10 Things We Learned About Digital Skills During the Pandemic

UpSkillAmerica
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LATINOS & SOCIETY
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UpSkill America, an initiative of the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program, is an employer-led movement that promotes training and advancement practices to help workers progress in their careers and attain better-paying jobs. It places a heavy emphasis on the need to assist frontline and entry-level workers, who are disproportionately women and people of color.

In 2020, UpSkill America began a 12-month, three-phase study to learn how the pandemic and heightened attention on racial inequities were influencing companies' employment plans for the months and years ahead and how the pandemic was influencing employers' education and training programs. The study looked at questions such as these:

- In today's rapidly changing business environment and economy, what are the workforce skill needs that are increasingly important?

- In what ways are these skill needs affecting a range of employment practices, including education and training programs for frontline workers?

- How has the current context–the pandemic and heightened attention on racial inequities–influenced businesses' workplace hiring practices as well as plans to support career advancement for frontline workers?

- What types of employee concerns have surfaced regarding what they are facing in the workplace and at home? What are the ways that businesses are helping to support employees' needs?

All videos, decks and resources produced as part of the study are at www.aspeninstitute.org/of-interest/how-2020-affected-businesses-skills-and-equity-at-work. The study was supported by Strada Education Network and Walmart.org.

This brief was excerpted from our publication, Pathways to digital skills development for Latino workers: What employers say about their skill development needs and what workforce organizations are doing to help.

1. Due in part to digital transformation during the pandemic, having digital skills is a necessity for much of the population to participate in basic job search and workplace processes as well as many basic life and civic activities.

During the pandemic, employers improved many processes by moving them online. Employers told us how the difficult circumstances had forced them to question longstanding assumptions and processes and find new and better ways to do things. In many cases, the new and better ways of doing business included moving paper or in-person processes to a digital format. A similar transformation was happening in government services as well.

Examples of Human Resources and related processes and policies that companies listed as having been improved during the pandemic include the following:

- Workflow
- Collecting employee feedback
- Candidate screening
- Hiring

- Interviewing
- Onboarding
- Workplace flexibility
- Internal communications

Many companies that mentioned improved policies and processes believe these changes are permanent. Across sectors, employers reported that, for the foreseeable future, there will be some element of remote work, especially for office staff who aren't workplace dependent. There is a need for reliable, high-speed internet and the tools to access it. Continuing remote work requires a strong digital skill set, including mastering new technology platforms for communication and collaboration. Given the existing gaps in terms of digital skills and access to broadband connectivity and digital devices that affect many Latino households and communities, it is crucial to embed strategies that support digital equity to avoid leaving these workers behind.

For the second phase of the study, UpSkill America partnered with Training Industry Inc. to field a national survey in January 2021. Respondents comprised 340 business representatives. The following are the main takeaways from the survey that were relevant to the Digital Skills and the Latino Workforce project.

2. The need for digital skills increased during the pandemic.

In response to questions about the impact of COVID-19, 77.1% of respondents said the need for digital skills increased either a lot or a moderate amount during 2020. For respondents with more than half of their workforce composed of frontline workers, this number was 78.8%. Of the respondents, 68.9% said that "skills to use technology in the workplace" were affected by recent events either a lot or a moderate amount. Employers further reported this increased need for digital skills included the need for skills to interact with and manage increased automation, to use basic office software, to communicate in a digital environment, and to use technology in the workplace.

3. Employers who responded to our survey believed investments in digital skills training would be most useful in helping frontline workers grow within their company.

Finally, employers responded that, from a national perspective, investments in digital skills training would be most important to help frontline workers grow within their company. Employer respondents identified the investments that would be most beneficial to supporting frontline workers.

From a national policy perspective, survey respondents identified that the following investments would be the most helpful to help frontline workers grow within their company (n = 312)

Investment	Percentage
Digital skills training	42.3%
Tuition assistance for certification	34.6%
Incumbent worker training	29.2%
Tuition assistance for college degree	26.6%
Apprenticeship programs	21.2%
High school completion	20.2%
English as a Second Language (ESL)	14.4%

For the third phase of this research, additional employers were interviewed and asked the following:
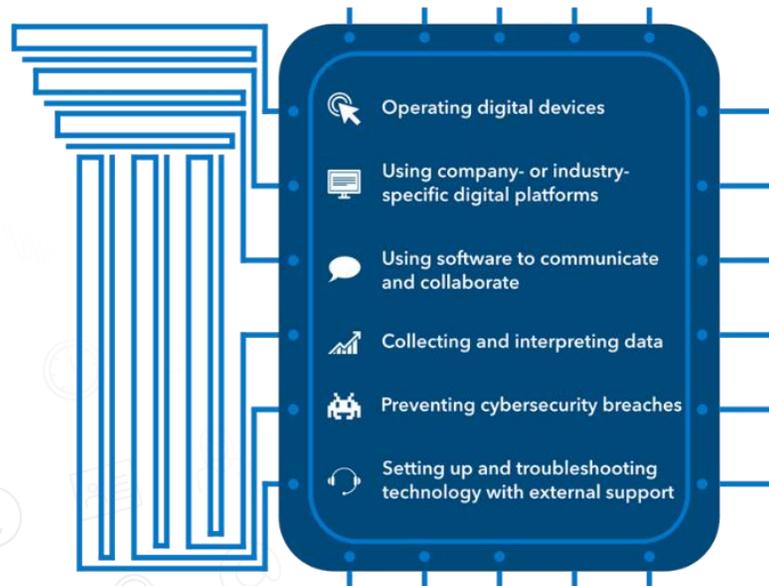
- How businesses were adopting technology in the workplace
- If COVID-19 accelerated these efforts

- How digital transformation is impacting skill needs for frontline workers
- What approaches businesses are taking to support development of digital skills for frontline workers

4. Regardless of where on the digital continuum businesses were before the pandemic, almost all employers interviewed in this phase (16) said the pandemic accelerated digital transformation within their company. Employers also noted plans to sustain or build on digital changes adopted during the pandemic.

5. Employers listed a substantial number of examples of how workers are now being asked to use digital skills in the workplace.

Examples employers gave of foundational digital skills workers need included the following:
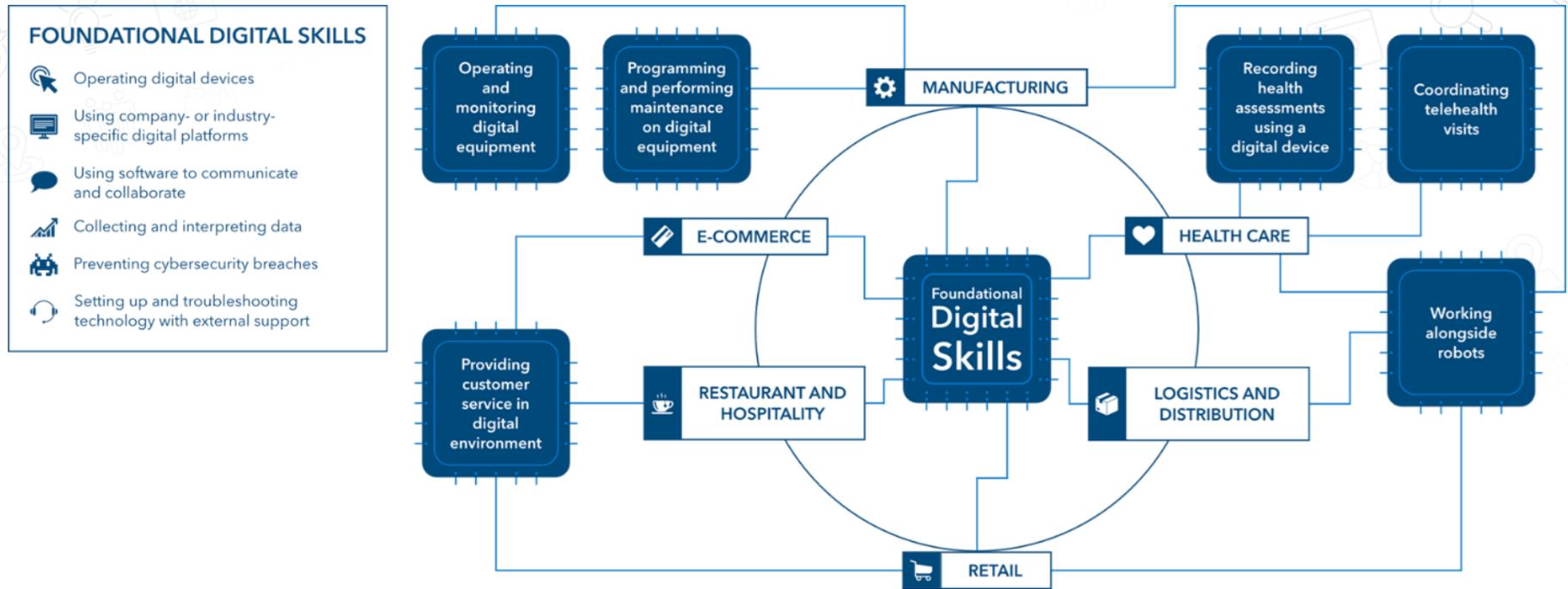
FOUNDATIONAL DIGITAL SKILLS

EXAMPLES

Foundational Digital Skill	Examples
Operating digital devices	Using touch screen to open app; Using mobile device for contactless restaurant payment
Using company- or industry-specific digital platforms	Using a learning app for guidance on work tasks; Navigating information management systems
Using software to communicate and collaborate	Communicating with colleagues via email; Using Microsoft Teams to share updates across work shifts
Collecting and interpreting data	Recording product inspection results and identifying product or process issues (Manufacturing); Monitoring patient vitals from wearable devices (Health care)
Preventing cybersecurity breaches	Recognizing and avoiding suspicious links or attachments
Setting up and troubleshooting technology with external support	Following written instructions to set up PC for remote work; Troubleshooting software with remote IT support

When examined according to industry, these skills were included:

FOUNDATIONAL DIGITAL SKILLS

- Operating digital devices
- Using company- or industry-specific digital platforms
- Using software to communicate and collaborate
- Collecting and interpreting data
- Preventing cybersecurity breaches
- Setting up and troubleshooting technology with external support

Operating and monitoring digital equipment

Programming and performing maintenance on digital equipment

⚙ MANUFACTURING

Recording health assessments using a digital device

Coordinating telehealth visits

✎ E-COMMERCE

♥ HEALTH CARE

Foundational Digital Skills

Providing customer service in digital environment

☕ RESTAURANT AND HOSPITALITY

📦 LOGISTICS AND DISTRIBUTION

Working alongside robots

🛒 RETAIL

6. Employers said they wanted workers with "digital resilience."

Employers described the importance of worker attributes such as flexibility and adaptability as technology changes. Some employers used the language of digital resilience, which Digital US defines as "having the awareness, skills, agility, and confidence to be empowered users of new technologies and adapt to changing digital skill demands."

7. Employers reported that they were investing in a range of training strategies to develop the digital skills of their workers.

Employers reported several internal training approaches to develop the digital skills of their workers, including these:

- Providing ongoing training for frontline staff

- Providing occupation-specific training (e.g., apprenticeship programs)

- Using on-site simulation centers to introduce new technologies

- Deploying managers and high performers to provide individual and small-group training

- Integrating digital skills training with ESL instruction

- Aligning training with individualized staff development and promotion plans

8. Employers are partnering with a variety of organizations for their digital skills training programs.

For these initiatives, employers reported using partners including community colleges and universities, community-based education and training providers, online education and training providers, and industry experts.

9. Employers also reported making investments in technology and internet service to help their workers be successful.

To help workers have access to digital technology, employers described purchasing computers or mobile devices for frontline staff, providing onsite access to computers or mobile devices, providing discounts on broadband subscriptions (for remote workers), and developing detailed instructions for hardware setup and troubleshooting (for remote workers).

10. Employers spoke to the importance of seeing digital transformation in terms of change management.

Finally, employers spoke at length about the importance of managing digital transformation:

Communicating changes to workers with honesty and empathy

- How changes will improve work processes
- How changes will affect workers

Expanding management positions and management training

- To support workers in adapting to change
- To provide individualized support to workers in developing new skills

All videos, decks and resources produced as part of the Impact of COVID-19 study are at www.aspeninstitute.org/of-interest/how-2020-affected-businesses-skills-and-equity-at-work.

These learnings from the Impact of COVID-19 Study, as well as others related to the importance of equity in the workplace, raised numerous issues about how employers might want to ensure certain populations have equal access to and support for the learning opportunities they provide employees as well as opportunities they provide in their communities through partnerships with local and regional organizations.

About the Study

This brief was excerpted from our publication, Pathways to digital skills development for Latino workers: What employers say about their skill development needs and what workforce organizations are doing to help. The Digital Skills and the Latino Workforce project is a partnership between the Latinos and Society Program and the UpSkill America Initiative at the Aspen Institute. The goal of the project is to learn how digitalization and automation of work impact Latino frontline workers and Latino-owned businesses across sectors.

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