



# Digital Equity Act

## New federal investment & what it means for the WIOA system

*Amanda Bergson-Shilcock*  
*National Skills Coalition*

Marriott Hotel and Conference Center  
Normal, Illinois (& virtually!)  
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# Today's agenda

- Welcome and introductions
- What's this about new funding?
- How does this relate to our shared reality over the past 2+ years?
- What will the Digital Equity Act entail?
- How can WIOA partners prepare for this opportunity?
- What question do you have now?

# Introducing National Skills Coalition: Our vision

- ▶ Jobs that require skills training are the backbone of our economy.
- ▶ National Skills Coalition fights for a national commitment to inclusive, high-quality skills training so that more people have access to a better life, and more local businesses see sustained growth.

## Our impact

- ▶ Since 2000, through expert analysis and technical assistance, broad-based organizing, targeted advocacy, and cutting-edge communications, NSC has changed hundreds of state and federal skills policies that have changed thousands of lives and grown local businesses and economies.

# Our networks



## NATIONAL SKILLS COALITION



# What's this about new funding?

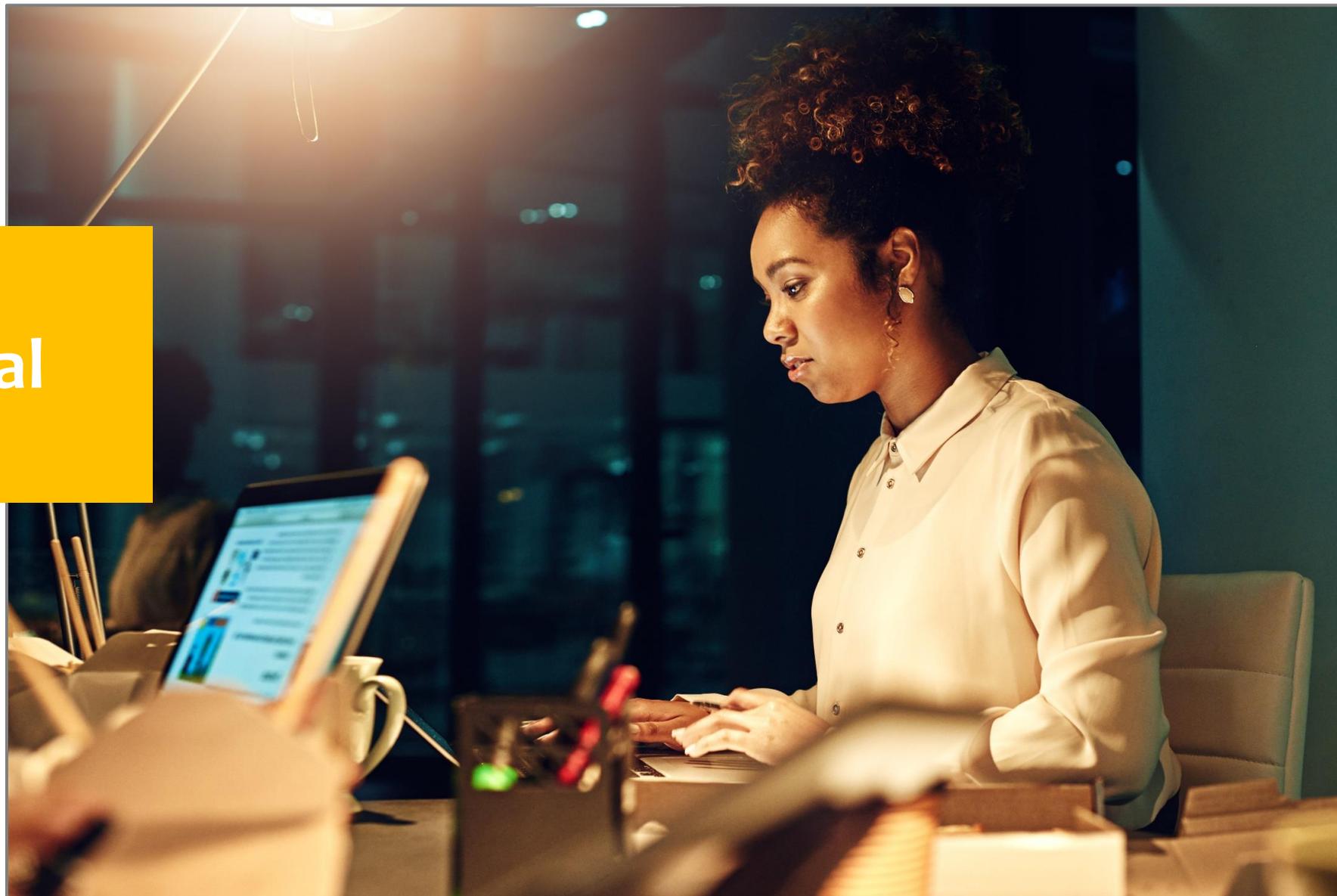
The Digital Equity Act  
will send **\$2.75 billion** to  
US communities in the  
next 5 years



The pandemic brought home a new reality:



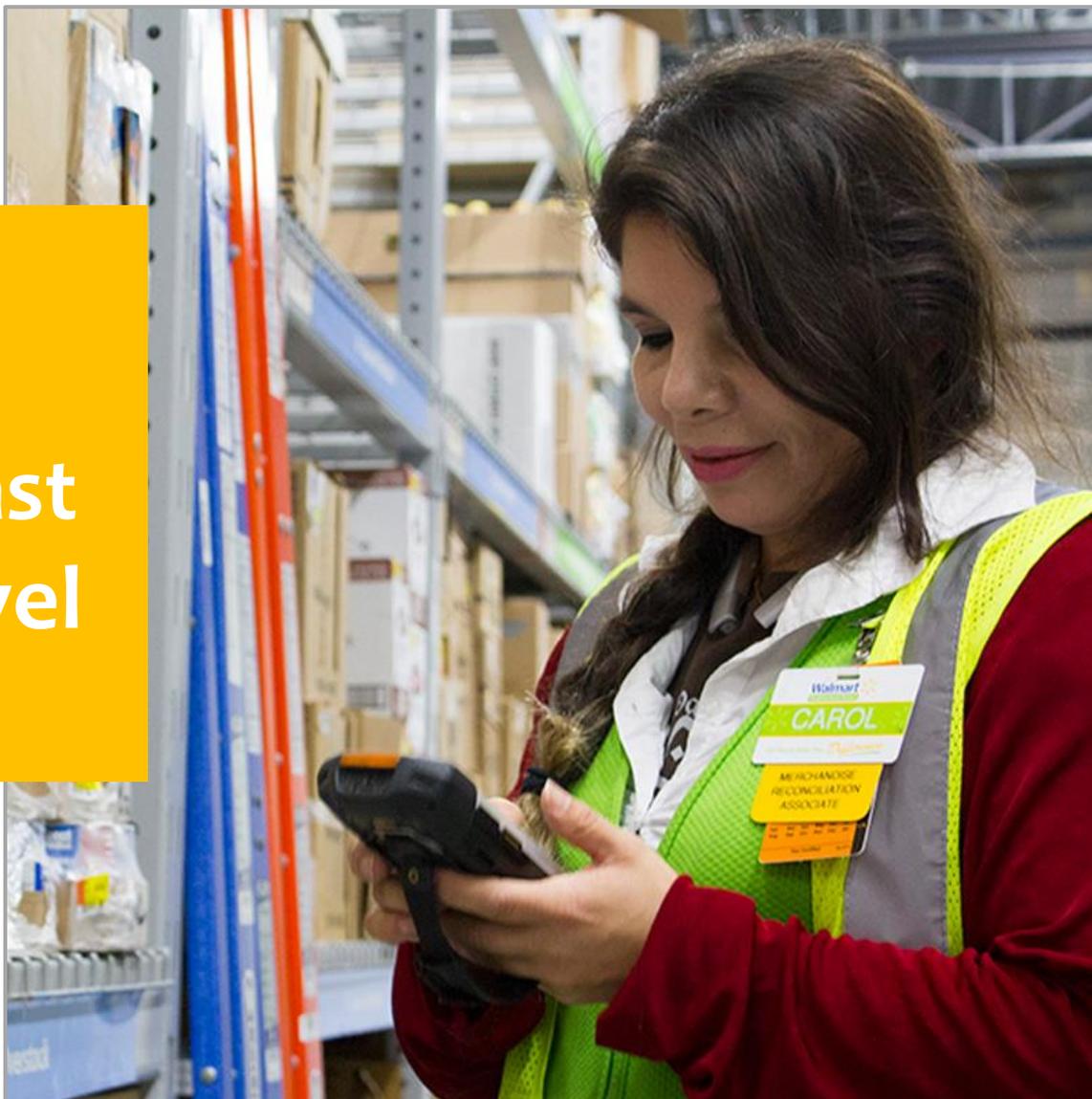
Everyone  
needs digital  
skills.





**Businesses accelerated 10 years of planned technological change into just 1 year.**

Things are  
changing  
especially fast  
for entry-level  
workers.



Digital skill  
demands vary by  
industry...



... and small and mid-sized businesses face particular challenges in upskilling workers.



Workforce system  
leaders are  
experiencing these  
issues firsthand...



# Digital inclusion challenges for wkdev staff & jobseekers:

- Lack of **broadband access**
- Lack of up-to-date **digital devices** (or smartphone-only access)
- Lack of *foundational* **digital skills**
- Fragmented knowledge (can do some tech tasks, not others)
- Difficulty identifying & obtaining in-demand **industry-specific** digital skills

# It's your turn

- How have these issues shown up in your program or organization?
- Were you surprised by any of the challenges facing your colleagues or clients?

*Type your answers in the chat!*



Data affirms the magnitude of challenges facing jobseekers and workers:

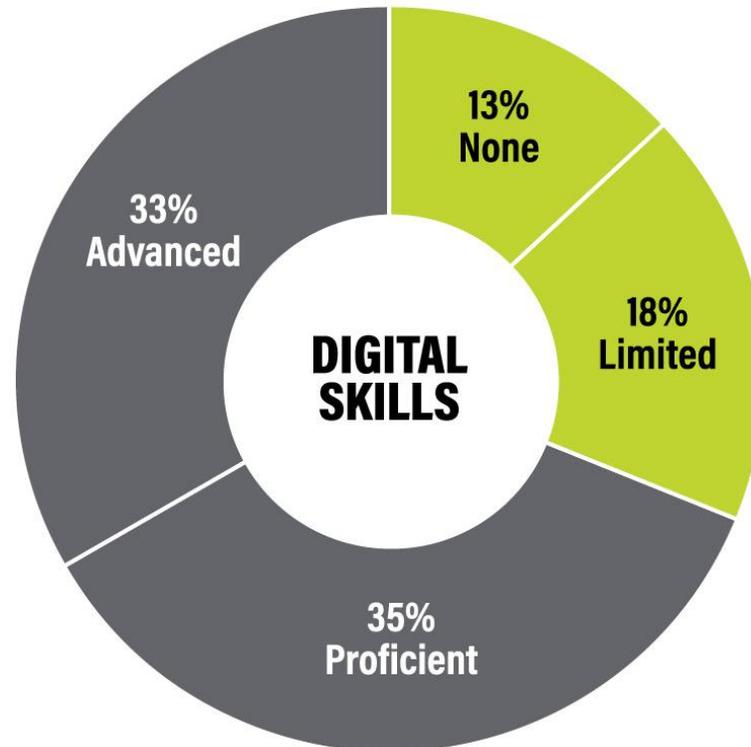


# About this data

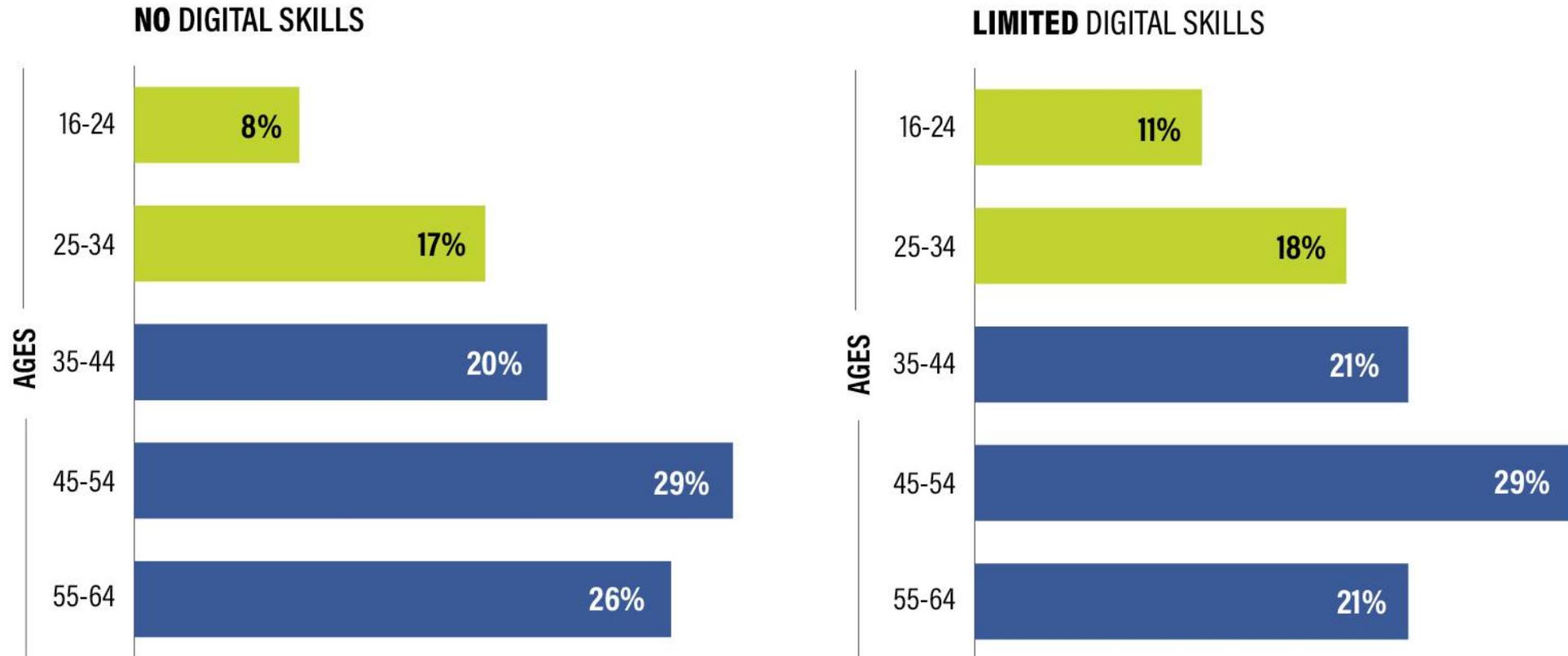
- Data you're about to see comes from rigorous assessment called **PIAAC**
- Organized by OECD and conducted in US by IES of the US Department of Education *before* the Covid-19 pandemic
- US workers **ages 16-64**
- Employed at the time of survey

# Foundational skill needs are widespread

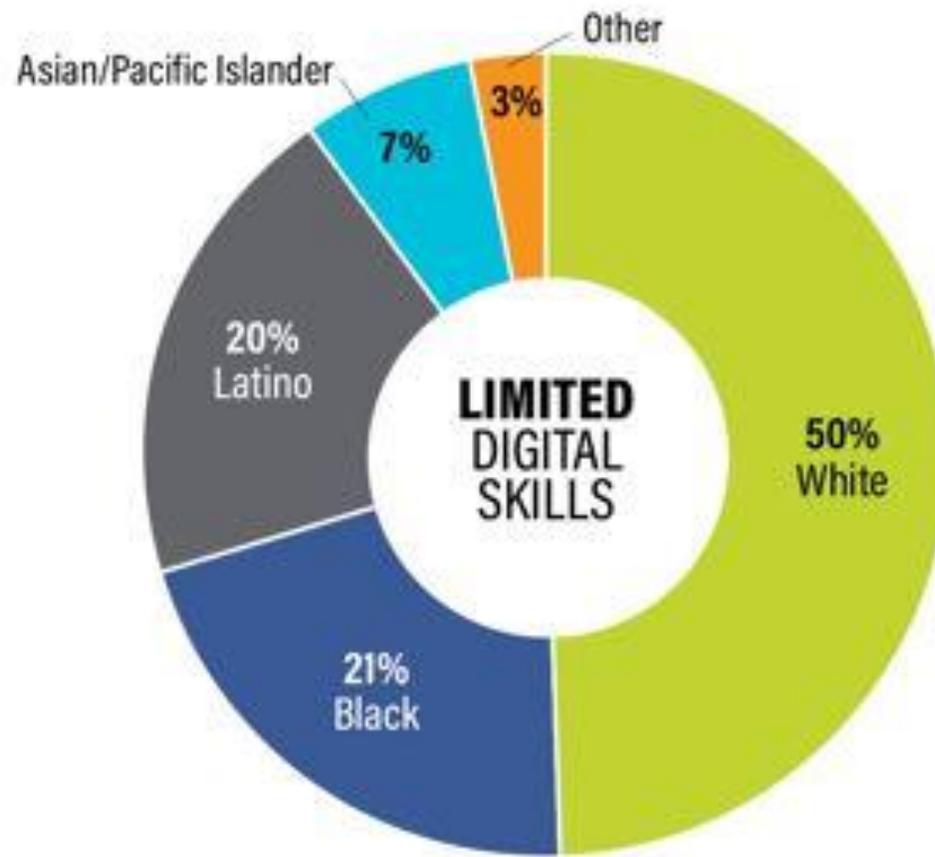
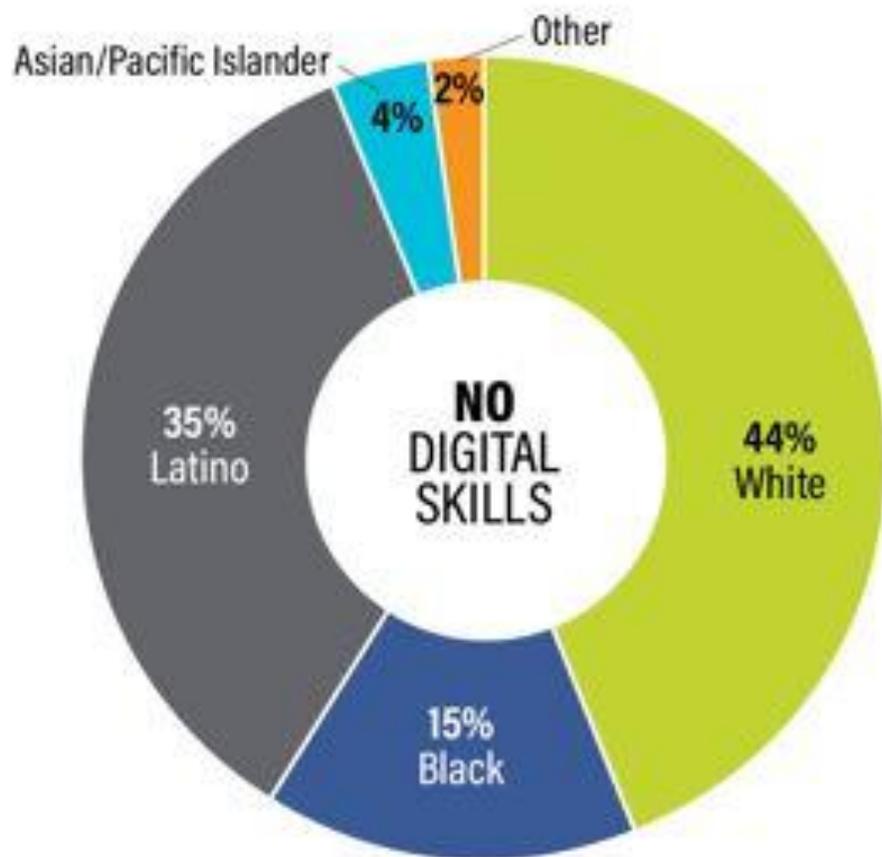
Nearly one-third of America's workers lack digital skills



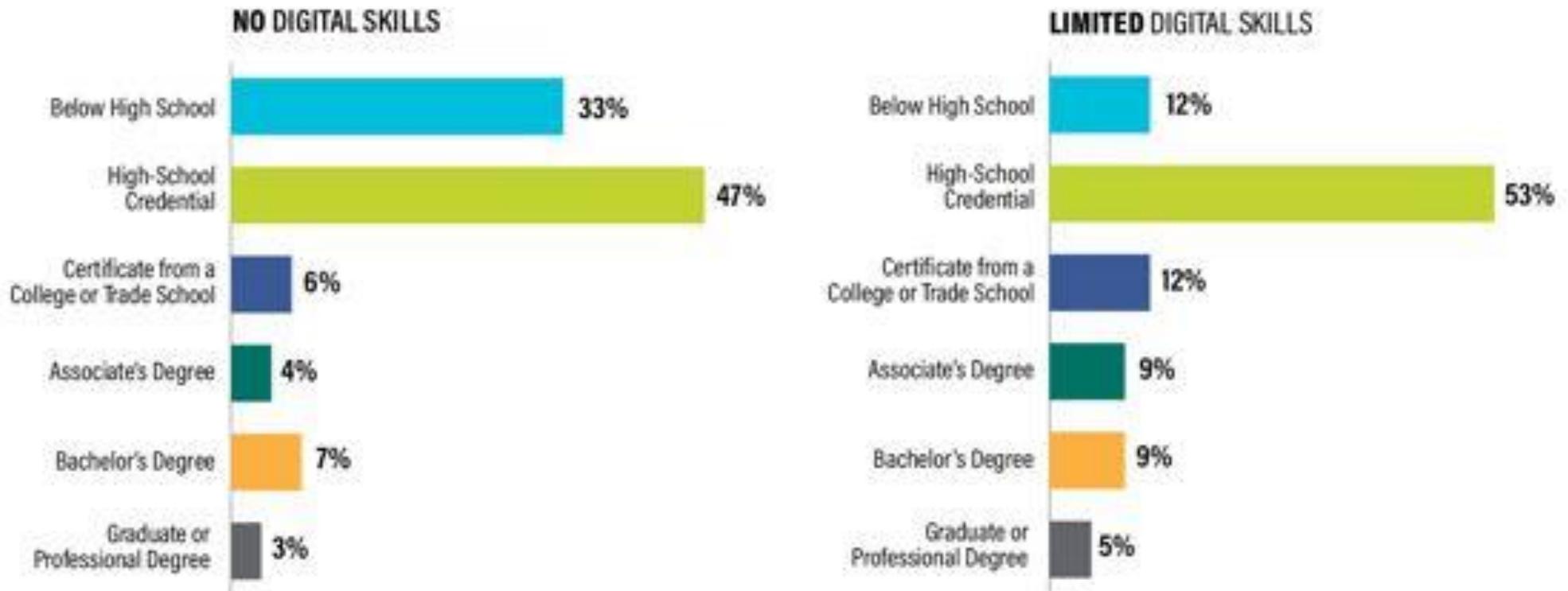
# Younger workers are not immune to digital skill gaps



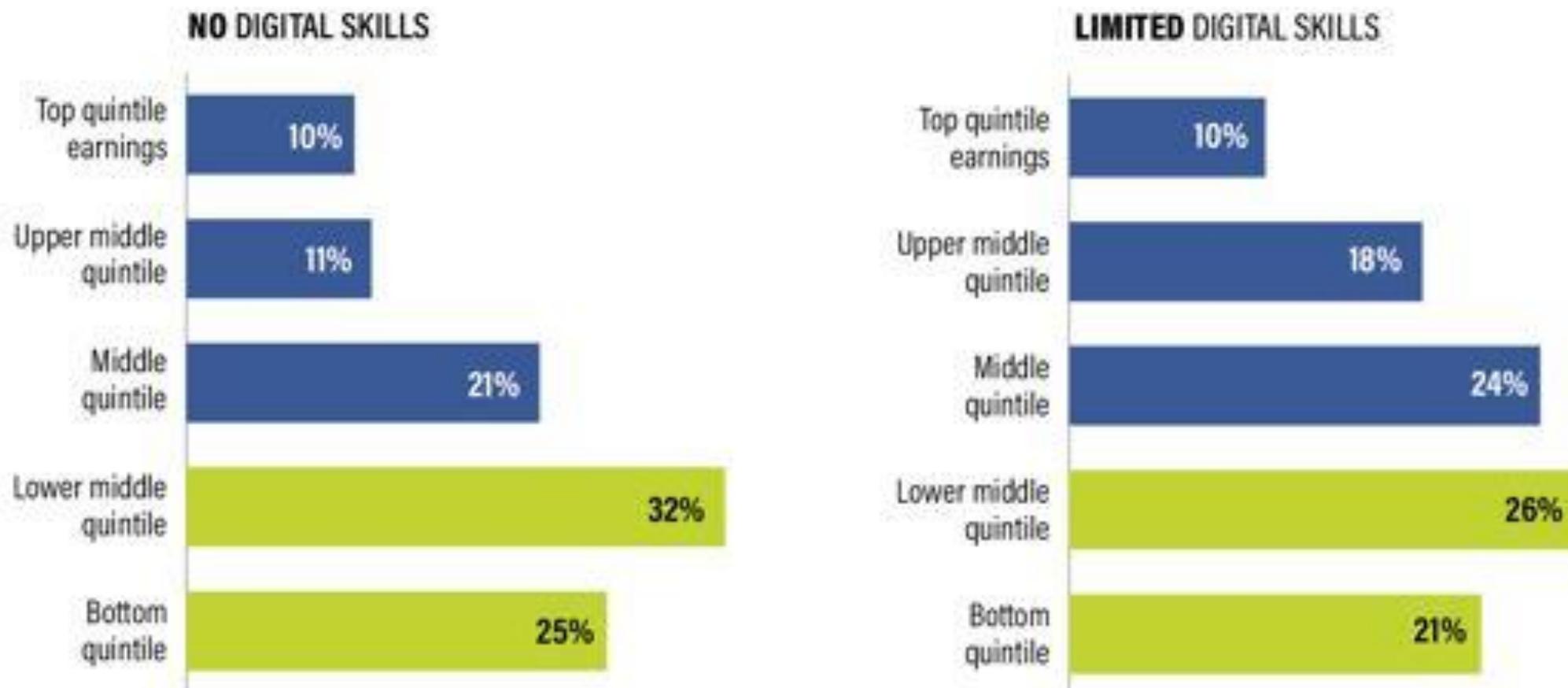
# A plurality of workers with digital skill gaps are white



# Most workers with digital skill gaps have a high school education or less

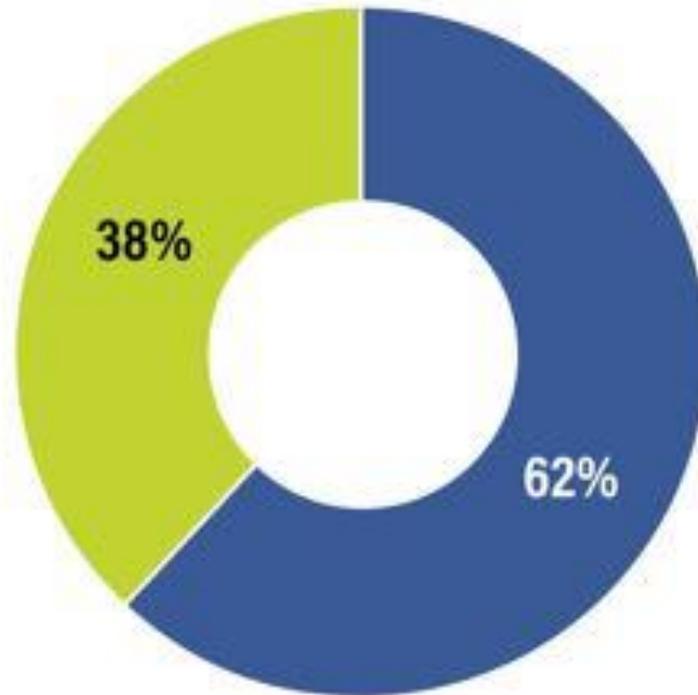


# Roughly half of workers with limited or no digital skills have low earnings

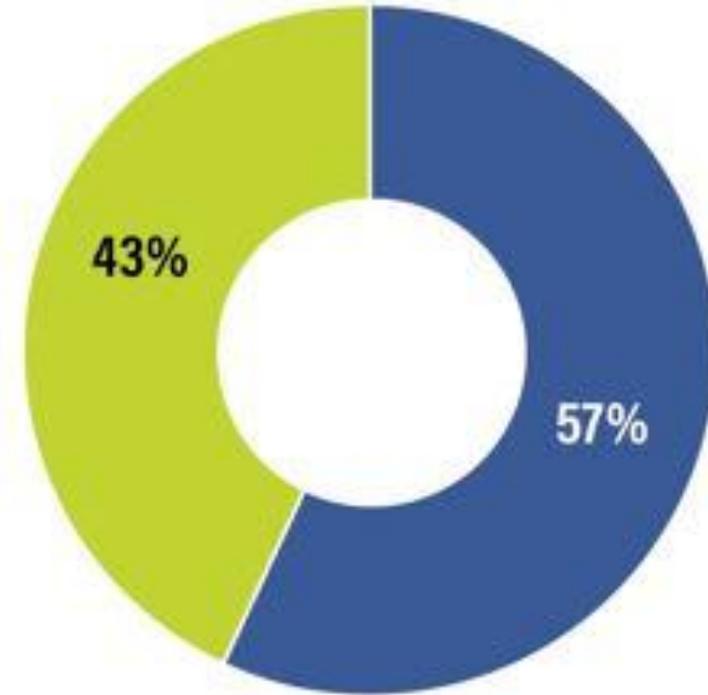


# Many workers who lack digital literacy have jobs that require substantive computer skills

Among Workers with **No** Digital Skills



Among Workers with **Limited** Digital Skills



■ Moderate or complex computer skills needed for current job

■ Straightforward computer skills needed for current job

# People often have *fragmented knowledge*

- **Definition: Comfortable with certain tasks, unfamiliar with others**
- Digital skills *aren't* binary
- Don't underestimate people's ingenuity and expertise
- Avoid assumptions about who lacks digital skills and why
- Engage people in identifying which interventions can help them make bridges between the skills they have and the skills they need

Federal policy is  
catching up to  
reality:

Congress passed  
the Digital Equity  
Act in Nov. 2021



# Digital Equity Act funding timeline (*anticipated*)

- **May 2022:** US Commerce Dept/NTIA releases Notice of Funding Opportunity for \$60M in state Digital Equity *planning grants*
- **Summer 2022:** States begin 12-month Digital Equity planning process
- **Summer 2023:** NTIA releases NOFO for \$1.44 billion in *formula funds* to states (“Digital Equity Capacity Grants”)
- **Summer/Fall 2023:** NOFO for \$1.25 billion in *competitive grants* to states and other eligible entities (“Digital Equity Competitive Grants”)

# What's the next step?

- A **Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO)** for Digital Equity Planning Grants is expected in May from the NTIA
- States applying for the Planning Grant must name the agency that will be their administering entity
- The administering entity has 12 months after the planning grant is awarded to develop the State Digital Equity Plan

# What does this mean for WIOA system partners?

- Your governor will soon be designating which state agency will be the *administering entity* for Digital Equity grants (*Spring 2022*)
- You can reach out to your state's administering entity to get involved in the Digital Equity Planning process (*Summer 2022-Summer 2023*)
- You'll also be able to weigh in during a 30-day public comment process before your State Digital Equity Plan is submitted to the NTIA

# It's your turn

- **Have you already spoken to state leaders about the Digital Equity Planning process?**
- **If so, what was the response?**

***Type your answers in the chat!***



# What will need to be in your State Digital Equity Plan (*partial list*):

## Short, clear guidelines in legislation include:

- **Identification of barriers to digital equity faced by covered populations in State, such as**
  - People living in low-income households (covered households) or rural areas
  - Older adults
  - Veterans
  - Racial or ethnic minorities
  - Individuals with disabilities, language barriers, literacy needs, or who are incarcerated
- **A description of how the State plans to collaborate with key stakeholders**
- **Be on the lookout** for further NTIA guidance

# You don't have to wait to take action!

- YOU have the power to make sure Illinois takes full advantage of this federal investment
- You can **make sure that jobseekers and workers are at the center** of state digital equity plans and grant applications
- Develop **your own vision** of what “good” would look like and then guide your state partners toward that

# It's your turn

- What do you think is most exciting about the digital equity planning process?
- What most concerns you about digital equity planning?

*Type your answers in the chat!*

# What comes after Digital Equity Planning?

- State Digital Equity **Capacity Grants** (\$1.44 billion nationwide over 5 years)
- Your state's administering entity will receive this **formula funding** and will re-grant it to local partners
- We don't know yet how states will manage this process (e.g. a Request for Proposals?)

# Plans will create a roadmap for funding

- State Digital Equity Plans **will guide how states spend** their capacity grant funds
- By putting jobseekers and workers at the center of plans, workforce development advocates can help to ensure that their needs are addressed by state re-grants

# There is a third type of funding available

The Digital Equity Act also includes funding for federal **competitive** grants (\$1.25B nationwide over 5 years)

## Organizations eligible to apply directly to the federal government for grants:

- A political subdivision, agency, or instrumentality of a State
- An Indian Tribe, an Alaska Native entity, or a Native Hawaiian organization
- A foundation, corporation, institution, or association that is a not-for-profit entity and not a school
- A community anchor institution
- A local educational agency
- An entity that carries out a workforce development program
- A partnership between any of the preceding entities
- A partnership between any of the preceding entities and an entity that the Assistant Secretary determines to be in the public interest; and is not a school  
*(Cannot be or have been an administering entity under the Capacity Grant Program)*

How can you start to prepare now?



# Familiarize yourself with key terms in the Digital Equity Act

- Eligible entities (*discussed earlier in this presentation*)
- Covered populations
- Eligible activities

Who are  
“covered  
populations”?



# Many covered populations overlap with WIOA system jobseekers & workers

- Individuals in a household with **income below 150 percent of poverty** level
- **Aging** individuals
- **Incarcerated** individuals (other than individuals who are incarcerated in a Federal correctional facility)
- **Veterans**
- Individuals with **disabilities**
- Individuals with a language barrier, including individuals who are **English learners**; and have **low levels of literacy**;
- Individuals who are members of a **racial or ethnic minority** group; and
- Individuals who primarily reside in a **rural** area

What types of  
*services* can be  
provided with  
DEA funding?



# The Digital Equity Act defines key terms

- **DIGITAL INCLUSION** (A) means the activities that are necessary to ensure that all individuals in the United States have access to, and the use of, affordable information and communication technologies, such as: (i) reliable fixed and wireless broadband internet service; (ii) internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user; and (iii) applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration; and (B) includes— (i) **obtaining access to digital literacy training**; (ii) the provision of quality technical support; and (iii) obtaining basic awareness of measures to ensure online privacy and cybersecurity.
- **DIGITAL LITERACY** means the skills associated with using technology to enable users to find, evaluate, organize, create, and communicate information.

## Entities receiving federal competitive grants must engage in at least one of these activities:

- (i) To develop and implement digital inclusion activities that benefit covered populations.
- (ii) To facilitate the adoption of broadband by covered populations in order to provide educational and employment opportunities to those populations.
- (iii) To implement, consistent with the purposes of this title— **(I) training programs for covered populations that cover basic, advanced, and applied skills; or (II) other workforce development programs.**
- (iv) To make available equipment, instrumentation, networking capability, hardware and software, or digital network technology for broadband services to covered populations at low or no cost.
- (v) To construct, upgrade, expend, or operate new or existing public access computing centers for covered populations through community anchor institutions.
- (vi) To undertake any other project and activity that the Assistant Secretary finds to be consistent with the purposes for which the Program is established.

Does this all seem  
like a lot to handle?



1. Tap into your Business Services colleagues to gather real-time info on companies' digital skill needs





2. Analyze your program data to understand how *(if!)* online and virtual services are reaching jobseekers



Professional Development  
americanjobcenter®

### 3. Share your findings via your state Digital Equity Planning process beginning Summer 2022



4. Provide workforce services that help people build both *foundational* and *industry-specific* digital skills



5. Issue guidance on how local workforce providers can support digital inclusion via existing federal programs



**The bottom line:**

**Workers deserve our investment in  
their digital skills.**



**Amanda Bergson-Shilcock**

***Senior Fellow***

**National Skills Coalition**

**215-285-2860 (mobile)**

**[amandabs@nationalskillscoalition.org](mailto:amandabs@nationalskillscoalition.org)**

# Digital Equity Act 101 fact sheet

Need a clear, simple overview to share with partners? Our brand-new fact sheet can help!

Check it out here:

[Implementing the new Digital Equity Act: What state and local skills advocates need to know](#)



SPRING 2022

## IMPLEMENTING THE NEW DIGITAL EQUITY ACT

### WHAT STATE AND LOCAL SKILLS ADVOCATES NEED TO KNOW

The bipartisan infrastructure law passed by Congress in 2021 included major new investments for states via the Digital Equity Act. Now, as implementation of this powerful \$2.75 billion legislation gets underway, state and local leaders should take advantage of this once-in-a-generation opportunity.

By preparing now, advocates can ensure that their state's digital equity efforts are closely connected to broader education and workforce goals; that they are reaching key populations such as rural communities and people of color; and that they are helping individuals and businesses build resiliency in the face of continued rapid technological change.

### WHAT FUNDING IS AVAILABLE?

There are three types of funds that will be released under the Digital Equity Act:

- ▶ **\$60 million** to states for Digital Equity planning grants (via formula funding).
- ▶ **\$1.44 billion** in Digital Equity Capacity Grants (also formula funding) to states for a range of digital inclusion/equity activities. States will regrant much of this money to local partners.
- ▶ **\$1.25 billion** in Digital Equity Competitive Grants to states and other eligible entities (such as nonprofits).

# What's working to build industry-specific digital skills:



- ▶ **Partnerships** between educational institutions and employers
- ▶ **Contextualized** and integrated learning
- ▶ **Rapid prototyping** of new programs

More details in the full report:  
[www.tinyurl.com/BoostingDL](http://www.tinyurl.com/BoostingDL)

# More digital skills resources

- ▶ [Applying a Racial Equity Lens to Digital Literacy](#) (6-page fact sheet)
- ▶ [Digital Skills for an Equitable Recovery](#) (report with federal policy recommendations)
- ▶ [10 State Policy Recommendations](#) for Digital Equity
- ▶ [The New Landscape of Digital Literacy](#) ([report](#) and [slides](#))
- ▶ [What is “rapid prototyping”](#) and how does it help workers develop digital literacy? (blog post)

**Applying a racial equity lens to digital literacy**  
How workers of color are affected by digital skill gaps



**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. Examples include restaurant workers being trained in food safety using virtual reality goggles, home health aides using tablet computers to report patient information, retail clerks using smartphone apps to process returned items, and manufacturing workers using augmented reality to assemble parts.

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 one-third of American workers lack these vital digital skills.** This lack of skills has wide-ranging consequences, hampering workers' own economic mobility and security, while also holding back the productivity and economic competitiveness of the U.S. companies that employ them.

Workers of color are disproportionately affected by digital skill gaps compared to their white peers, in large part due to structural factors that are the product of longstanding inequalities in American society, such as income and wealth gaps and uneven access to high-quality K-12 education. Historically, public policy decisions played a key role in forming racial inequities in educational attainment, employment, and wages among American workers. Policies also have helped create the systems that shape access and outcomes in postsecondary education and training for people of color. Therefore, public policies must now be an integral part of the **action** to addressing digital skill gaps for workers of color.

This fact sheet draws on U.S. data from a respected international assessment known as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Survey of Adult Skills, or PIAAC.<sup>1</sup> The data shows that 13 percent of currently employed American workers ages 16-64 have no digital skills, and an additional 12 percent have very limited skills. Another one-third (35 percent)

**HALF OF BLACK WORKERS NEED DIGITAL SKILLS**



**MORE THAN HALF OF LATINO WORKERS NEED DIGITAL SKILLS**



Source: Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2022 Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), 2018-19.

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

[www.nationalskillscoalition.org](http://www.nationalskillscoalition.org)

  
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