



Research

# Report: 6 of 10 Millennials Have 'Low' Technology Skills

- By Dian Schaffhauser
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Digital natives aren't as tech-savvy as they think they are — at least, not according to their bosses. American millennials (those between the ages of 16 and 34) may be the first generation that grew up with computers and Internet access, but all that time spent glued to a small screen hasn't translated to technology competence. While they spend an average of 35 hours every week on digital media, nearly six out of 10 millennials can't do basic tasks such as sorting, searching for and emailing data from a spreadsheet.

Those are the findings of a research project that analyzed data from an assessment of adult competencies that tests cognitive and workplace skills. **Change the Equation**, a consortium of business and education organizations, hired the **American Institutes for Research** (AIR) to analyze raw data from the 2012 **Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies** (PIAAC), a household study conducted by the **Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development**.

AIR specifically examined results of "Problem Solving in Technology Rich Environments" for 5,000 test-takers in the United States, aged 16 to 64. Those questions assess how well the person can use digital technology, communications tools and networks to get and analyze information, communicate with others and "perform practical tasks."

Based on how well a person did in that portion of the PIAAC, he or she was given a score between zero and 500, which was used to define what level of technical proficiency he or she possessed: below level 1, level 1, level 2 and level 3. Those who score below level 2, as an example, couldn't

solve a multi-step problem that required more than one computer application. Then the various levels were used to understand characteristics of the test-takers in each category, such as average earnings. Fifty-eight percent of millennials fell into those lower levels.

The results of the analysis, shared in the four-page report, "**Does Not Compute: The High Cost of Low Technology Skills in the U.S. — and What We Can Do About It**," found that although 91 percent of millennials consider a lack of computer skills irrelevant to their job prospects, employers think otherwise. A **survey by the American Association of Colleges and Universities**, found that only 37 percent consider recent college graduates well prepared to stay on top of new technologies.

That gap could impair millennial earning power. As the report noted, a person ranked at the lowest skill level earns nearly 40 percent less on average (\$2,920 per month) than a person at the highest level (\$6,622), even when other characteristics that affect earnings, such as race, gender or skills in math and literacy, are held constant.

"Our findings go against the assumption that America's first generation of 'digital natives' are tech savvy," said Change the Equation CEO Linda Rosen. "If we continue to leave young people to their own devices — quite literally — their low skills will become a dead weight on individual opportunity and American productivity."

The story doesn't end there, however. The organization is espousing science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education to help fill the gap for young people. Its Web site offers a resource, **STEMworks**, for finding STEM education programs around the country. Currently, the site profiles about five dozen programs around the country that follow a strict set of **design principles** set by Change the Equation, such as using "rigorous evaluation" to stay on top of progress, ensuring work is sustainable and addresses under-represented groups, and creating public-private partnerships with "high impact."

Among the recommendations offered in the new report:

- To use technology to solve real-world challenges;
- To share lessons from business;
- To serve underserved populations in STEM fields, including women and people of color; and
- To teach the teachers.

"Opportunities to learn problem solving with technology must become the rule rather than the exception," the report's authors stated. "Now is the time for business to join forces with

government, educators and other STEM advocates to ensure that all young people...have the opportunity to become tech savvy."

The complete report is available for download from the [Change the Equation site](#).

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