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Digital Literacy Becoming Essential for Job Hunters

By: Wilford Shamlin III | September 27, 2013

Digital literacy will become so important in American society that it will soon be impossible to function without basic proficiency in technology, affecting the ability to find and keep gainful employment, a literacy expert said Thursday.

In a world where paperless transactions are becoming the normal way of business, Dr. Judith Renyi, executive director of the Philadelphia Mayor's Commission on Literacy, said, "Very soon you won't be able to function at any level without digital literacy."

Up to 65 percent of working adults lack the crucial and basic technology skills expected in nearly all jobs, according to the Commission on Literacy. This affects employees who have worked for years but lost their job due to changes in their industries and find themselves lacking the technology skills that are part of basic job requirements and also necessary to search and apply for jobs.

"If you don't have digital literacy, you can't find a job, you can't apply for a job, you can't sustain a job," said Renyi, who oversees the panel charged with improving literacy and digital literacy among an estimated 550,000 Philadelphians at least 16 years old and out of school but do not have literacy skills necessary to pass employment or college entrance tests.



James Quick meets with Terry Decker, a tutor for the Mayor's Commission on Literacy, in June at the Queen Village office of Ready, Willing and Able, an organization that provides education and job placement services for homeless men. — PHOTO BY ANDREW HUTH, MAYOR'S COMMISSION ON LITERACY

"Just about anything you're going to do in life, you're going to need these skills," she said. Digital skills are essential in not only searching for a job but finding suitable work that provides enough income to sustain a family, but Renyi said knowledge and proficiency in technology can mean spending less time on routine tasks such as paying bills, which can be handled through electronic transactions, including online banking accounts and smartphone apps.

According to the commission, helping more residents achieve higher levels of education and digital literacy is good for the economy because they are able to find better paying jobs and wean themselves from government assistance programs for income, housing, health care and social services. National Adult Education and Family Literacy Week concludes Sunday, just as new findings in an international assessment of adult skills and literacy in the U.S. are due out, the first such examination in more than a decade.

For individuals who want higher paying jobs, Renyi said post-secondary training or education is required, in addition to a high school diploma, or the equivalent.

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About 82 percent of job seekers who were tested at PA Career Links employment centers “are functioning at 5th to 8th grade levels of reading, writing and math,” according to the commission.

Entrance exams for job training are set at the 10th grade reading, writing and math, so anyone who wants to pursue post-secondary training and education must be proficient in basic skills at the 10th grade level or higher. The commission has found that “many adults who have a high school diploma or GED fail these tests and need refresher programs to prepare for jobs and post-secondary testing.”

Others who lack digital literacy are about 200,000 people with criminal records seeking re-entry into the community. According to the commission, tests show that “they are testing even lower than average citizens on reading, writing, and math,” and their basic skills are on par with a student in the third-grade, or lower.

In Philadelphia, 15,000 students each year drop out of high school but only 1,700 obtain their GED, and that means 13,000 people each year lack a high school diploma or GED. Add to that, lack of Internet access at home for 43 percent of Philadelphia residents in a city that has a poverty rate that is second only to Detroit at about 28 percent, according to the latest figures. That’s nearly double the national average.

Mayor Michael Nutter sees the commission’s work on improving overall literacy in Philadelphia as a key element in a strategy to reduce poverty and crime.

LeeRoy Jordan, program director for Ready, Willing & Able (RWA), said there’s heavy emphasis on education for homeless men who participate in the program. Many of them have been imprisoned and addicted to drugs or alcohol. Some participants lag too far behind in their education to earn their GED during their 12-month stay in the job training and placement program in Queen Village but all participants are encouraged to work to improve themselves. Jordan said that all participants must take a 16-week computer course that helps familiarize them with standard software and technology including tools like an e-mail account.

“We take people from here who are nonliterate to being able to do Power Point presentations. Paper applications are going the way of the dinosaurs. You’ve got to be able to apply online. That’s a big part of what a [RWA] graduate does and what he looks like,” Jordan said, noting that RWA has a 100 percent job placement rate for program participants. “A big part of that is getting a job no matter what their rap sheet looks like.”

Martin Finsterbusch, president of the National Coalition for Literacy, said in prepared remarks, “We know that investing in adult education pays, not only for learners, but for the communities, states and country in which they reside. We urge Congress and state legislatures to ensure all adults who need services can access them by investing more in adult education.”

Advances in digital technology are passing many people by, and those are the ones who worry Renyi most. She said some people are taking public transportation and spending hours to conduct personal business when there’s technology that enables them to complete business transactions around the clock using their laptops, smartphones, tablets and other devices.

Renyi said literacy also includes developing critical thinking skills, which involve using the best keyword searches, knowing when a web site is inappropriate or untrustworthy, and evaluating validity of web sites and information culled from the Internet.