

Who Is Not Digitally Literate in the United States?

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Introduction:

This study is focused on the following research questions:

- What is the demographic, skills, and employment profile of U.S. adults who are not digitally literate?
- How does the U.S. compare to other developed countries on digital literacy and on computer use at work and in everyday life?

Adults are increasingly going online for everything from finding recipes and making retail purchases to trading stocks or filing taxes. This research addresses the gap in the information about adults who are not digitally literate, reporting on the demographic and socio-economic background of the 32 million Americans who do not have sufficient comfort or competence with technology to use a computer.

The study defines not digitally literate using the requirements that PIAAC established for determining basic computer competence: (1) prior computer use, (2) willingness to take the assessment on the computer, and (3) passing a test of basic computer skills, such as using a mouse and highlighting text on the screen. Adults who did not meet any one of these requirements are classified as not digitally literate.

Findings:

Our analysis found that:

- U.S. adults who are not digitally literate tend to be less educated, male, 45 years old or older, Black or Hispanic, have lower literacy and numeracy scores, had lower labor force participation rates, and tend to work in lower-skilled jobs when they were employed;
- a smaller proportion of adults in U.S. are not digitally literate than on average internationally;
- a larger portion of U.S. adults use computers at work compared to adults internationally, but a smaller proportion of U.S. adults use computers in every-day life compared to adults internationally.

Policy/Theory Implications:

These findings indicate that targeted digital literacy interventions are needed, given the profile of the adults-in-need:

- digital literacy needs of older adults, i.e. in the later stages of their working years, should be reflected in digital literacy course offerings and curricula;
- digital literacy skills can be incorporated into other basic skills interventions;
- more opportunities or funding for those not in the workforce are needed with the aim of improving digital literacy and increasing ICT use in everyday life.

These results also show that a focus on increasing use and proficiency with technology outside of work is needed in the U.S., given international context.