Future Skills Centre | Centre des Compétences futures

Project Insights Report

Bridging the Digital Skills Gap for Older Adults

PARTNERS
Diversity Institute

LOCATIONS
Across Canada

PUBLISHED
August 2026

CONTRIBUTORS
Diversity Institute

Executive Summary

Digital transformation has improved access to services, employment and social connections for some Canadians, but created barriers for older adults, one of the fastest-growing segments of the population. The digital divide is not just an issue of access to infrastructure, but one of affordability, access to tools, and the skills to use them. Efforts to address the needs of older adults are fragmented, siloed, and simply not enough. For example, training investments have largely focused on pathways to employment and on reskilling or upskilling for the working-age population, particularly youth. These investments often assume a level of digital literacy and comfort with evolving technologies (like online learning) that may not align with the preferences of older adults.

Furthermore, many older adults are postponing retirement, re-entering the labour force, or starting businesses, and need skills training to ensure their desired level of labour market participation. Global Digital Skills Index 2022 shows that only 12% of older adults in Canada are actively learning or training in digital skills in workplaces, which is half the proportion of middle-aged individuals doing so (24%). In addition, they are increasingly targeted by cybercrime, fraud, and deep fakes, and need AI literacy not only to ensure their desired level of labour market participation but also to protect them.

This report examines how challenges related to affordability, health, design and usability, and infrastructure intersect with social, knowledge, attitudes, and emerging technology barriers shaping digital exclusion in older adults. Demographic factors (like gender and immigration status) compound digital barriers for those belonging to equity-deserving groups. An assessment of targeted solutions shows that training models incorporating mentorship, safety-focused and personalized curricula, and wraparound supports are effective in reducing barriers and increasing digital skills uptake among older adults.

The study concludes that digital inclusion is increasingly central to healthy aging, wellbeing, and social participation. Coordinated strategies, sustained funding, and inclusive training frameworks are necessary to better support older adults' meaningful participation in an increasingly digital society.

KEY INSIGHTS

1. Age is negatively associated with familiarity with AI among workers. According to a national survey, among workers aged 55-64, about one out of four (26%) reported being familiar with AI, while about three out of four (71%) of workers aged 18-24 reported AI familiarity.

2. Fragmented, short-term funding and siloed training delivery models prevent digital skills programs designed for older adults from scaling equitably, inclusively, and sustainably with widespread impact.

3. Although digital adoption accelerated during the pandemic, only 17% of older adults who pursued training during the pandemic enrolled in digital-skills-related courses, highlighting low uptake despite rising needs that could benefit from technology proficiency, such as accessing virtual healthcare services.

The Issue

In Canada, rapid digital transformation is changing the way people access services, work, and socially engage. However, certain populations, such as older adults and equity-deserving groups, face disproportionate challenges caused by gaps in digital access, skills, exposure, and confidence. As governments, financial institutions, healthcare providers, and community services are increasingly shifting essential services to online-first or online-only, those without adequate digital literacy face growing risks of exclusion. Advances in technology, for example, AI's rapid evolution and diffusion, could add a further barrier faced by older adults to access services.

Beyond access issues, older adults in Canada also encounter persistent barriers to digital inclusion, including limited levels of basic digital skills, affordability issues, lack of tailored training programs, lack of disability-assistive devices, and concerns regarding privacy and safety online. These challenges are compounded for older adults residing in rural and remote regions that face infrastructure gaps and inadequate service availability, low-income individuals, and those belonging to equity-deserving groups.

This research explores the state of digital skills among older adults in Canada and the barriers to access and adoption they face. Addressing these gaps through flexible training models is important, not only for individual well-being, daily functioning, and independence, but for ensuring equitable access to services, work, and reducing broad social and economic inequalities that will grow if unaddressed.

What We Investigated

This research report explored the current realities of digital access and skills acquisition for older adults in Canada in combination with best practices for tailored training programs to inform policy strategy and investments in closing the digital skills gap. The significance of digital access among older adults, who represent one of the fastest-growing and diverse segments of the population, is that of both economic and social priority.

Reviewing the digital skills landscape for older adults required examination of the barriers they face to digital adoption, exploration of training approaches, analysis of program and policy design, and identification of strategies for building digital skills that support workforce readiness, lifelong learning, and health management. Digital literacy and proficiency levels are shaped by more than just age alone, with sociodemographic factors and interactions with gendered inequalities creating distinct barriers as a result of the heterogeneity of the older adult population.

The evidence-based insights and training program framework generated by the report provide guidance for scalable digital inclusion strategies and advise policymakers, employers, and community organizations with effective approaches to strengthening digital inclusion for older adults.

What We're Learning

Despite a distinctly wide digital skills gap faced by older adults in Canada, efforts to address their needs have remained fragmented, siloed and inadequate as investments have largely prioritized the employment and reskilling or upskilling needs for the working-age population (particularly youth). However, ensuring that older adults have digital skills is important to bolster Canada's labour force in the face of looming skills shortages and amid stagnating productivity growth.

Significantly more older adults are active in the labour market today than before (doubling from 6.6% in 1994 to 15% in 2023). As Canada juggles the labour force implications from reductions in immigration, a shrinking number of younger workers entering the workforce, and increasing retirement, strengthening digital skills for older adults is essential in securing workforce participation.

However, older adults are receiving less digital skills training for work, with only 12% of "baby boomers" actively training for workplace digital skills readiness and just 8% expecting to do so in five years; comparatively, 24% of "millenials" are actively training and 25% expect to do so in five years. The lack of workplace training designed for older adults negatively affects their use and adoption of emerging technologies like AI.

There are intersectional nuances in challenges faced by older adults, with equity-deserving groups reporting increased barriers to digital literacy. Persistent gender differences in digital access and skills are increasingly important to understand, as women have fewer social supports available to assist them with technology, and are at a higher risk of stereotyping that hinders their digital skills development. Furthermore, gendered inequality is exacerbated for racialized women, who face higher unemployment rates and lower incomes than racialized men and than the non-racialized population.

Traditional "one-size-fits-all" training models are insufficient in addressing the diverse needs of older adults. Older adults vary widely in their digital readiness, health needs, learning preferences, and socioeconomic circumstances. Effective practice requires relationship-based delivery, one-on-one or small-group mentorship, and training that is grounded in real-world tasks such as accessing telehealth, government services, or online banking. Innovative practices and training design components include harnessing intergenerational, youth-led mentorship, the way skills are framed, peer-to-peer learning, and ensuring teachers and mentors are educated on anti-ageism and anti-oppression frameworks.

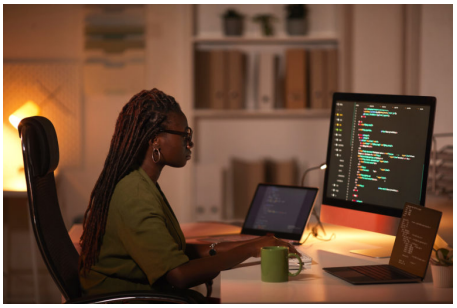
Why It Matters

Canada's growing aging population is steadily transforming the social and economic landscape, making digital inclusion for older adults a core public policy and workforce issue that requires concrete policy direction and national leadership. Existing training programs designed to address barriers have demonstrated promising outcomes despite current funding and resource constraints. Scaling inclusive training models requires expanding their reach to ensure that skills development is disseminated evenly and accessibly. Without coordinated, well-funded, equity-driven approaches, the rapid adoption of digital technologies and challenges posed by emerging forms (i.e., artificial intelligence) will continue to deepen inequities, put healthy aging at risk, reduce labour force participation and weaken the social well-being of older adults.

Part of an effective response to digital skills barriers affecting older adults is training that combines inclusive and instructional design with support for community-based delivery. Older adults face a growing need for flexible, accessible learning opportunities that meet them where they are. Targeted programs that bundle device access, affordable connectivity, adaptable delivery modes, and ongoing personalized support were found to strengthen engagement among older adult learners. Training approaches need to reflect the interplay of various barriers, including the relevance of training to specific needs, the confidence and familiarity of learners, and combine mentorship to meet broad social and economic inclusion goals.

Successful training program design and delivery are underpinned by broader policy support through coordinated partnerships, collaboration and funding. A formal digital inclusion strategy that brings together relevant stakeholders across the ecosystem with stronger federal investments can support long-term training infrastructure, staffing and evaluation to protect program continuity, while ensuring resources are allocated for older adults facing compounded barriers and at a higher risk of exclusion do not remain at the periphery.

What's Next



State of Skills: Digital Tools in the Skills Ecosystem

There is considerable promise in the role digital tools and virtual career services can play in improving access to training and career development, particularly for those with geographic barriers or constraints such as family care or other work responsibilities.

Read Thematic Report

The digital divide experienced by older adults is dynamic and continually evolving. This issue demands sustained, coordinated efforts to address persistent and widening gaps, measure outcomes, and develop evidence-based approaches to social and economic needs that are changing due to the nature of digitalization. Funders should prioritize long-term, intersectional research to track progress and digital equity for those who are at a higher risk of exclusion. Recognizing the diverse needs of Canada's older adult population means examining and identifying barriers faced by equity-deserving groups who remain underrepresented in current digital skills training approaches and research. Ensuring that Canada's digital skills and AI literacy strategies take into account the needs of older adults is critical. Additionally, further investigation of the approaches to upskilling and training that respond to their needs and preferences will be important to inform evidence-based approaches.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

Cukier, W., Israilov, B. (2026). Project Insights Report: Bridging the Digital Skills Gap for Older Adults. Toronto: Future Skills Centre. https://fsc-ccf.ca/research/digital-skills-gap/

Funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program

Canada

Bridging the Digital Skills Gap for Older Adults is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

The Future Skills Centre acknowledges that the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee share a special relationship to the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory,' where our office is located, bound to share and protect the land. As a pan-Canadian initiative, FSC operates on the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, the name given to the North American continent by some Indigenous peoples. We are grateful for the opportunity to work in this territory and commit ourselves to learning about our shared history and doing our part towards reconciliation.

© Copyright 2026 – Future Skills Centre / Centre des Competences futures