

# Key Digital Skills for Broadband

This is one of a series of short explainers about high-speed Internet access issues. The full series is available [here](#).

## BACKGROUND

As technology and Internet-connected devices become more integrated into daily life, there is a tendency to assume that everyone has a certain base level of proficiency. But the reality is that even if we can achieve universal broadband availability, affordability, and device distribution, a lack of digital skills will leave millions of people unable to benefit from those successes. From navigating websites, to using a word processor, to assessing the reliability of information online, digital skills building is fundamental to ensuring equitable access to technology and the Internet, and is a central component to digital inclusion efforts in communities across the country.

For those who lack the resources or access to build their digital skill sets, the learning curve is steep. If we don't address this inequity, these members of our communities risk falling further behind and will find it increasingly difficult to fully participate in society, no matter how fast and affordable their broadband connection is, or how many devices they have.

Recent data from the [Pew Research Center](#) shows progress in closing the digital divide for adults age 65 and older (compared to younger age groups), with gaps in device ownership, Internet usage, and social media participation all shrinking over the past decade. Yet, a lack of digital skills still limits many older adults from confidently and securely leveraging new technologies.

## THE PROBLEM

Building digital skills requires well-crafted programs and ongoing work. Some have described this challenge as building "digital literacy," but given how fast the digital world changes, the simple term "literacy" may not be as useful as a digital skills frame. Consider these factors when building digital skills development programs:

- Know your audience and intended outcomes –Digital skills building can range widely from introductory skills to highly specific and technical expertise. Having a general understanding of the incoming knowledge base and needs of participants will ensure that the materials and learning objectives are properly calibrated to the audience. Many digital skills providers, like the [Chicago Public Library](#), categorize materials based on experience level or specific learning objectives to help direct users to the resources that match their needs. Some of the most common audiences for digital skills training include older adults, new Americans, job seekers looking to retrain or add to existing skill sets, adult education students, justice-involved individuals (including currently and formerly incarcerated persons), and public housing residents.

Research has found that older adults face some distinct challenges when learning digital skills, including physical

and cognitive difficulties and beginning with lower levels of comfort and confidence in their ability to learn new technologies. Significant research has been conducted and numerous models developed to meet these needs, including by the Older Adults Technology Service of AARP (see National Resource Spotlight for more info), and a practitioners guide book called "[Designing Training and Instructional Programs for Older Adults.](#)"

- Connection and support–Digital skills programs should strive to meet users where they are–both in providing resources appropriate to their skill level, and in the physical spaces and through the networks with which they are already familiar. Working with trusted community partners for outreach and recruiting participants will lend credibility to the program. It is even better if the training occurs at a location where participants already frequent (e.g., senior centers, places of worship, or service organizations).

Formally trained [Digital Navigators](#) can be invaluable in assembling and sustaining successful skills-building programs. Their role is to operate at the intersection of technology and digital inclusion, community-based organizations, and the broader community. Digital Navigators often work on a one-on-one basis, both

teaching skills and connecting people with the resources to meet their needs.

Following completion of any digital skills training, it is also key to provide users with ongoing technical support and opportunities to continue advancing their skills and answering follow-up questions, whether through the training provider or through another organization. Digital Navigators serve as the point of connection to the broader digital inclusion community and can help participants access additional resources, while revising the program to be more successful down the road.

For instance, after implementing a successful Digital Navigator program, the Salt Lake City Public Library, working with the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA), the Urban Libraries Council, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, published a **Digital Navigators Toolkit** with key findings from the pilot program and guidance for communities to implement their own programs.

## TYPES/CATEGORIES OF DIGITAL SKILLS

- Computer use - key components, mouse & keyboard use
- Operating system basics - navigation, creating, managing and organizing files
- Using an Internet browser
- Creating and using an email account
- Introduction to social media platforms - Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn
- Connecting virtually - video calls (Zoom, Teams, FB Messenger), chat
- Intro to key software - Microsoft Office, Google Productivity Suite
- Online finances - managing bank and other online accounts, making online purchases
- Privacy, security and data protection
- Troubleshooting and finding help
- Finding trusted sources for additional learning

## COMMUNITY PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

### Seniors 2 Seniors Program - Tri-Co Connections

Potter County, PA

Upon rolling out fiber-to-the-home service to customers, Tri-Co Connections, the broadband arm of Tri-County Rural Electric Cooperative in Northern Pennsylvania, recognized a technology knowledge gap among their large older adult member base. In response, it worked with local education partners and the area agency on aging to launch the Seniors 2 Seniors Program. The program delivers instructor-led, hands-on computer skills and Internet basics training for older adults, who are partnered with high school seniors for in-class support. The high school students receive school credit, and the program participants gain vital digital skills all while strengthening social connections and bridging generational divides. The Mount Washington

Valley Age-Friendly Community and Gibson Center for Senior Services iterated on the Seniors 2 Seniors Program and is highlighted in the **Expanding Device Availability for Broadband** fact sheet.

## KEY CONTACTS & RESOURCES

The following are some types of organizations that frequently offer digital skills training, serve as a host location, or help to connect participants to training programs. In fact, some organizations serve two or even all three of these roles.

- Libraries
- Educational institutions (school districts, colleges & universities, career tech/trade/vocational schools)
- Community and senior centers
- Direct service providers to older adults, persons with physical or cognitive difficulties, veterans, immigrants and refugees
- Goodwill Industries
- Workforce development organizations
- Public housing authorities

## NATIONAL RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

- OATS (Older Adults Technology Services) from AARP

The mission of OATS is to harness the power of technology to change the way we age.

**OATS** provides high-quality learning programs, information, and direct support through its flagship program Senior Planet to help people aged 60 and older understand and effectively use mainstream technology and digital tools and resources in order to produce measurable gains in their health, economic security, social engagement, and civic participation.

The Senior Planet social impact model consists of free multi-week courses, offered in multiple languages, in small classes taught by a professional trainer.

- Designed with and for older adults
- Mainstream devices and application
- Emphasis on partnerships

While OATS does teach free technology classes to older adults, the organization is not only about technology. The organization sees technology as an entry point for myriad conversations and collaborations with older adults seeking change in their lives. OATS provides an experience for older adults seeking to achieve their potential or learn new skills. OATS also participates in a wide range of commissions, policy councils, and advisory boards across the United States.

- National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA)–[Digital Inclusion Startup Manual](#) (Chapter 4)

The Digital Inclusion Startup Manual (Chapter 4) from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) offers a comprehensive look at what it takes to start up a digital literacy training program. It offers guidance on target audience, finding instructors, developing a curriculum, and provides a list of free digital skills training materials to get started.

## ACTION STEPS

Policymakers and philanthropy should be funding digital skills training programs to help ensure underserved populations, including older adults, are able to take advantage of more technology and unlock the value of adopting Internet-based tools and games. The Infrastructure and Investment Jobs Act has appropriated billions of dollars that will be available for several years to directly fund these programs.

When designing these programs, the format of the training events is key to a program's success. Some of the factors to consider when developing digital skills training include:

The type of instruction for a training course will likely be determined by a combination of need, audience size, and availability of resources. Having a professional instructor from the technology or education sector may be ideal, but it can be expensive and may limit the number of participants. Courses that meet over a period of weeks or months and progressively build skills from one session to the next are best structured as instructor-led courses, where the instructor can monitor and support the progress of participants throughout the course. Some programs utilize volunteers either instead of or to supplement a paid instructor to expand program capacity and provide additional support to participants.

Some organizations do offer one-on-one digital skills training, and whether scheduled or ad-hoc (e.g., ask-a-librarian) sessions, these tend to be more targeted toward a specific need as opposed to broad skill-building courses.

As an alternative to instructor-led courses, self-paced online courses can work well for users who have a basic foundation of digital skills and are comfortable navigating the Internet. These are often modular in format, allowing participants to hone in on specific skills they are interested in learning. Self-paced online resources can also reach a much wider audience, since they can be accessed at any time and are not limited by class size.

Many digital skills participants understandably prefer in-person training, at least initially, as they build comfort and familiarity with operating a computer and accessing digital resources. Hands-on support from instructors and volunteers is key to building confidence and overcoming challenges. However, like everyone, digital skills programs had to adapt to the Covid-19 pandemic. Not only have they adapted in-person trainings to an online setting, but many have also created trainings specifically for needs that arose because of social distancing and shut-downs, such as courses on holding Zoom calls, online grocery shopping, and accessing telehealth resources.

Multilingual resources are important. New Americans are a key target audience for digital skill-building programs, and many immigrant- and refugee-serving organizations already provide courses or other materials. Whether or not they already offer training, organizations that serve immigrant communities can offer advice about which languages should be offered, and may be able to assist with securing instructors or translation services.

### ABOUT ILSR

The Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR) is a 48-year-old national nonprofit research and educational organization. ILSR's mission is to provide innovative strategies, working models, and timely information to support strong, community rooted, environmentally sound, and equitable local economies. To this end, ILSR works with citizens, policymakers, and businesses to design systems, policies, and enterprises that meet local needs, to maximize human, material, natural, and financial resources, and to ensure that the benefits of these systems and resources accrue to all local citizens. Learn more at [www.ilsr.org](http://www.ilsr.org).

### ABOUT NDIA

NDIA advances digital equity by supporting community programs and equipping policymakers to act. Working collaboratively with more than 700 digital inclusion practitioners in 47 states, NDIA advocates for broadband access, tech devices, digital skills training, and tech support. NDIA combines grassroots community engagement with technical knowledge, research, and coalition building to advocate on behalf of people working in their communities for digital equity. Join the NDIA community as a friend, champion, or ally and get the benefits of connecting with your fellow digital inclusion community members. Find out more at [digitalinclusion.org](http://digitalinclusion.org).

### ABOUT AARP

AARP is the United States' largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering people 50 or older to choose how they live as they age. With nearly 38 million members and offices in every state, Washington D.C., Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, AARP strengthens communities and advocates for what matters most to families, with a focus on health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment. The AARP Livable Communities initiative supports the efforts of local leaders and residents throughout the nation to make their communities more livable and age-friendly. Its programs include the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities and the annual AARP Community Challenge "quick-action" grant program. Learn more at [AARP.org/Livable](http://AARP.org/Livable) and by signing up for the free, weekly AARP Livable Communities e-Newsletter at [AARP.org/LivableSubscribe](http://AARP.org/LivableSubscribe).

APRIL, 2022