

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The digital skills divide is a global problem, one that requires more than just one group getting involved to help solve it. We have a new report out from the Digital Resilience in the American Workforce initiative, otherwise known as DRAW. Joining me now to talk about it is Alison Ascher Webber, a director with the EdTech Center at World Education. Alison, thank you for joining me.

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

Thank you for having me, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You've done a scan. You've looked around the country. Tell me what you can about what that digital skills gap looks like.

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

Over the last few years, since the pandemic, we've heard a lot about the digital divide and there's been a lot of great work and solutions. And I think what's really important to see from our research is that despite all this effort, we still have over 30 million adults that are struggling to even learn to use technology of any kind. And this is really shocking and upsetting to me that new data from the 2021 NTI internet use survey shows that despite all the efforts, the attention the digital divide has gotten, we've only seen a 1% increase between 2019 and 2021 in the, who has access to the internet. And so we know who has, and this goes from 79%, just to 80%. So that's 20% of our population that still doesn't have internet. And I mentioned our struggling to learn, to even use a basic technology.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So let me ask you this. When you say they don't have access, what is keeping them from access? Is it money? Is it location or combination?

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

So it's certainly a combination. We, the digital divides of, for example, access to internet devices and more continues to reflect. And of course it's exacerbating existing inequalities when you analyze it by race economic and other demographic factors. Certainly it's harder to have the infrastructure in rural areas. And a lot of funding fortunately, will be going to that in the infrastructure spending. However, it comes down to being a people problem. This is not an infrastructure problem. It's a people problem. The inequities never society have decided to leave people behind and not prioritize creating opportunities, accessible opportunities for the 32 million that don't know how to use a computer or the 20% of our populations that don't have internet to get the supports they need to learn why it's important, how it could help them.

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

So part of it's the understanding of why it's important and that they have supports and can feel confident that they can use it. But then there's this whole component of cost for many Americans, just the cost of the internet, the cost of the device is a big barrier. And I think that shows that it's not just infrastructure when a larger number are in urban areas of who actually doesn't use the internet.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That's what I was actually going to bring up is that I remember reading. And I think I read some of it in your report as well that it's not just the rural area.

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

Statistic can be surprising to many of us who perhaps thought of that digital divides existing more in the rural areas, but actually 76% of households without home internet are in urban areas, primarily in low income neighborhoods, disproportionately affecting people of color. A recent report also showed that how many households lost internet during the pandemic at a time when it was most needed because they weren't able to pay for it. So there are interventions helping from the federal government to reimburse internet or make it more affordable. And we applaud those at the same time. There have to be personal human interventions out in the communities to help people understand the power of the internet, where and how they can get affordable devices or even loan devices from their libraries. And all those kind of personal human centered interventions are needed. In addition to the support with paying for technology and internet.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That sounds like a public private collaboration. Then it's like the public funding stepping into help. But where do you get that personal intervention who can lead that charge?

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

One thing we found in our [inaudible 00:05:06] was the importance of a personal connection and trust with the individuals who are not yet accessing the internet or are still developing foundational digital literacy. What we found is that embedding supports for digital nav, what we call digital navigation services. So help gaining access to the internet, a plan, a device, whether it's loaned or given or affordable to purchase and the supports to learn how to use it instead of hiring someone new or sending someone to a new program to do that, it's most important to embed that in locations and services that people are already trusting and using. So for example, when someone goes to a health clinic, when someone goes to an adult education program, when someone goes to their children's school, those are all touch points that need to be leveraged to support individuals. And so, interestingly, it's not about hiring a whole new diverse workforce to walk the streets and ask, do you have internet?

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

It's actually training and equipping and providing the funding to existing social service programs, existing education and workforce programs to embed those supports within their services. I mean, no one should come to an adult education program or a workforce program and be served more than I would say. We can argue about this four or six hours and not already have had their digital inclusions needs met at the very first intake point. We need to figure out, do you have internet? Do you have access to device? Do you need help with your foundational digital skills? Because digital literacy is a critical literacy that you need now to operate in this world, to get the information you need, access to

opportunities. And if we don't address that first, we're doing a disservice to individuals in our communities.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think a lot of people don't realize, and you're probably familiar with this. Because I think I met one of your colleagues at one of these locations. Jamie Harris Goodwill provides a lot of digital skills training. So people are out there and they're hearing this and they're thinking, where could I get those skills? Where could I direct people? Goodwill has those programs.

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

Absolutely. Goodwill has been a great partner with us in our work with the digital coalition and more, and is out in so many communities. I think what Goodwill and other organizations are working towards improving. And part of this is our funding streams need to incentivize. This is the ability to provide more just in time flexible supports. So what has historically happened? And I will say, and I come out of adult based education. It's like, oh, you need digital literacy sign up for this two months, class come three days a week. That was kind of this cohort model of instruction that no longer makes sense. Devices are portable. Software is portable. You don't need a computer lab. You can get help where, and when you need it to onboard to using technology. And so how can we provide those supports more flexibly? So organizations like Goodwill are having more drop in.

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

They can call learning lounges or locations where there are digital navigators available. So someone can just stop in and get in diverse individual personalized support just in time at a location, whether it's a Goodwill, a library, in some cases, even laundromats where someone's there to help them. Formal instruction is critical and very important. At the same time, if you're talking about closing some of these shocking divides in who has access to the internet devices and digital skills development opportunities, we need to get a lot more human centered in our program, design and delivery. And our funding streams need to figure out how to pay for that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Guys have found some strategies and some resources that are helping close this. I think it's sharing that knowledge is going to help people around the country. So what have you seen that you would like people to know is out there for people who need these skills or organizations that want to help skill up their community?

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

Our [inaudible 00:09:29] look certainly at the challenges that we're facing and the barriers, but also really focused on promising practices and solutions in sixth thematic areas in how we better define digital skills. We look at those organizations that are starting to move away from just teaching discreet digital skills. Do this, do that towards kind of developing lifelong learners of technology, because technology's constantly changing. So who is doing that well? How can we continue to promote the development of digital resilience, not just basic literacy, who is doing great work in advancing digital inclusion and equity, best instructional practices and resources you can use now, including content and curriculum, both for in-person instruction or digital instruction, how organizations doing great work in assessing and validating digital skills.

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

So people can get screened into jobs based on having developed digital skills, whether in informal environments or just learning on their own. Also really great work states and other org, adult educational organizations are doing on for professional development for practitioners and all of this work is the best practices. The resources are being put into professional development opportunities that will be freely available to the field through the DRAW project. And we are really grateful for the obvious of Korean technical education and adult education at our department of education for funding this and making the resources, the learnings available. So our field can continue its great work.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So Allison, what is the intention of the DRAW landscape scan?

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

When we started the DRAW project, we wanted to understand how the digital revolution that we're in, which technology has been changing daily and the learners, the adult community members, who we support are, or will soon start using devices that and software at work in their lives in waves that we aren't familiar with, the technology and our culture is changing faster than we as educators can keep up with. So how does this affect? Who, why, where, when, how, why we teach foundational digital skills? And most importantly, for the DRAW project, as we'll be creating professional development resources to support teachers, what are the resources that are most needed to support them and how can we get that to them and really change the way digital skill development can be accessed and how it is taught in our country.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So what is the role of the employer? Because one of the things that we talk about a lot at working nation is that this access to digital skills can lead to really in demand jobs. So how can you get employers involved in a community to help create that workforce that they need?

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

The scan found a great need and opportunity in employer engagement and the need to help and provide professional development to educational and workforce providers out in the communities to create partnerships with employers. There's a number of reasons for that. First employers can help give us access to the frontline workers and others who don't have the time to go off to a training out in the community. Though some of the best practices are whether it's union programs or Tyson foods or others that are offering very culturally competent, responsive, multilingual and other kind of trainings right at the workplace. Often on page time to their frontline workforce. What we found is a challenge and an opportunity that a lot of our workforce and educational providers express a difficulty in knowing what are the just in time skills employers need and keeping sort of that knowledge updated. So it's an opportunity in that if they are able to get that feedback from employers, they're very eager to design their programs to meet the needs.

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

One thing we found, I think it was really interesting is that many of the digital skill frameworks curriculums that we reviewed are a little bit too computer focused or especially when you're talking about the found levels of foundational digital literacy. And don't reflect the fact that at the workplace

frontline employees and others are engaging with interfaces on machines, engaging with scheduling and HR software on the phones, even doing operations on their phones. And so how do we keep providers aware of the opportunity to partner with the employer, to train workers, starting with their phones and building from that towards higher levels of digital skills.

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

We know that employers will look at digital literacy capacity and skills as an indicator of someone's ability to learn and someone's ability to succeed on a job. And so that kind of skills based hiring model of no matter how someone learned it, they can navigate the internet, navigate a basic interface that could bring in a lot of opportunity for someone to get a job advanced within a job. One of the best ways employers can help us is articulating their needs very clearly. So providers can plan their training around that. And then within their companies make very clear what digital skills are needed. So people can take that training in advance.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You mentioned a little bit earlier in the conversation that an individual may not know how important these digital skills are. There's a personal conversation that has to be had. How do you have that conversation?

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

We found many organizations that we're creating community partnerships, whether it's CBOS, faith-based organizations, even youth groups out in the community to help talk to and coach community residents, to understand and start engaging with technology. That's certainly important. I think the best way is just to start using technology in your programming. That's a real authentic way that learners can start engaging and seeing its power. So going back to adult education programs, health programs to actually use technology thoughtfully in their service delivery, but intentionally building in all the supports individuals need to succeed. And that is the way you show the power of technology, not talking to somebody, certainly trusted community liaisons can help recruit someone to receive the supports of a digital navigator. That's the best practice model. At the same time, it's the embedding. It's the contextualized learning that happens in authentic environments that we need to create.

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

And so when we hear of large companies buying tablets to every employee and on a phone to deliver training, there might be questions about privacy and what the phones can be used for or not. And those are really important worker issues to talk about. But at the same time, what an incredible digital inclusion strategy, whether it's a tablet or even virtual reality in some places to have authentic opportunities to say, wow, I'm going to use this device to learn network or to perform my job duty, better support clients better. If it's a retail organization, they themselves see the power of it.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So Allison, what is one of the most important ways to be able to include and improve the instruction on digital skills? How can someone interested in doing that, make that happen?

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

Our initiative digital resilience and American workforce will be producing a lot of great professional development resources. So please stay tuned and look out for them as they come. But the most important thing to know about best practices in digital skills instruction is that digital literacy and even higher level skills should not be taught in a vacuum. This is true with all adult education, literacy and skills, but digital skills should be taught in the context of using technology to accomplish real things in people's lives. So whether that is at a workplace setting, using technology to do your job or to learn new skills needed on your job, or if it's in someone's life, contextualizing digital skills in the context of a parent education program, how do you use digital skills to find resources and opportunities for your children or in the context of a health initiative? How do you use technology to access your health insurance and monitor your health? Whatever the context is, the best way to improve digital skills instruction is to contextualize it and embed it within real authentic use.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I am going to put a link to the DRAW landscape scan in the article, but that is accompanying the podcast. Allison, thank you so much for talking to me about it.

Alison Ascher Webber, EdTech@World Education:

Thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking to Alison Ascher Weber, a director with the EdTech Center of World Education. I'm Ramona Schindelheim editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.