
DIGITAL LITERACY SOLUTIONS FOR NORTH PHILADELPHIA

*Insights and Recommendations from the
Opportunities for Workforce Leadership (OWL) Collective*

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Executive Summary

As the Opportunities for Workforce Leadership (OWL) Collective prepares for its second year of programming and collaboration, it has set its sights on addressing one of the largest barriers to employment identified by the City of Philadelphia’s Fueling Philadelphia’s Talent Engine report-- digital literacy. This is a critical issue for the OWL Collective because employers are quickly embracing a 21st century workplace. Meanwhile, there are still individuals in North Philadelphia and across the city who have never used a desktop computer or rely solely on their mobile phone for internet access. As a result, individuals without access to technology are at an increasing disadvantage for finding and maintaining sustainable employment.

On January 22nd, 2020, the OWL Collective held its third bi-monthly meeting at Project HOME’s Honickman Learning Center. During this meeting, over 50 individuals representing 29 community organizations, services providers, employers, city agencies, and Temple University Departments broke out into small groups to discuss assets and changes needed to close the digital divide in North Philadelphia. Based on the challenges and opportunities identified in these small group conversations, the OWL Collective identified a number of recommendations for strategic investments and programmatic changes to explore. In the next year, members of the OWL Collective will dedicate resources to implement solutions that address the digital divide.

Challenges and Opportunities

1. **The need for a shared understanding of “Digital Literacy”**—Currently, there is little formal agreement around which skills and competencies are included under “digital literacy”, which means programming varies widely across the field. This lack of agreement in the field inhibits the possibility of collaborative digital literacy solutions because organizations are prioritizing goals and outcomes differently.



2. **Approaches to digital literacy assessment and programming vary from organization to organization**—The lack of standardized assessments and program offerings across service providers prevents North Philadelphians from being connected with training opportunities efficiently and lead to many program offerings being a “hit-or-miss” for participants.
3. **Motivating people to learn computer skills can be a challenge**—A lack of internal motivation can be one of the biggest barriers to digital literacy skill development. This internal barrier can stem from a belief that computer skills are not important or from “computerphobia”. Therefore, digital literacy solutions must focus not only on skill development, but also on helping individuals overcome their own internal barriers to learning.
4. **Resources are available, but not necessarily accessible**—Many of the digital literacy resources available are not designed with the community’s employment, transportation, scheduling, learning, or supportive service needs in mind. Addressing these barriers is a vital to ensuring that everyone in North Philadelphia can take advantage of digital literacy programming.
5. **Strengths-based approach to digital literacy**—Many people are familiar with using some types of technology, just not always in a professional context. Designing solutions that can build off of a participant’s existing skills will likely lead to stronger outcomes than programs that do not emphasize the strengths of participants.



6. **A one-size-fit-all approach to digital literacy curriculum does not work for everyone**—Every person has different skills and experiences that shape their digital literacy needs. Without offering a tiered curriculum, individuals who have higher or lower levels of digital literacy gain little benefit from program offerings. Additionally, the lack of course options limits a person’s ability to continue developing digital literacy skills once they have achieved basic proficiency.
7. **Digital Literacy is a critical tool for long-term employment**—Digital literacy is now a foundational skill for adult education, workforce development, and employment—not an optional one. In order to expand sustainable employment in North Philadelphia, it is more important than ever for workforce development providers and employment advocates to pivot their approach to prioritize these skills.
8. **Employers must play a role too**—Employers are the most knowledgeable about the labor market needs and the current hiring and training practices. Therefore, seeking their insight is extremely important in defining digital literacy solutions. In addition, employers who are engaged in the process are more likely to adapt innovative and inclusive employment practices, which would benefit North Philadelphia job seekers.

Recommendations for Strategic Investments

1. Standardizing language, assessment, and curriculum around digital literacy.
2. Developing a resource map to better understand where the opportunities and gaps in access are.
3. Messaging digital literacy as a crucial life skill to North Philadelphia stakeholders.
4. Improving digital literacy curriculum to meet the needs of the community.
5. Leveraging existing partnerships to expand access to digital literacy resources.
6. Engage employers in shaping digital literacy solutions.

Perspectives from the Field

1. The need for a shared understanding of Digital Literacy—The City of Philadelphia’s Digital Literacy Alliance defines digital literacy as, “the ability to access technology and the Internet and use those tools to find, evaluate, share and create content.” Across the field, however, interpretations of what skills and experiences individuals actually need to achieve “digital literacy” vary widely. As a result, organizations may prioritize certain aspects of digital literacy differently than other organizations, which can shift the focus of their program outcomes and funding priorities. This lack of uniformity in understanding



of digital literacy poses a challenge for defining collective goals because it means organizations are identifying needs and defining desired outcomes differently. This must be addressed in order to lay the foundation for meaningful strategies across North Philadelphia.

2. Approaches to digital literacy assessment and programming vary from organization to organization—Due to the lack of uniform understanding of digital literacy, assessment and programming looks very different depending on the organization. Regarding assessment, the conversation revealed that many organizations do not assess for digital literacy during intake at all. For the programs that do assess for digital literacy, there is no real standard for assessment, although tools like NorthStar Digital Literacy seem to be popularly used. This lack of uniformity extends to programming, where curriculum and program outcomes differ significantly. The dramatic difference in assessment and programming practices do not serve North Philadelphia well. Without a streamlined system, participants are not getting connected with support as quickly as they could in many organizations. They are also likely not receiving the kinds of timely interventions and effective curriculums they need to achieve their employment and life goals. Additionally, many felt that because there are no clear standards for skill development and outcomes, the benefits of attending existing digital literacy programming can be very “hit-or-miss” for participants, which can negatively impact engagement.

3. Motivating people to learn computer skills can be a challenge—A common challenge that members of the OWL Collective have come across is that many individuals find learning computer skills boring and/or unnecessary for success in the world. On the other end of the spectrum, some experience “computerphobia” --or are afraid to take on digital literacy courses because the skillsets are so unfamiliar. From the personal experiences of OWL members, this is a common issue for populations who have lived most of their life without computers such as older adults and returning citizens. In order to inspire the internal motivation necessary to learn, digital literacy strategies need to focus on changing individuals’ mindset to see that digital literacy is an important life skill and make digital literacy seem approachable. To achieve this, one suggestion from the group was to contextualize digital literacy curriculum by incorporating it into other education and training programs.

4. Resources are available, but not necessarily accessible—Many of the computer labs and other existing resources in North Philadelphia do not currently operate with the community's needs in mind. For example, some computer labs in are only open during standard business hours. Others require individuals to sign in with an ID, are hard to get to using public transportation, or do not have staff available to show individuals how to use the computers. This means that people who work during the day, people who do not have an ID, people who do not have access to reliable transportation, and people who have never used a desktop computer are not able to fully take advantage of the resources in their area. Increasing the number of computer labs that are open alternative hours and increasing support for users is critical for addressing the digital divide in North Philadelphia.

5. Strengths-based approach to digital literacy—With the rise of smartphones, most people interact with technology every day, and are able to use their mobile devices for a lot of different things. Digital literacy approaches should focus on how to leverage the skills that individuals already have from interacting with technology on a daily basis and transfer those skills to digital literacy for education or the workplace.

6. A one-size-fit-all approach to digital literacy curriculum does not work for everyone—Many organizations only offer one level of digital literacy programming. This leaves no room for individuals who have basic digital literacy skills to continue building their skills. These one-size-fits-all courses can also exclude individuals who are generally very familiar with using technology but not in a professional context, such as youth and young adults. To address this, some organizations offer different tiers of digital literacy courses, and have seen a significant benefit associated with this offering. Expanding the use of a scaffolded curriculum would allow service providers to meet people where they

are on the digital literacy continuum and support individuals in building skills that will lead to long-term employment.

7. Digital Literacy is a critical tool for long-term employment—The workforce development and employment landscape are digitizing quickly. Today, computers are used for everything from testing to earning one’s high school equivalency and gaining an industry-recognized certification to filling out job applications, setting up interviews, and completing essential job functions. While some of these vital parts of finding and maintaining sustainable employment are able to be completed without a computer (i.e. on paper or on their mobile device), the reality is that it is often not something that individuals can opt-out of anymore. Because digital literacy is now such a foundational skill in education and employment, there needs to be a very strong emphasis in closing the digital divide among education and workforce development service providers.

8. Employers must play a role too—Many employers are not intentionally excluding individuals with low digital literacy or lack of computer access, but rather are unaware that some of their practices present barriers to potential talent. Calling on employers to have candid conversations about the role the digital divide plays in employment and unemployment is the first step to creating a more inclusive hiring and employment environment. Employer perspectives are also important for shaping training efforts to match the current labor market needs. This is especially important because as long as the digital divide exists, employers must understand the issues in order to make the necessary accommodations. Otherwise, many of the populations we serve will be at a disadvantage in the labor market.

Recommendations

1. Standardizing language, assessment, and curriculum around digital literacy—A critical part of collaborating around digital literacy is making sure that we are all speaking the same language. As a first step, the OWL Collective must come back together to determine what skills and competencies we mean when we say, “digital literacy”, what outcomes and outputs are important to measure, how individuals are assessed for digital literacy proficiency, and what kinds of support and instruction are necessary to achieve the best outcomes for North Philadelphia residents. This shared understanding will serve as the guideline for determining goals, strategies, outputs, and outcomes.

2. Developing a resource map—To understand where the gaps are, the OWL Collective needs to understand where the assets and opportunities are first. With such a large

coalition of well-connected organizations, the OWL Collective is a natural leader in the effort to identify and map existing digital literacy resources in North Philadelphia. This process will involve each member reaching out to their robust networks and building the relationships necessary to garner information. Using these findings, the OWL



Collective can create a comprehensive map that will not only serve as a resource for North Philadelphia residents seeking digital literacy resources, but also serve as a roadmap for defining the next steps towards closing the digital divide.

3. Messaging digital literacy as a life skill—Digital literacy is only going to become more and more essential as society continues to adopt new technologies. As service providers, it is our responsibility to set participants up for success. This requires an understanding of the things that prevent individuals from building their digital literacy skills, while also sending a united message that digital literacy is necessary for reaching the next level of education and/or employment. As a next step, the OWL Collective should define specific strategies to improve individual attitudes towards digital literacy and work to actively share the information and tools they need to connect with digital literacy resources. At the same time, we need to ensure that the systems our participants interact with (i.e. city agencies, other organizations, etc.) internalize this message and work to remove the systemic barriers to digital literacy.

4. Improving curriculum to meet the needs of the community—As the group discussed, it is very difficult to engage participants in digital literacy programs if the program does not demonstrate the value of learning these skills. Exploring the possibility of 1) introducing digital literacy programming that can be contextualized for existing job training programs or 2) offering scaffolded digital literacy programs concurrently with other training programs would likely make a significant impact in advancing digital literacy for North Philadelphia. If done successfully, OWL Collective Members can continue to improve digital literacy opportunities for North Philadelphia residents by encouraging other organizations to adopt similar models.

5. Leveraging existing partnerships to expand access—Providing North Philadelphia residents reliable access to affordable devices, WIFI, and software is the best way to bridge the digital divide. The OWL Collective can use its reach to expand access through a number of ways:

- A. *Affordable technology*: Since one of the major barriers to digital literacy is access, increasing the number of individuals with a personal laptop or desktop computer by offering North Philadelphia residents technology at reduced or no cost could have dramatic impact on digital literacy. While this is no easy task, it is not unheard of. The OWL Collective members can explore a number of routes to achieve this including applying for funding or partner with tech companies in Philadelphia in order to provide personal devices to participants.
- B. *Extending Computer Lab Hours*: The OWL Collective can also expand access by leveraging its existing relationships and working with spaces that have computer labs (The KEYSLOT Network, local schools, post-secondary institutions, libraries) to find ways to extend their hours.
- C. *Cross Promoting Existing, Effective Programs*: Across the OWL Collective, learning about the other programs that partnering organizations and sharing those resources with participants can be instrumental in helping someone find a digital literacy program that works for them.

6. Engage Employers in Short and Long-Term Solutions—In order to open up more employment opportunities for North Philadelphians without the same access to technology, the OWL Collective needs to tap into stakeholders who know the labor market best—employers. Through building relationships with employers, the OWL Collective can encourage employers to implement more inclusive hiring and recruitment strategies while the digital divide still exists, such as optimizing their applications for mobile devices and advertising positions offline. The OWL Collective can also use these relationships can also inform long-term solutions by working with employers and to understand which digital literacy skills are absolutely necessary at the start of the job, and which can be developed over time through training. This knowledge will allow OWL Collective Partners to design more effective pipelines into employment and will encourage employers to implement practices that promote diversity hiring and better retention.



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About the OWL Collective

The Opportunities for Workforce Leadership (OWL) Collective is a collaborative partnership between community organizations, service providers, employers, and Temple University departments dedicated to improving employment outcomes for North Philadelphia residents through data-informed, strengths-based, and community-driven workforce development strategies.

For a full list of members of please visit templeinpwi.org/our-partners/



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