

PUBLIC LIBRARIES & DIGITAL LITERACY

Access to computers, smartphones, and tablets is not enough to allow many people to take full advantages of the benefits the Internet offers. Public librarians help individuals build technology competencies and capacities that transcend barriers to digital readiness.

DIGITAL LITERACY

TECHNOLOGY

Public libraries offer free access to computers, broadband Internet, and wireless Internet

EXPERTISE

Public librarians offer expertise that helps people understand technology and Internet-enabled services and resources

SKILLS

Public libraries offer a wide range of free technology instruction, including courses on employment and health resources

E-GOVERNMENT

Public libraries help people complete immigration, citizenship, social service, emergency benefit, and other online forms

EMPLOYMENT

Public libraries help people create résumés, search for jobs, and apply for jobs online

89.9%

Libraries offer training in general Internet use

79.3%

Libraries offer point of use technology training

84.4%

Libraries assist the public with using common productivity software

86.9%

Libraries offer assistance with basic computer skills

Public libraries play a vital role in ensuring digital equity and readiness by providing free access to a range of public access technologies, broadband, and Internet-enabled services to those who could not otherwise access these resources. Public libraries also provide training and assistance to those who lack technology skills or who have difficulty using and creating digital content.

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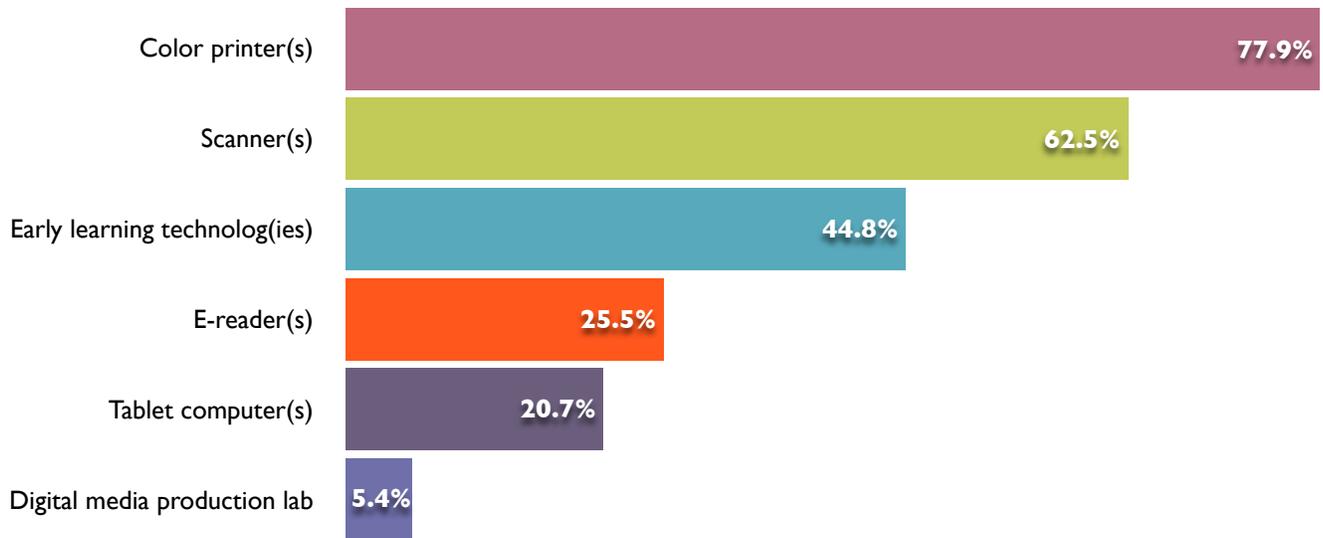


Figure 1. Technology Services Offered by Public Libraries Overall.

Digital Literacy

In general, digital literacy means the ability to locate, evaluate, and use digital information. Those with digital literacy skills can efficiently find the information they seek, evaluate that information, and use that information effectively. The ability to recognize what information is needed and when to use it are additional components of digital literacy.¹ Digital literacy also includes the ability to effectively use a range of technologies (e.g., computers, tablets, mobile devices) and Internet-enabled services (e.g., Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube). These different components of digital literacy are of equal significance. Without access, people cannot develop digital literacy; without digital literacy, they cannot achieve digital readiness, and are not positioned to gain maximum benefit from essential online resources.

Digital Divide

In an information and Internet-driven age, where information, services, and resources are increasingly available only online, people without access to technology or the Internet are at a considerable disadvantage. They may lack the ability to access information resources, or the knowledge to use these resources effectively. This lack of ability or knowledge is likely to have a

negative impact on their ability to succeed by limiting their access to employment, health, and E-government resources, educational achievement, as well as informational and recreational resources. Public libraries play a vital role in providing people with access to computers and the Internet (see Figure 1). Public libraries reported an overall average of 18.8 public access computers (PACs) - including laptops - in 2014. Public libraries provide access to technology in concert with instruction in the use of these resources, helping to bridge the digital divide in their communities.

Technology Training

A strong majority of American public libraries offer training in basic computing and Internet skills. Nine out of ten locations (89.9%) assist patrons with basic Internet usage, ensuring that all members of the public are capable of taking advantage of libraries' broadband offerings. 86.9% of libraries offer training in the most basic computing skills, such as how to use a keyboard or mouse, while 84.4% of locations assist patrons with common productivity software. There is relatively little variance between libraries in different areas for these types of basic services. 93.3% of suburban libraries help patrons with

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patrons with basic Internet skills, while 86.6 % of rural libraries offer these services. Librarians prefer to offer these basic trainings on an as-needed basis, through informal point of use interactions. 79.3% of libraries report using this type of delivery method to provide training in basic Internet use, versus 38.9% through formal classes and 38.2% offering individual help by appointment. Conversely, libraries are more likely to offer instruction in more advanced topics through formal classes. 44.0% of libraries that offer training in Web development use formal classes as their delivery method, versus 51.2% using informal point of use training for the same topic. Likewise, 53.3% of libraries that help patrons create digital content, such as apps, do so through formal classes, while 57.6% offer these services through informal point of use interactions.

Communities that libraries serve desire and associate these training services with public libraries. Indeed, 34.0% of Hispanics and 28% of Blacks 16 or older indicated that public libraries help people find jobs and pursue training “a lot.”²

Key Issues and Challenges

Despite the importance of these services, public libraries face a number of challenges in their efforts to provide access to and instruction in digital resources. Increased use of technology training classes coincides with increased need for library

services, resources, and infrastructure — as well as staff expertise.

The average year opening for U.S. public libraries is 1970, predating the ubiquity of PACs in library locations and programming that depends on broadband access. Yet only 21.3% of libraries made major renovations in the last five years. Data collected through the 2014 Digital Inclusion survey shows a direct relationship between library renovations, and the rates at which libraries can provide technology training offerings to the community (Figure 2). In general, digital literacy services such as training in general computer, software, and Internet use, are offered more frequently in libraries that have been renovated in the past five years. But the gap is more obvious with programs that offer the community greater familiarity with new technologies that require new hardware, increased bandwidth, and upgraded internal networks. For example, there is a 11.2% point gap between renovated and non-renovated libraries when it comes to offering greater familiarity with new technologies, and a 13.5% point gap when it comes to providing social media training (Figure 2). Therefore, the more funding and support a public library receives from its community, the better that library can serve as a tool to foster greater digital readiness across that community.

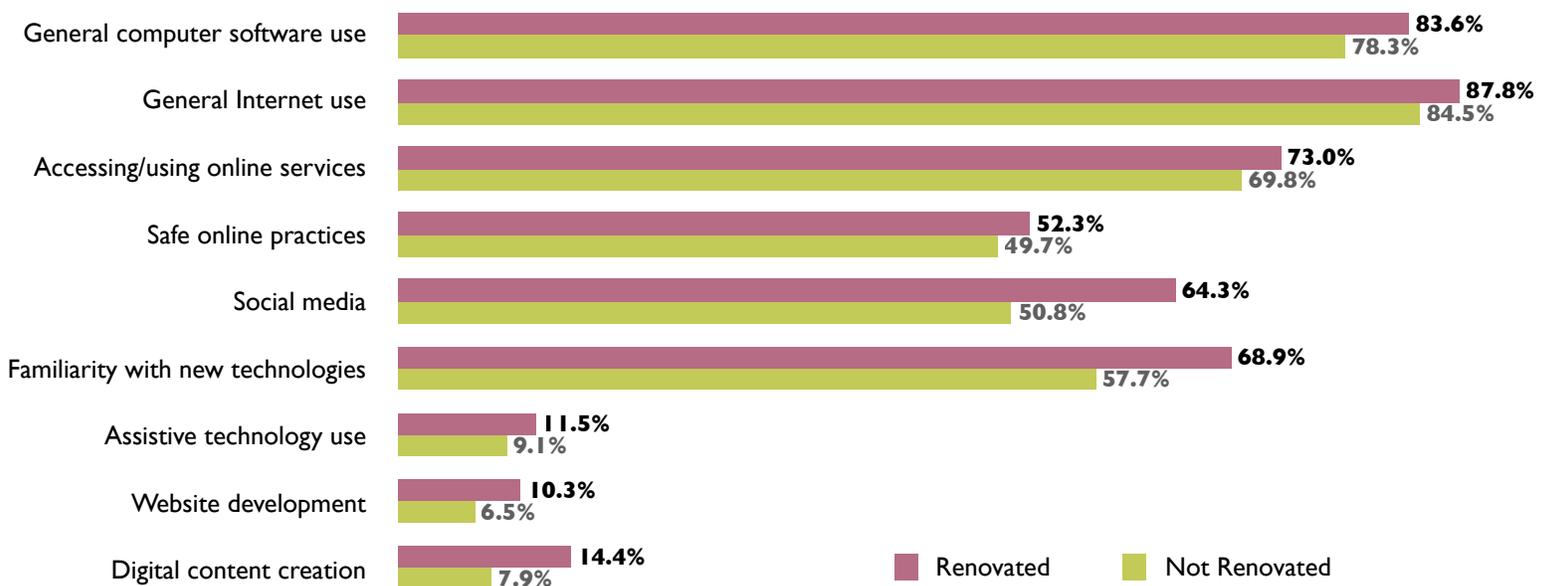


Figure 2. Public Library Technology Training Offerings Overall for Libraries Renovated and Not Renovated in the Last Five years.

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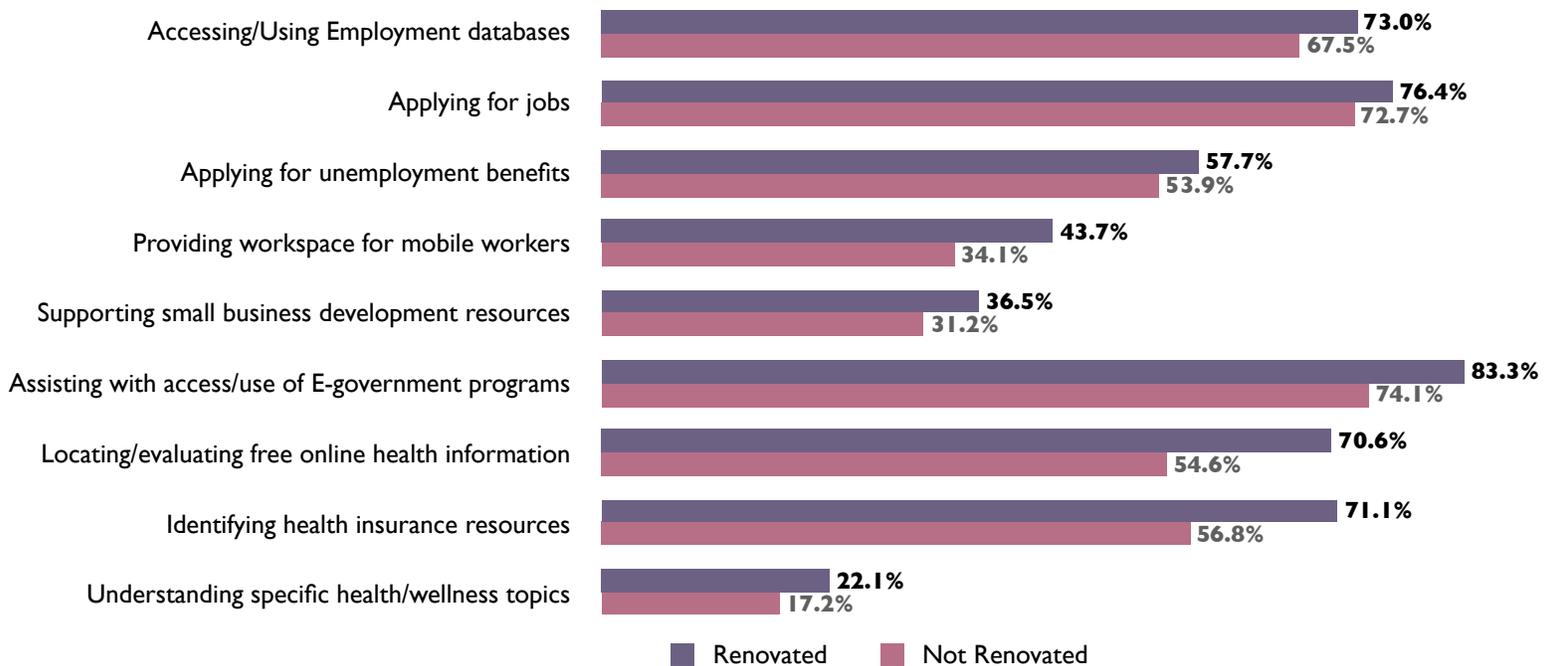


Figure 3. Workforce and Employment Programs Related to Physical Space, Renovated vs. Non-Renovated Libraries.

Library Renovations and the 21st Century Workforce

Data from the 2014 Digital Inclusion survey shows a clear relationship between improved physical space and workforce and employment programming. 43.7% of recently updated libraries offer space for mobile workers, while only 34.1% of locations that have not been renovated in the past five years offer such services (see Figure 3). Information and technology skills are essential for developing a competitive workforce. Public libraries teach people how to find and use the information they need, use technology, use the Internet and Internet-enabled technologies and services, and enhance their knowledge. Public libraries (overall) combine these workforce development skills with a number of critical services and resources:

- 62.3% of libraries offer access to subscription-based job training Websites.
- 73.1% of public libraries provide instruction in

skills that are essential to applying for jobs.

- 54.5% of help individuals apply for unemployment.

In doing so, public libraries create a skilled and knowledgeable workforce able to meet the challenges of today's economy.

Conclusion

Just as community access has become an important component of public library services, so too has patron technology training. Although public libraries face many challenges in their efforts to provide access and instruction services, they are embracing their role in ensuring digital equity and readiness, and as such, in building digitally inclusive communities.

References

² American Library Association. (2009). *Presidential Committee on Information Literacy. Final Report*. Chicago: American Library Association.

¹ Horrigan, J. (2015). "Libraries at the Crossroads. Pew Research Center. Available at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/09/15/2015/Libraries>.