American jobs are undergoing massive technological transformation, with even entry-level workers now expected to use all manner of digital devices and equipment. The hospitality sector – which encompasses accommodation and food services — and other services sector are no exception. With one in ten American workers employed across these key sectors, millions of people are affected by these growing digital demands. Examples include restaurant workers being trained in food safety using virtual reality goggles, parking attendants using handheld computers to log vehicle incidents for insurance purposes, and hotel clerks helping guests to install customized apps that allow them to use mobile keys.

To succeed in this rapidly transforming environment, workers need broad-based digital problem-solving skills that equip them to learn a wide variety of today’s technologies and navigate continued changes in the future. This digital literacy includes both the capacity to use technology and the cognitive skills necessary to navigate it successfully.

But a startling percentage of American hospitality workers lack these vital digital skills. Data from a respected international assessment show that 18 percent of currently employed US hospitality and other services workers have no digital skills, and an additional 18 percent have very limited skills. Another one-third (34 percent) have achieved a certain level of proficiency, while just 29 percent have the advanced skills necessary to be most adaptable to changing technology.

**THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE:**

**WORKERS WITH NO DIGITAL SKILLS**

More than one in six hospitality and other services workers (18 percent) fall into this category. These workers failed to meet one or more of the three baseline criteria to even take the full digital skills assessment: 1) prior computer use, 2) willingness to take the computer-based assessment, or 3) ability to complete four out of six very basic computer tasks, such as using a mouse or highlighting text on screen.

While additional demographic data is not available for hospitality and other services workers specifically, among overall US workers, individuals with no digital skills reflect a diverse range of backgrounds. Nearly half (44 percent) are between the ages of 16 and 44 – that is, in the first half of their working years. Men are over-
Hospitality workers need investment in their digital skills

Among overall US workers at the proficient digital level, 61 percent are between the ages of 16 and 44. There are slightly more women (52 percent) in this category than men. Just under half (48 percent) have a high school credential or less. More than two-thirds (70 percent) are white, 12 percent are Black, 11 percent are Hispanic, and 5 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander.

WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO

For the hospitality and other services sectors to continue to thrive in the United States, workers will need to equip themselves with in-demand digital skills — and businesses will need to invest in helping their employees build such skills. Congress can take action by investing in upskilling for individual workers and jobseekers, and supporting industry-led training partnerships.

Current federal investments in workforce development provide almost no dedicated support for digital skill-building; most notably, Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act lists digital literacy as one of numerous allowable activities for adult education programs. The recently-introduced Digital Equity Act (HR 4486/S 1167) would make a more substantial, targeted investment in digital literacy through twin grant programs to the states: one structured as formula funding, and the other as competitive funding. Digital literacy investments could also be bolstered through other key federal workforce and education policies, such as the Higher Education Act, Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T).

Where this data comes from

Data in this report combines information from the “Accommodation and food services” sector and the “Other services” sector. Other services include computer and communication equipment repair, dry cleaning and laundry, hairdressing, funeral activities, pet care, and valet parking services, among others.

Acknowledgments

National Skills Coalition sincerely appreciates the contributions of our research partner on this project, the American Institutes for Research — Katie Herz, Saida Mamedova, B. Jasmine Park, Emily Pawlowski, Jahel Soroui, and the rest of the PIAAC team — and thanks them for their thoughtful collaboration and careful analysis. Any remaining errors, of course, are our own.

This research was made possible by generous support from Walmart. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings, conclusions, and recommendations presented in this report are those of National Skills Coalition alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Walmart.