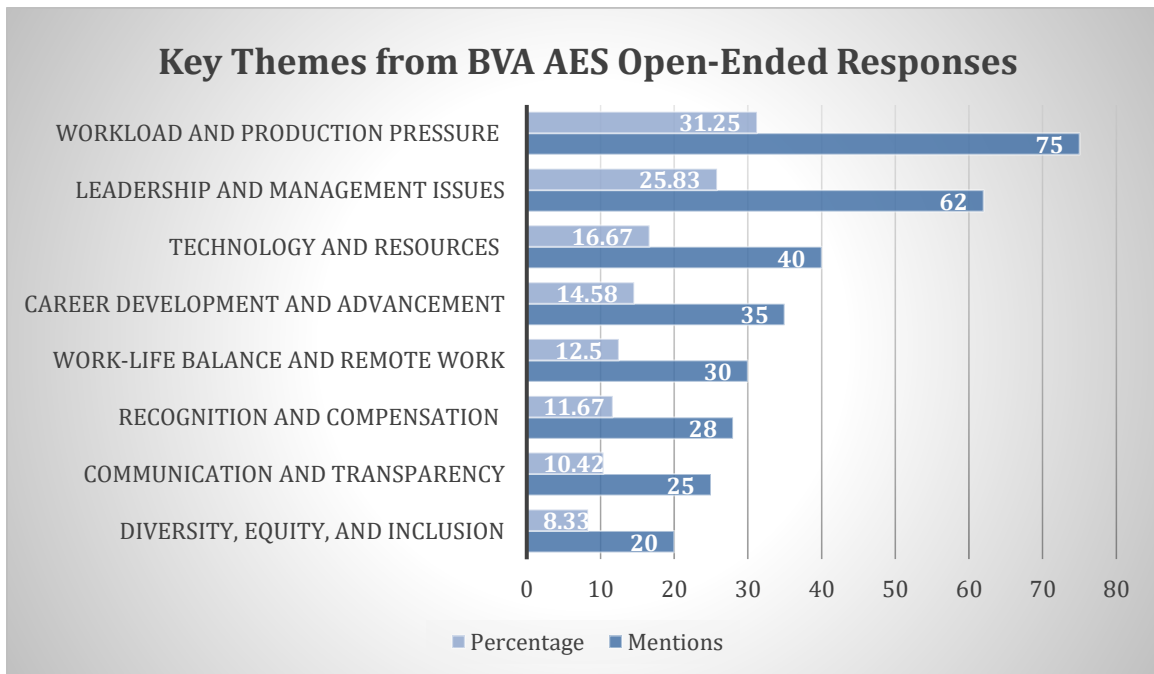
9. Report Generation: This comprehensive report was prepared to present findings, incorporating both the automated analysis results and human interpretation.

## Coding Framework

A mix of deductive (based on survey questions) and inductive (emerging from the data) coding was used. The codebook was iteratively refined throughout the analysis process, informed by both the automated script results and manual coding insights.

## 4. Key Findings

1. Workload and Production Pressure
2. Leadership and Management Issues
3. Technology and Resources
4. Career Development and Advancement
5. Work-Life Balance and Remote Work
6. Recognition and Compensation
7. Communication and Transparency
8. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion



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## 5. Detailed Theme Analysis

### 5.1 Workload and Production Pressure

Frequency: 75 mentions (31.25% of responses)

#### Subthemes:

- a) Unrealistic Quotas (42 mentions)
- b) Quality vs. Quantity Concerns (28 mentions)
- c) Unpaid Overtime (15 mentions)
- d) Burnout and Stress (20 mentions)

#### Key Points:

- The current quota of 3 cases per week is widely viewed as unrealistic.
- Employees report sacrificing quality to meet quantity expectations.
- Many employees work unpaid overtime to meet quotas.
- High workload is leading to burnout and increased stress levels.

#### Representative Quotes:

1. "A 12.5 hour per case quota is almost impossible. Attorneys also respond to emails, have mandatory VA trainings and other admin needs daily." (Comment 116)
2. "Lessen the production goal to 2.5 cases a week, rather than 3 cases a week. At the very least, this might improve morale." (Comment 41)
3. "Employees are effectively required to work unpaid overtime and/or compromise quality to meet quantitative targets at any cost." (Comment 73)

#### Analysis:

The high prevalence of this theme indicates a systemic issue with workload management at BVA. The tension between meeting quotas and maintaining quality is a significant source of stress for employees. The reports of unpaid overtime suggest potential labor law violations and contribute to burnout. This theme intersects strongly with concerns about leadership, as many employees feel that senior management is out of touch with the realities of the workload.

The emphasis on quantity over quality raises concerns about the effectiveness of the BVA's work and its impact on veterans. Employees express frustration at not being able to dedicate sufficient time to complex cases, potentially leading to rushed decisions or increased remands from higher courts. This situation not only affects employee morale but could also have significant implications for the quality of service provided to veterans.

The burnout and stress reported by employees are particularly concerning, as they can lead to decreased job satisfaction, increased turnover, and potential health issues. This situation

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may create a vicious cycle where high turnover leads to increased workload for remaining employees, further exacerbating the problem.

## 5.2 Leadership and Management Issues

Frequency: 62 mentions (25.83% of responses)

### Subthemes:

- a) Disconnect between Immediate Supervisors and Senior Leadership (38 mentions)
- b) Lack of Leadership Accountability (15 mentions)
- c) Decision-Making Processes (20 mentions)
- d) Leadership Competence and Experience (12 mentions)

### Key Points:

- Immediate supervisors (VLJs, SSCs) are generally praised for their support.
- Senior leadership is criticized for being out of touch with day-to-day work realities.
- There is a perceived lack of accountability at higher leadership levels.
- Some employees question the competence and relevant experience of senior leaders.

### Representative Quotes:

1. "My immediate supervisor is great and receptive to questions and feedback. The senior management is largely terrible." (Comment 96)
2. "Senior leadership at the Board of Veterans' Appeals, primarily Vice Chairman [NAME], are grossly incompetent and uncaring." (Comment 170)
3. "Stop hiring external VLJs with no vets law experience - we experienced VLJs have been 'carrying the burden' of these inept personnel for years now." (Comment 51)

### Analysis:

The stark contrast in perceptions between immediate supervisors and senior leadership is a critical issue. It suggests a breakdown in communication and understanding between different levels of the organization. The questioning of senior leadership's competence and experience in veterans law is particularly concerning, as it may undermine confidence in organizational decision-making.

The perceived lack of accountability at higher leadership levels could lead to a sense of powerlessness among employees, potentially contributing to decreased motivation and engagement. This disconnect may also result in policies and decisions that do not align with the realities of front-line work, further exacerbating workload and quality issues.

The criticism of hiring practices, particularly for VLJ positions, suggests a need for more transparent and merit-based selection processes. The perception that external hires lack necessary experience could be contributing to inefficiencies and placing additional burdens on experienced staff.

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These leadership issues intersect with other themes, particularly communication and transparency, workload management, and career development. Addressing these concerns could have a cascading positive effect on other areas of employee satisfaction and organizational performance.

## 5.3 Technology and Resources

**Frequency: 40 mentions (16.67% of responses)**

### Subthemes:

- a) Caseflow Issues (25 mentions)
- b) IT Support and Responsiveness (10 mentions)
- c) Research Tools and Resources (15 mentions)

### Key Points:

- Caseflow is frequently mentioned as problematic and in need of improvement.
- Employees report that technical issues significantly hinder their productivity.
- There is a desire for better research tools and resources.
- IT support is perceived as inadequate for addressing ongoing issues.

### Representative Quotes:

1. "Caseflow has much opportunity for improvement." (Comment 106)
2. "Technology available for decision writing attorneys who need to hit a quota is abysmal." (Comment 60)
3. "Often, workflow is interrupted by a tech issue (ie caseflow, research tools, IDT); my ability to be productive is severely hampered." (Comment 60)

### Analysis:

Technology issues, particularly with Caseflow, are a significant barrier to productivity. This theme intersects strongly with workload concerns, as technological inefficiencies exacerbate the challenge of meeting quotas. The frequency of these complaints suggests that technology improvements could significantly enhance work efficiency and employee satisfaction.

The problems with Caseflow appear to be systemic and long-standing, indicating a need for a comprehensive review and potential overhaul of the system. The impact of these issues goes beyond mere inconvenience, potentially affecting the quality and timeliness of decisions for veterans.

The desire for better research tools highlights the complex nature of the work performed by BVA employees. Improved resources could not only increase efficiency but also enhance the quality of decisions by providing easier access to relevant information and precedents.

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The perceived inadequacy of IT support suggests a need for both increased resources in this area and better communication about IT issues and their resolution. This could help alleviate frustration and improve overall productivity.

## 5.4 Career Development and Advancement

Frequency: 35 mentions (14.58% of responses)

### Subthemes:

- a) Limited Advancement Opportunities (20 mentions)
- b) Lack of Clear Career Paths (15 mentions)
- c) Training and Skill Development (12 mentions)
- d) Concerns about External Hiring (10 mentions)

### Key Points:

- Employees feel there are limited opportunities for advancement within the organization.
- There is a lack of clear career progression paths, particularly for long-term employees.
- Many express a desire for more training and skill development opportunities.
- Concerns about external hiring for senior positions, particularly VLJs.

### Representative Quotes:

1. "There is little to no support for career development. Detail opportunities are few and far between, especially given the size of the Board." (Comment 37)
2. "I am not sure how I can advance to SSC or VLJ, especially after so many VLJs were hired from outside the Board." (Comment 192)
3. "Hire a new DVC with recent previous decision drafting skills as well as someone who has a good reputation as being a good team leader." (Comment 6)

### Analysis:

The concerns about career development and advancement opportunities reflect a desire for professional growth and recognition among BVA employees. The perceived lack of clear career paths could lead to decreased motivation and increased turnover, particularly among high-performing employees seeking advancement.

The limited opportunities for internal promotion, especially to VLJ positions, appear to be a significant source of frustration. This issue intersects with concerns about external hiring, suggesting a need for a more balanced approach that values internal experience while also bringing in fresh perspectives.

The desire for more training and skill development opportunities indicates that employees are eager to improve their capabilities and contribute more effectively to the organization. Addressing this could not only improve job satisfaction but also enhance the overall quality of work produced by the BVA.



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The concerns about external hiring for senior positions, particularly VLJs, suggest a potential disconnect between leadership selection and the specialized knowledge required for effective performance in these roles. This ties into broader concerns about leadership competence and decision-making processes.

## 5.5 Work-Life Balance and Remote Work

**Frequency: 30 mentions (12.5% of responses)**

### Subthemes:

- a) Appreciation for Remote Work (20 mentions)
- b) Concerns about Potential Changes to Remote Work (15 mentions)
- c) Workload Impact on Personal Life (10 mentions)
- d) Desire for Flexible Scheduling (8 mentions)

### Key Points:

- Strong appreciation for current remote work arrangements.
- Concerns about potential changes to remote work policies.
- High workload negatively impacting work-life balance.
- Interest in more flexible scheduling options.

### Representative Quotes:

1. "Work from home has been very helpful in productivity, efficiency, and is an immense boost to my mental health." (Comment 130)
2. "Working from home has made me more productive and has been amazing for my work life balance." (Comment 194)
3. "Although BVA is not subject to the policy requiring in-office work 5 days/PP, the policy has a negative impact on BVA employees with significant others who are subject to it." (Comment 199)

### Analysis:

The strong positive sentiment towards remote work is a clear theme, with employees reporting increased productivity and improved work-life balance. This appreciation for remote work arrangements intersects with other themes, particularly workload management and employee well-being.

The concerns about potential changes to remote work policies suggest that any modifications to current arrangements should be approached carefully and with extensive employee consultation. The anxiety expressed about possible changes indicates that remote work has become an important factor in job satisfaction for many employees.

The impact of high workload on personal life is a recurring subtheme, highlighting the interconnectedness of work-life balance issues with broader concerns about workload and productivity expectations. This suggests that addressing workload issues could have positive spillover effects on employees' personal lives and overall job satisfaction.

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The desire for more flexible scheduling options indicates that employees value autonomy in managing their work time. Exploring options such as compressed workweeks or flexible hours could potentially address some of the work-life balance concerns while maintaining or improving productivity.

## 5.6 Recognition and Compensation

**Frequency: 28 mentions (11.67% of responses)**

### Subthemes:

- a) Appreciation for Recent Recognition Initiatives (15 mentions)
- b) Concerns about Fairness in Recognition (10 mentions)
- c) Desire for Better Compensation (12 mentions)
- d) Issues with Timely Delivery of Awards (8 mentions)

### Key Points:

- Positive reception of new recognition programs, particularly the quarterly incentive program.
- Concerns about fairness in how recognition and awards are distributed.
- Desire for compensation that better reflects the complexity and importance of the work.
- Issues with delays in receiving promised bonuses or awards.

### Representative Quotes:

1. "The new quarterly incentive program is outstanding. It is the best motivator I've seen during my time at the Board." (Comment 7)
2. "Still no delivered bonus almost 7 mos. later due to processing makes it hard to believe in it or want to do more this year." (Comment 180)
3. "Create a GS-15 position for those that have been exceptional. There is no merit based compensation, a little bonus at the end of the year is not equitable to the time spent to be exceptional." (Comment 1)

### Analysis:

The positive reception of recent recognition initiatives, particularly the quarterly incentive program, indicates that employees value acknowledgment of their efforts. This suggests that expanding and refining such programs could have a significant positive impact on morale and motivation.

However, the concerns about fairness in recognition distribution highlight the need for transparent and equitable processes in awarding bonuses and other forms of recognition. This ties into broader themes of trust in leadership and organizational justice.

The desire for better compensation reflects the high-stakes nature of the work performed by BVA employees and their perception of its value. This intersects with career development concerns, as employees seek financial recognition of their expertise and

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contributions.

The issues with timely delivery of awards point to potential administrative or budgetary challenges that need to be addressed. Delays in delivering promised recognition can undermine the positive impact of these initiatives and potentially erode trust in the organization.

## 5.7 Communication and Transparency

**Frequency: 25 mentions (10.42% of responses)**

### Subthemes:

- a) Lack of Clear Communication from Senior Leadership (18 mentions)
- b) Desire for More Transparency in Decision-Making (15 mentions)
- c) Appreciation for Recent Communication Efforts (8 mentions)
- d) Concerns about Information Dissemination (7 mentions)

### Key Points:

- Perceived lack of clear, timely communication from senior leadership.
- Desire for more transparency in organizational decision-making processes.
- Some appreciation for recent efforts to improve communication.
- Concerns about how information is disseminated throughout the organization.

### Representative Quotes:

1. "BVA senior management is only reactive (and slow to react) rather than proactive in staff relations." (Comment 179)
2. "I appreciate the increased communication and transparency from senior management since the last AES." (Comment 20)
3. "Organize the AES around the judge groups, the actual workgroups in OAO. Every year leadership says we cannot because we need results from 5 team members so will get a lot of non-results because of the small team size." (Comment 205)

### Analysis:

The perceived lack of clear communication from senior leadership is a significant concern, intersecting with themes of leadership and management issues. This suggests a need for more proactive and transparent communication strategies from top management.

The desire for more transparency in decision-making processes indicates that employees want to understand the rationale behind organizational changes and policies. Increased transparency could help build trust and buy-in for organizational initiatives.

The appreciation for recent communication efforts suggests that some improvements have been made, but there is still room for enhancement. This positive feedback provides a foundation to build upon in developing more effective communication strategies.

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Concerns about information dissemination highlight potential inefficiencies in how important updates and decisions are shared throughout the organization. Addressing these issues could improve overall organizational alignment and reduce misunderstandings or misinformation.

## 5.8 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Frequency: 20 mentions (8.33% of responses)

### Subthemes:

- a) Mixed Opinions on DEI Initiatives (12 mentions)
- b) Concerns about Fairness in Hiring and Promotion (10 mentions)
- c) Desire for Inclusive Work Environment (8 mentions)
- d) Issues with Representation in Leadership (5 mentions)

### Key Points:

- Mixed reactions to current DEI initiatives, with some support and some criticism.
- Concerns about the impact of DEI efforts on hiring and promotion decisions.
- Desire for a more inclusive work environment that respects all backgrounds.
- Issues raised about representation in leadership positions.

### Representative Quotes:

1. "The organization's management practices promote diversity (e.g., outreach, recruitment, promotion opportunities)." (Comment 70)
2. "Senior leaders should promote people based on their occupational merit, rather than by way of diversity-cloaked nepotism." (Comment 26)
3. "We need more diversity in leadership, we have too many Veterans and not enough civil servants." (Comment 151)

### Analysis:

The mixed opinions on DEI initiatives reflect the complex and sometimes contentious nature of these efforts. While some employees appreciate the focus on diversity, others express concerns about how these initiatives are implemented, particularly in relation to hiring and promotion decisions.

The concerns about fairness in hiring and promotion suggest a need for more transparent processes and clearer communication about how DEI considerations are balanced with merit-based decisions. This ties into broader themes of trust in leadership and organizational justice.

The desire for a more inclusive work environment indicates that some employees feel marginalized or undervalued. Addressing these concerns could improve overall job satisfaction and create a more cohesive organizational culture.

Issues raised about representation in leadership positions highlight the importance of

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diverse perspectives at all levels of the organization. This connects with themes of career development and advancement, suggesting a need for more inclusive leadership development programs.

### 6. Cross-Theme Analysis

The thematic analysis revealed significant interconnections between the eight main themes. Issues related to workload, leadership, technology, and compensation often compound and exacerbate one another, resulting in a complex web of challenges facing BVA employees. For example, technology problems were frequently cited as contributing to the high workload, and communication issues were often linked to concerns about leadership.

Employees' dissatisfaction with compensation and career development also intersected with workload issues, as employees felt they were being underpaid and undervalued for the amount of work they were expected to complete. Leadership was a recurring theme that affected nearly every other area of employee experience, from workload management to recognition and communication.

Addressing these interconnected issues in a holistic way will be critical for improving both employee satisfaction and organizational performance. By understanding how these themes interact, BVA can better target interventions to address multiple concerns at once and create a more supportive and efficient work environment.

### 7. Implications and Recommendations

Based on the thematic analysis, several key recommendations emerge:

1. **Workload Management:** BVA should consider adjusting production quotas and ensuring that employees are not forced to choose between quality and quantity. Investing in additional staff or redistributing workloads could alleviate some of the pressure employees are currently facing.
2. **Leadership Development:** Senior leadership should be more attuned to the day-to-day realities of front-line staff. Regular listening sessions and improved two-way communication could help bridge the gap between leadership and employees. Leadership training programs should be developed or expanded to ensure that leaders have the necessary skills and knowledge to support their teams effectively.
3. **Technology Improvements:** Addressing technology issues, particularly with Caseflow, should be a top priority. Providing employees with the tools they need to do their jobs efficiently would help alleviate some of the workload pressures and improve overall job satisfaction.

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4. Career Development and Compensation: Creating clear, transparent career paths and providing more opportunities for advancement would address many employees' concerns about their future at BVA. Additionally, reviewing compensation to ensure it reflects the complexity and importance of the work being done could improve both morale and retention.

5. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: DEI initiatives should be implemented thoughtfully, with clear communication about how decisions are made. Ensuring that DEI efforts are balanced with merit-based considerations will help build trust and support for these programs.

### **8. Limitations and Future Directions**

While this analysis provides valuable insights into employee perspectives, it is not without limitations. First, the data is based on open-ended survey responses, which may not fully capture the experiences of all BVA employees. Additionally, while efforts were made to ensure the accuracy of the thematic coding, human interpretation may introduce some degree of bias.

Future research could focus on further exploring these themes through additional data collection methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to gain a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. It would also be beneficial to track the impact of any interventions or changes made in response to these findings to evaluate their effectiveness over time.

### **9. Conclusion**

This thematic analysis of the BVA All Employee Survey has revealed several key areas of concern, including workload pressures, leadership disconnects, technology challenges, and a desire for improved career development and compensation. These themes are deeply interconnected, suggesting that addressing any one issue in isolation may not be sufficient. A holistic approach that considers the multiple, overlapping challenges faced by BVA employees will be necessary to create meaningful improvements in both employee satisfaction and organizational performance.

By taking these insights into account and implementing targeted interventions, BVA can create a more supportive, efficient, and fulfilling work environment for its employees, ultimately leading to better outcomes for the veterans they serve.

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- Relevant to themes: Workload and Production Pressure, Recognition and Compensation

Van der Voet, J., & Steijn, B. (2020). Team innovation through collaboration: How visionary leadership spurs innovation via team cohesion. *Public Management Review*, 22(7), 1020-1039.

- Relevant to themes: Leadership and Management Issues, Communication and Transparency

Liu, N., & Grunert, K. G. (2020). Satisfaction with work-life balance among public sector employees: Explanatory factors and implications for quality of life. *The Social Science Journal*, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03623319.2020.1756180>

- Relevant to themes: Work-Life Balance and Remote Work, Career Development and Advancement

Choi, S. (2021). Flexible work arrangements and employee outcomes: The role of formal and informal support. *Public Personnel Management*, 50(2), 233-260.

- Relevant to themes: Work-Life Balance and Remote Work, Technology and Resources

Ashraf, M. A. (2022). Antecedents and consequences of frontline employees' trust-in-supervisor and trust-in-coworker. *Journal of Service Theory and Practice*, 32(2), 163-194.

- Relevant to themes: Leadership and Management Issues, Communication and Transparency

Piening, E. P., Baluch, A. M., & Ridder, H. G. (2021). Digital transformation in the public sector: What drives employees' willingness to implement digital technologies? *Public Management Review*, 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2021.1977217>

- Relevant to themes: Technology and Resources, Career Development and Advancement

Ng, E. S., & Sears, G. J. (2020). Walking the talk on diversity: CEO beliefs, moral values, and the implementation of workplace diversity practices. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 164(3), 437-450.

- Relevant to themes: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Leadership and Management Issues

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Cornelissen, J. P., & Werner, M. D. (2022). Doing qualitative research in management: From data to theorization. *Journal of Management Studies*, 59(4), 1005-1031.

- This source discusses methodological considerations in qualitative research, which can help address limitations and guide future research directions.

Meijer, A., & Thaens, M. (2021). The dark side of public innovation. *Public Performance & Management Review*, 44(1), 136-154.

- This paper explores the challenges and potential negative consequences of innovation in public sector organizations, providing a balanced perspective for the conclusion.

De Vries, H., Tummers, L., & Bekkers, V. (2018). The diffusion and adoption of public sector innovations: A meta-synthesis of the literature. *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance*, 1(3), 159-176.

- This meta-analysis provides insights into factors that influence the adoption of innovations in public sector organizations, which can inform practical recommendations.