

# Hospitality workers need investment in their digital skills



## DIGITAL SKILLS SERIES

**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,<sup>1</sup> 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.

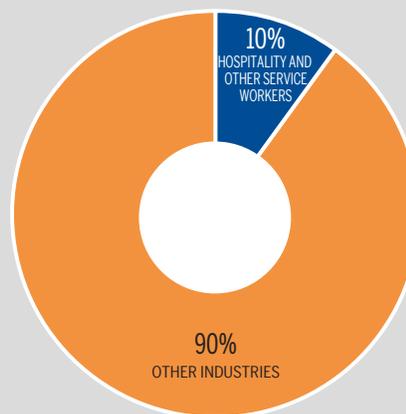
**But a startling percentage of American hospitality workers lack these vital digital skills.** Data from a respected international assessment show that 18 percent of currently employed US hospitality and other services workers have no digital skills, and an additional 18 percent have very limited skills. 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 in 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.

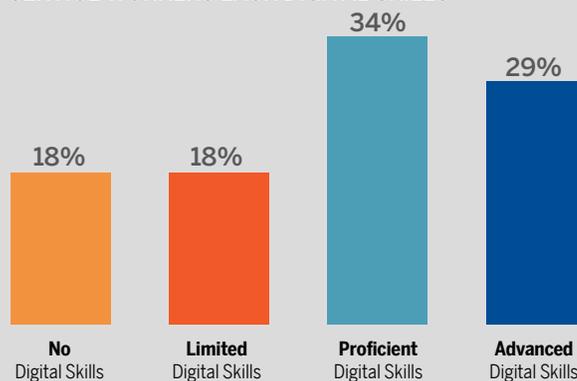
While additional demographic data is not available for hospitality and other services workers specifically, among overall US workers, individuals with no digital skills reflect a diverse range of backgrounds. Nearly half (44 percent) are between the ages of 16 and 44 – that is, in the first half of their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

### ONE IN TEN AMERICAN WORKERS IS EMPLOYED IN HOSPITALITY OR OTHER SERVICES



Currently employed US workers ages 16-64. Source: OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), 2012-14.

### MORE THAN ONE-THIRD OF HOSPITALITY AND OTHER SERVICE WORKERS LACK DIGITAL SKILLS



Currently employed US workers ages 16-64. Source: OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), 2012-14.

Have questions or want to learn about specific examples? Contact National Skills Coalition for details at [info@nationalskillscoalition.org](mailto:info@nationalskillscoalition.org).

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represented among those with no digital skills, at 61 percent. The overwhelming majority of those with no digital skills (80 percent) have a high school credential or less. And as might be expected, their wages are low: 58 percent have earnings in either the bottom or the second-lowest quintile. A plurality (44 percent) are white, 15 percent are Black, 35 percent are Hispanic, and 4 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander.<sup>2</sup>

## ONE FOOT ON THE LADDER: WORKERS WITH LIMITED DIGITAL SKILLS

Another one in six hospitality and other services workers (18 percent) are in this category. People with limited digital skills would have a hard time completing simple digital tasks that have a generic interface and just a few steps. An example would be a person who is presented with five e-mails in an inbox. The e-mails are responses to an event invitation. The task is simply to sort the e-mails into pre-existing folders to track who is and is not attending the event.

Again, while detailed demographic data is not available for hospitality workers specifically, data on US workers overall paints a vivid picture of people at this skill level. Across industries, a full 50 percent of individuals with limited digital skills are between the ages of 16-44. These workers are evenly divided between men and women. Half (50 percent) are white, 21 percent are Black, 20 percent are Hispanic, and 7 percent Asian/Pacific Islander.<sup>3</sup> Two-thirds (66 percent) have a high school credential or less.

## HOLDING STEADY: WORKERS WITH PROFICIENT DIGITAL SKILLS

One-third (34 percent) of hospitality and other services workers have achieved a certain level of proficiency in their digital skills. People at this level would typically struggle with tasks that require the use of both generic and specific technology applications. For example, a person might be presented with a new type of online form, and need to navigate across multiple pages and applications to answer the test question. The task may have multiple steps, and may require the use of tools (such as the “sort” function) to solve the problem. The person may have to identify the goal themselves, and engage in higher-level reasoning to solve the problem.

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.<sup>4</sup>

## 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.<sup>5</sup> 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).

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> The remainder are grouped under the “Other” race/ethnicity category.

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<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/integrating-technology.pdf>

### Where this data comes from

Data in this publication comes from the Survey of Adult Skills, conducted under the auspices of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The survey, also known as the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies or PIAAC, is administered by National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education. The survey gathered data from a representative sample of U.S. adults in 2012 and 2014. (Data used in this analysis combine information from both years for greater statistical precision.) The survey includes a background demographic questionnaire that is administered in English or Spanish, followed by a cognitive assessment in English measuring the three domains of literacy, numeracy, and the somewhat awkwardly named “problem-solving in technology-rich environments,” or PS-TRE. The data included here comes from the PS-TRE section of the study.

Note: An additional round of U.S. PIAAC data collection was completed in 2017. While 2017 data is not reflected here due to the timing of its

release to the public, it is largely consistent with earlier years. Learn more about the 2017 data here: [https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/current\\_results.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/current_results.asp)

### Acknowledgments

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