Digital Skills Discussion Guide

> A Tool for Workforce Service Providers

By Amanda Fins, The Aspen Institute, December 2021

There is much in the news about technological change and our research team at the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program frequently hears workforce development professionals express concerns about the implications of technology change for job-seekers and workers. At the same time, many workforce professionals are working with companies on building a more diverse workforce and are supporting business' efforts to strengthen inclusion practices and ensure their strategies foster equitable advancement opportunities. In response to these intersecting interests, we developed this Digital Skills Discussion Guide. The Guide is intended to help workforce providers learn about how employer partners are integrating technology and upskilling workers. By beginning this learning process, this resource can facilitate supporting workers adapting to new ways of interacting with their work environments during this digital transformation.

As those familiar with our [Question Bank for Workforce Providers](#) know, conversations with hiring and workplace managers can both strengthen relationships with businesses and provide insights about labor demand, skill needs, hiring and employment practices, and work environments. We've designed this Digital Skills Discussion Guide as a companion tool to the original Question Bank, which focuses on the retail sector and asks more general questions about employment practices. Workforce development professionals can use these resources together to guide conversations with employers looking to invest in digital skills training for their frontline workers. These guided conversations can strengthen workforce services, deepen business relationships, and explore new ways to partner to achieve mutual benefit – including referring workers to [good fit jobs](#).

Ultimately, we hope this tool can be helpful to workforce providers and employers who are interested in learning about the impact of technology on frontline workers and developing strategic, coordinated responses that support worker wellbeing and business success.
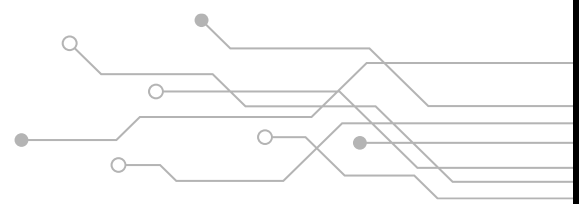
Conversations with employers about digital skills can help workforce professionals:

> Learn about how the daily work of frontline occupations may be changing as industries apply new technologies

> Learn about how the frontline workforce is adapting and learning in response to changes, and what supports can enable digital skill development that is widely accessible and equitable

> Learn about promising approaches to digital skills training within and outside the workplace that lead to career advancement and wage increases

> Learn the ways in which digital skills training investments can be paired with job quality supports to enable career advancement and wage increase opportunities for frontline workers

> Learn about any challenges finding, recruiting, and/or retaining workers with the skills needed for an occupation

> Learn about and find opportunities to support efforts to build greater diversity in the digital workforce

This discussion guide is based on a series of conversations that our research team held with business representatives from a range of industry sectors during 2020 and 2021. We explored how businesses are adopting technology in the workplace, how COVID-19 accelerated these efforts, how digital transformation is impacting skill expectations for frontline workers, and what approaches businesses are taking to support development of digital skills for frontline workers. By facilitating learning-focused conversations, we encouraged employers to articulate their digital skills needs and consider the training and supports they could provide to strengthen worker stability and equitable advancement. The experience of conducting those conversations inform this guide.

We hope that this discussion guide will help you begin an ongoing dialogue with a range of employers that provides practical information to help strengthen your employer relationships and workforce services. Where possible, to supplement your conversations with business representatives, we also encourage you to speak directly with frontline workers about their experiences with technology change. Their experience on the job is valuable expertise that can improve our approach to potential digital skills solutions. See our resource, Centering Worker Voice in Employer Engagement and Program Design, for ideas about how to engage frontline workers in your learning process.

> Let the Conversation Guide Your Questions

When you take a look at the questions below, you'll see that there are far too many questions to ask in one session. You should pick and choose a mix of questions based on your objectives, the stage of your relationship, and what you already know about this employer and the local industry. You may find that some questions feel right for first discussions and others would feel more comfortable once you've established rapport. With this in mind, each section provides a number of open-ended questions with potential follow-up questions to encourage the employer to share their approach. We suggest you listen closely and let the context you hear shape the questions you ask next from the list that follows. Additionally, some of the questions included here – such as questions about the diversity of the workforce – may be sensitive. It's valuable to communicate that the intent is not to discern whether they have the right answers to the questions, but rather to use the conversation as a mutual learning opportunity and jumping off point for any future conversations or work you may do together. The goal is to learn from each other to improve the experience of workers and contribute to the success of the business. Lastly, it's good practice to let the employer know at the beginning of the conversation what you plan to do with the information shared. You may also want to ask about any confidentiality concerns they have in order to address this early and create an environment where they feel open to sharing.

> Prepare for Your Conversation

Before going into a conversation with an employer, consider what your goal for the discussion is. Is it to inform your organization's training programs for jobseekers? Is it to help identify candidates to refer for employment? This will ensure you are selecting questions most helpful for your goal.

Additionally, preparing for your conversation by doing a little "desk research" in advance is good practice. Here are a few questions to explore before going into your conversation to get a good sense of your intended trajectory for the discussion:

- What occupation(s) do you want to talk about?

- Has the company (or the occupation) been in the news recently? Have you seen stories related to the digitalization of work processes or other technology changes?

- What do you and others in your workforce development community know about the company's investments in technology, and how they may have changed the nature of the work for frontline workers? For example, a local retailer has installed kiosks in the lobby; how has this changed the job tasks and skill needs of workers?

- Can you learn anything about how the company describes digital skill requirements from job postings on their career site?

- Is the company unionized? If so, which occupations are part of the union? Do you know whether the union has been involved in conversations about technology implementation?

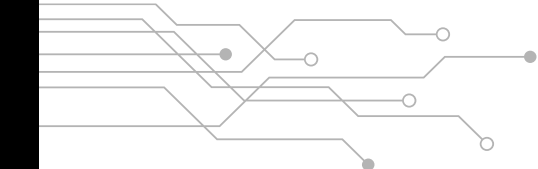# > 1. Questions to Understand the Business and Your Target Occupation(s)

☐ Approximately how many employees in the business fill this role?

☐ What is the typical education level for employees in the occupation?

☐ How easy or difficult do you find it to attract and retain employees in this position? Are digital skills a factor?

☐ Are employees in this occupation working remotely?

☐ What are some top-of-mind digital skills challenges impacting this occupation now?

> Are these challenges similar or different for employees in other occupations?

☐ How do digital skills affect the role of these employees in terms of day-to-day operations and business productivity?
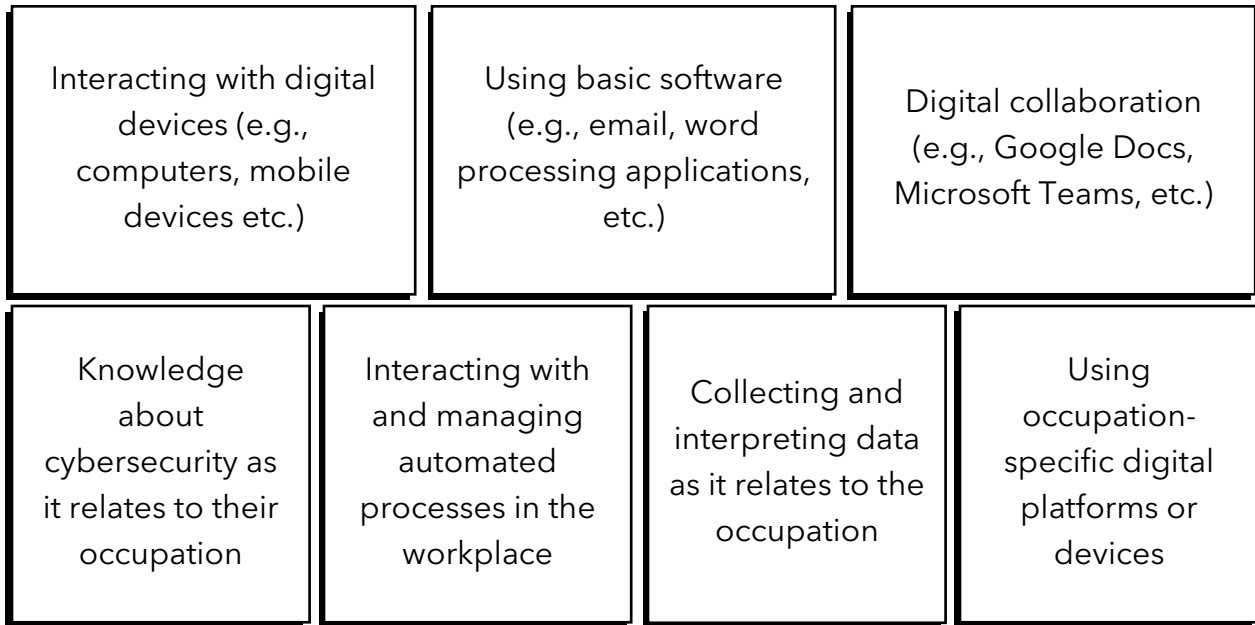
> 2. Questions about Current Workforce Skills Needs

☐ Do your employees in [target occupation] use [specific technology devices] (e.g., computers, mobile devices)? What do they use [device] for?

  > Where are the [devices] located? Are they shared [devices]?

  > What type of support do they have for set-up and troubleshooting?

  > In the last 6 months, have they started doing new things at work using the [devices]? What are they?

  > What kinds of things are employees having trouble with? What types of approaches is the company taking to address these?

☐ What other kinds of new technology or devices do your employees use?

  > How do they use them?

  > How do they troubleshoot and what kind of support is there for set-up and troubleshooting?

  > What new things do your workers do with this new technology?

☐ Can you describe the digital skills your organization expects for employees in [target occupation], and why they are important in the current work environment?
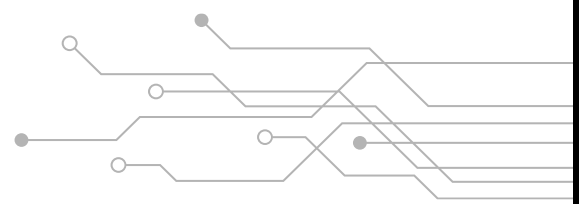
☐ Could you provide examples of the ways that frontline workers use technology at work?

> To what extent is [skill from the chart below or otherwise mentioned] important for frontline workers to perform their jobs?

Interacting with digital devices (e.g., computers, mobile devices etc.)	Using basic software (e.g., email, word processing applications, etc.)	Digital collaboration (e.g., Google Docs, Microsoft Teams, etc.)

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Knowledge about cybersecurity as it relates to their occupation	Interacting with and managing automated processes in the workplace	Collecting and interpreting data as it relates to the occupation	Using occupation-specific digital platforms or devices

☐ Are there things that are currently changing, or plans to make changes, that would affect the digital skills that your frontline workers are using to perform their roles?
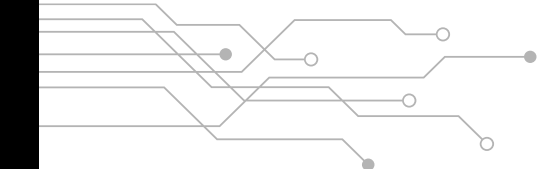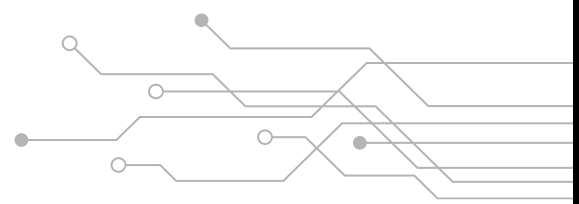
> 3. Questions about Hiring Practices

☐ Have you gone through a process to identify the digital skills needed for this occupation?

☐ Which skills do you require at hire, and which will you train for?

☐ Have you revised your position descriptions and job postings to reflect needed digital skills?

☐ What evidence do you look for on applications that the applicant has those skills? (e.g., degrees, certifications, badges, work experience)

☐ How do you screen applicants for digital skills (job description, interview process)?

☐ Do any of your interviews involve tests, project work, or tasks you ask applicants to complete?

☐ Can you tell us the different ways that your company relies upon technology to support recruiting and hiring?
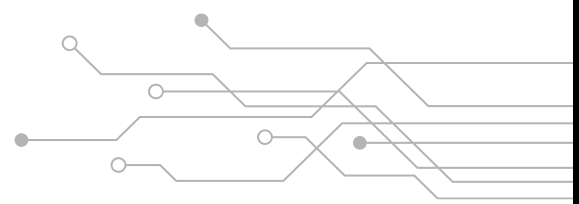
> 4. Questions about Training Practices

☐ What kinds of programs and supports do you offer to build digital skills? Have you found any particularly helpful strategies to support frontline workers building the digital skills they need to perform their work? Why was it helpful?

☐ How do workers learn about training offerings and their relationship to advancement opportunities?

☐ What kinds of formats do you provide the trainings in? (e.g., classroom, virtual, lab) Are they offered in multiple languages? What have you learned about what works for your workers?

☐ Are workers paid to participate or do they participate on their own time? Are there incentives for participation (e.g., explicit paths for advancement)?

☐ Have you ever partnered with other organizations to support development of digital skills for your workers? If yes, how so?

☐ Are you working on developing any new trainings to build digital skills for frontline workers?

☐ What kinds of investments are being made to support utilization of technology for employees at your company? (e.g., investments in technology such as internet bandwidth, equipment purchases, trainings, tuition assistance, etc.)

☐ We understand employees may be encountering multiple personal challenges that could affect their ability to work. What are some of the ways your company is thinking about helping these employees to participate in and complete digital skills training programs?

☐ How likely are your workers to take advantage of your company's programs and supports? Do certain groups of people participate in higher or lower numbers? Can you tell us why?

☐ Have digital skills implemented across your workforce changed who at your company can do the work? What kinds of considerations has this raised?

> 5. Questions about Equity in Digital Skills Training and Advancement

☐ Does your company have diversity goals as it relates to race, gender, age, ability, etc.? If so, how have these goals informed implementation of your digital skills training?

> How would you describe the diversity of your workforce? Does this diversity reflect your community? At the frontline level? At the supervisor level? At the management level?

> What successes and challenges have you had in hiring a diverse workforce that reflects the makeup of your community?

☐ Are there digital skills requirements that have to be met to be considered for a raise or promotion?

> If so, are these requirements clearly defined and easily accessible for workers? In what ways can workers learn what additional digital skills they may need to advance at the company?

> In what ways are employees able to demonstrate that they're ready for advancement?

> **Wrap up & Reflection**

☐   Do you have a sense of what types of digital skills will be needed in your workforce in the next 2-3 years? In the long term?

☐   Is there something important to digital skills we haven't asked about? Anything else you would like us to know?

☐   Is there anyone else at your company we should talk to, to learn more about how technology change is impacting the business and its workforce needs?
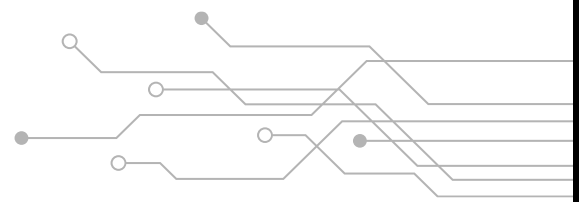
> Acknowledgments

We thank our employer partners for volunteering their time and insights to the research that informed this Guide. And we are grateful to the members of our team who played a role in developing it, including Senior Research Associate Amanda Fins, UpSkill America Director Jaime Fall, Executive Director Maureen Conway, Research Director Amy Blair, and former Workforce Strategies Initiative Associate Director Jenny Weissbourd.

> About

UpSkill America is an employer-led movement to expand opportunity for America's workers and allow our economy and communities to thrive. The movement promotes training and advancement practices to help workers progress in their careers and move into better-paying jobs. Led by a leadership team of employer organizations, UpSkill America's mission is to recognize employers that invest in their frontline workers; promote the adoption of policies and practices used by employers to educate, train and develop frontline workers; and highlight effective local and regional workforce development partnerships and how they educate, train and develop individuals for success in the workplace. Learn more at aspeninstitute.org/upskill.

UpSkill America is an initiative of the Economic Opportunities Program. EOP advances strategies, policies, and ideas to help low- and moderate-income people thrive in a changing economy. We recognize that race, gender, and place intersect with and intensify the challenge of economic inequality and we address these dynamics by advancing an inclusive vision of economic justice. For over 25 years, EOP has focused on expanding individuals' opportunities to connect to quality work, start businesses, and build economic stability that provides the freedom to pursue opportunity. Learn more at aspeninstitute.org/eop.

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