

VENTURA COUNTY **DIGITAL UPSKILLING INITIATIVE**



Outcomes and Key Learnings
2022–2025

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About the Economic Development Collaborative

The EDC is a private nonprofit that was founded in 1996 with funding from Ventura County, its 10 cities, and key private sector companies to provide a pathway to business growth, economic prosperity, and high quality of life for all. The EDC runs a Small Business Development Center (SBDC) and is a regional asset for economic vitality in Ventura, Santa Barbara, and Los Angeles Counties, giving businesses, community partners, and civic leaders the resources they need to succeed. By leveraging public and private funds, the EDC has become a key player in delivering business consulting, funding, and strategic initiatives that support the regional economy.

Acknowledgements

The Ventura County Digital Upskilling Initiative would not have been possible without the close support of dozens of regional partners. As grant recipient, the EDC administered the \$5 million in state funding, led the design of the three training cohorts, contracted partners, facilitated collaboration among partners, and addressed problems as they arose. The EDC managed all program partners, oversaw implementation, and developed replication toolkits to ensure the initiative's sustainability and scalability. While the EDC anchored the work, led by Jaime Fall, Workforce and Economic Strategies Director, and Vivian Vázquez, Workforce and Economic Strategies Senior Associate, the expertise and contributions of many partners were essential to the initiative's success.

REGIONAL PARTNERS

Assemblymember Jacqui Irwin developed the initial concept and got funding from the state.

Adult schools across Ventura County provided the Computer Basics course and supported curriculum development and improvement.

Conejo Valley Adult Education

Moorpark Adult School

Ojai Adult School

Oxnard Adult School

Santa Paula Adult School

Simi Institute for Careers & Education

Ventura Adult and Continuing

Education

Cause IMPACTS Consulting conducted initial research outlining the gaps and needs per cohort, project managed the initiative, and conducted final impact reporting.

CompTIA provided ICT Upskilling.

GBL Systems Corporation provided ICT Upskilling.

Small Business Development Center Advisors supported GYSBO by advising participants.

Ventura County Adult Education Consortium supported the convening of adult schools and participated in debrief sessions to improve the course.

Ventura County Community College District supported the design of Computer Basics.

Ventura County Community Foundation supported community outreach and marketing.

Ventura County Office of Education facilitated a collaborative group of adult school and community college instructors to develop the Computer Basics program materials and handled Computer Basics pilot program administration.

West Ed conducted an evaluation of the Computer Basics Program Pilot and first cohort.

Women's Economic Ventures (WEV) developed the Get Your Small Business Online curriculum in collaboration with the EDC and SBDC advisors and provided the course.

Workforce Development Board of Ventura County supported program design and marketing.



ASSEMBLY MEMBER

Jacqui Irwin

ASSEMBLY DISTRICT 42

LETTER FROM ASSEMBLYMEMBER JACQUI IRWIN

When I first envisioned the Ventura County Digital Upskilling Initiative, I saw an opportunity to address one of the most pressing challenges of our time—the digital divide. Today, digital skills are no longer optional; they are essential for success in nearly every industry, for every worker, and for every small business striving to compete in a global economy.

When I first envisioned the Ventura County Digital Upskilling Initiative, I hoped it would do more than teach technology skills—I hoped it would open doors to opportunity, connection, and confidence for residents and small businesses across our region. Three years later, I am proud to say that is exactly what it has done.

That is why, in 2021, I was proud to secure \$5 million in state funding to launch this initiative in Ventura County. Working together, the Economic Development Collaborative (EDC) and our incredible network of adult schools, community colleges, nonprofits, training partners, and small business partners not only met but exceeded our original goals, developing a pilot that can be scaled across the state.

Over the past four years, more than 1,000 Ventura County residents have gained essential digital skills—whether learning to use a computer for the first time, earning industry-recognized ICT certifications, or building an online presence to help their small business grow. These participants have gained skills that increase their earning potential, strengthen their families, and contribute to a more inclusive and prosperous local economy.

This initiative also deepened collaboration across sectors—linking schools, libraries, community-based organizations, government agencies, and small business networks in new and lasting ways to continue this work. The EDC and partners developed replication toolkits for both Computer Basics and Get Your Small Business Online and have trained dozens of organizations statewide to deliver these programs. Many local partners have also secured new funding to sustain and expand these opportunities. Together, we proved that digital upskilling is not just a workforce strategy—it is an economic mobility strategy.

The success of this initiative is a testament to what happens when we invest in people. It demonstrates that with the right support, innovation, and collaboration, we can close equity gaps, strengthen our workforce, and build more resilient communities. I am proud that this program has not only transformed lives in Ventura County but is now serving as a replicable model for other regions across California.

To all the partners and participants who made this possible—thank you.



Sincerely,

Jacqui Irwin
Assemblymember, 42nd District
Ventura County, California

I. Executive Summary

The Ventura County Digital Upskilling Initiative was launched in 2022 by the Economic Development Collaborative (EDC) and regional partners, with the vision of equipping job seekers, current workers, and small business owners in Ventura County with the digital skills and confidence needed to participate in the rapidly digitalizing world. The initiative was made possible by California State Assemblymember Jacqui Irwin, who secured \$5 million for a digital upskilling pilot in Ventura County with the goal of creating processes and programs that can be scaled across California.

Need for Digital Upskilling

Digital skills are now essential for work, daily life, and economic mobility—the ability for individuals and families to improve their income and social standing over time. Without digital skills, people are excluded from job opportunities, career growth, and online resources that can enhance daily life.



People with digital skills have more career opportunities and earn higher wages, with clear pathways into middle- and high-skill jobs.



Digital skills deficiencies disproportionately impact women, people of color, and non-English speakers, compounding existing inequities.



The COVID-19 pandemic widened the digital divide, accelerating the shift to digital tools and remote work. The shift disproportionately impacted those without digital skills.



All industries and employers need employees with basic digital skills. Today, 90% of Ventura County jobs require digital proficiency, and ongoing upskilling is critical for workers to stay competitive in an increasingly automated world.

Three Training Cohorts

The initiative provided digital upskilling training to three different cohorts of learners whom each had different digital skills training needs.



Computer Basics for people with limited to no digital skills who needed basic digital skills to get a well-paying job.



Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Upskilling for workers who already had some basic digital skills but needed specific ICT upskilling to help them move into a better-paying job.



Get Your Small Business Online (GYSBO) for entrepreneurs and small business operators who needed to establish an online business presence to stay relevant and competitive.








What is Digital Upskilling?

Digital upskilling is the process of teaching people how to think, act, and thrive in a digital world. It provides employees with the opportunity to gain the tools and skills they need to adapt to a world with ever-changing technologies. Along with teaching technical skills, such as how to use a specific device or navigate a particular software, digital upskilling ensures that employees have the fundamental knowledge required to understand new technologies.¹

Computer Basics

The Computer Basics course was created to meet the need for a free, short-term computer basics training program that is accessible to communities with little to no prior digital experience. People without digital skills are in danger of being left further behind as digitalization expands.

Without basic digital skills, people cannot:

-  Search for, apply for, and interview for a job.
-  Earn higher wages given to middle-skills workers or work remotely.
-  Access online work schedules, workplace benefits, or banking.
-  Avoid cybersecurity threats and scams.
-  Reserve an airline ticket, hotel room, table at a restaurant, or even a picnic table at a park.

Course Overview

The Computer Basics course equipped adult learners with the essential digital skills and confidence needed to navigate devices, be technically proficient at work, and access further education. Participants learned to operate Chromebooks, use the internet safely, manage documents and email, and participate in video calls.

Core Partners

EDC collaborated with the Ventura County Adult Education Consortium, adult schools, the Ventura County Office of Education, and the Ventura County Community College District to outline course objectives that ladder into existing adult school offerings. The Ventura County Office of Education then created the initial curriculum, and adult schools across the region were contracted to deliver the course and integrate it into existing catalogs to sustain provision beyond the grant.

Next Steps

The Computer Basics classes will continue in Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties, thanks to five California Advanced Services Fund Broadband Adoption Account grants that EDC has received from the California Public Utilities Commission. For more information on when this program will launch, go to: <https://digital-upskilling.edcollaborative.com/>



Course Delivery



FREE to all learners.



Short course provided in 6 to 8 weeks in 24 to 32 instructional hours.



In-person with hands-on practice and real-world application.



Curriculum available in English and Spanish.



Small class size of 15 to 20 participants.



Completers got a Chromebook. All participants received Chromebooks for use during the course, and every graduate got to keep the device to continue their learning and digital use.

Overall Computer Basics Impact

An evaluation by WestEd, a nonpartisan, nonprofit agency, found that the course led to significant learning gains, improving participants' ability to use digital tools and secure better jobs.

By the Numbers



>1000
Participants
trained



1004
Chromebooks
gifted



69
Classes
(27 in Spanish, 21 in English, 19 bilingual (English/Spanish), and 2 with Farsi or Arabic support)

Participant Demographics

50
Years old
(average age)

~70%
Female

>75%
People
of Color

65%
Native Spanish
speakers

“Thank you for the great opportunity to learn how to use a computer. Not only did it help me to be able to help my daughter, but now I can make my payments online. I can look for the information I need. The most important thing is that I will get a better position in my job, and that’s great. Thank you very much.”

– Itzel H., Computer Basics Student



Long-Term Impact

- Most participants use the Chromebook given to them three to seven times a week.
- 53% of participants in the pilot cohort said the course helped them get a better job.

Information and Communication Technologies Upskilling

The **Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Upskilling** cohort was created to ensure that workers currently employed had access to the digital skills and industry-recognized credentials needed to advance. Digital credentials open doors to higher-wage technical careers and create pathways to economic mobility. Unfortunately for many workers, career mobility has stalled not because of a lack of motivation or experience, but because promotions and higher-wage opportunities increasingly demand ICT skills that they have not yet been able to acquire.

Course Overview

This cohort targeted working adults and contracted training partners who provided access to industry-recognized ICT certifications through CompTIA and Amazon Web Services (AWS).

Core Partners

CompTIA provided virtual instructor-led training (VILT) that led to CompTIA A+ and/or CompTIA Security+ stackable certifications. Each certificate training was 17 weeks long and included instructor office hours and one-on-one support from career services staff.

GBL Systems partnered with AWS to provide self-paced online training that led to stackable credentials in AWS Cloud Foundations and AWS Cloud Architecting. Once a participant earned a certificate, they received support in creating a LinkedIn profile, resume, and cover letter, as well as connections to internships and career placement.

CompTia Outcomes

By the Numbers

 **124** Participants completed training

 **21** Participants were placed into jobs

 **57** Participants earned certifications

Participant Demographics

>60% People of color (36% Latino/a)

36% Female

43% Were over 40

51% Were unemployed

GBL System Outcomes

By the Numbers

 **64** Participants earned credentials

 **11** Participants were placed into paid internships

Participant Demographics

45% People of color (32% Latino/a)

29% Female

69% Made <\$50,000 before enrollment

63% Did not have a 4-year college degree

Small Business Upskilling

The **Get Your Small Business Online (GYSBO)** program was created to address the digital skills gaps among small business owners and entrepreneurs. Small businesses without basic digital infrastructure like a website, e-commerce functionality, or online visibility are vulnerable to falling behind competitors, losing out on revenue streams, and becoming virtually invisible in an increasingly digital marketplace.

When businesses are not online, they cannot:



Be found in online searches.



Increase revenue through online sales.



Improve back-office operations by using tools such as digital payroll systems.



Communicate with employees, coworkers, and customers.



Reach new customers.



Create or send invoices.

Course Overview

The GYSBO course taught small business owners and entrepreneurs the essential knowledge they needed to create, maintain, and grow their online business presence. Participants learned to create and launch a simple business website, create and implement online marketing, make their company searchable online (SEO), create social media content, and develop a six-month action plan.

Core Partners

The EDC contracted Women's Economic Ventures (WEV), a local nonprofit with a proven track record of providing cohort programs for small business owners, to design and deliver the GYSBO course. SBDC advisors and WEV business advisors provided one-on-one advising to participants.

Course Delivery



FREE to all learners.



Cohort Model to foster peer-to-peer learning.



Short course provided in nine sessions.



In-person with hands-on practice and real-world application.



Bilingual Curriculum available in English and Spanish.



Flexible Hyflex training allowed participants to participate each week without having to drive to a classroom, with an option to join some sessions in person to build community.



One-on-one advising helped participants apply the learning to address their business needs.

GYSBO Program Outcomes

Participant Demographics

77%
Female

72%
People of Color
(62% Hispanic or Latino/a)

47
Average age
of participants

By the Numbers

 **13**
Classes provided
(9 English, 4 Spanish)

 **170**
Participants
completed GYSBO

 **~160**
Businesses
received support
(some participants have
more than one business)

 **118**
Participants received
one-on-one coaching
(255 hours of support)

 **36**
New jobs
created

 **30**
New businesses
launched
within one year
of enrollment

62%
of participants
increased business sales

“What this funding delivers is not only a resource to deliver training immediately for the benefit of workers and business, but also an opportunity for investing in local partners and drawing on national best practices for assuring our capacity to remain continuously competitive in workforce skills.”

— Bruce Stenslie, President/CEO, EDC



Overall Impact

The **Ventura County Digital Upskilling Initiative** demonstrates the transformative potential of digital upskilling and the importance of regional collaboration to implement and sustain equitable economic mobility efforts. **In four years, the initiative:**



Served over 1,362 Ventura County residents, far exceeding the original goal of 400.



Strengthened collaboration and built lasting partnerships across direct service providers, adult schools, community-based organizations, and employers.



Created measurable impacts on economic mobility, from new job placements and internships to increased small business revenues and household income.



Built lasting capacity to deliver ongoing digital skills training and prepare workers at all levels for the modern economy.



Served those from underrepresented communities, including Spanish speakers, women, people of color, and older adults.



Developed a sustainable digital upskilling pilot that can be replicated across California as a strategy to increase economic mobility using digital skills training.



Developed replication toolkits that are already being adopted by others across California.



Developed sustained capacity to prepare workers at all levels for digital skills training.

Replication Toolkits

To expand the initiative's impact, the EDC and its partners created free replication toolkits that enable any organization to offer the Computer Basics or GYSBO programs. **Each NO COST replication toolkit includes:**

- » **Bilingual (English and Spanish) curriculum** (Google Slides presentations and instructor notes).
- » **Student activities and worksheets.**
- » **Program-evaluation tools** to help organizations measure the impact of their courses.
- » **Program-administration tools** to help implement the program.

How to Access the Toolkits

All materials are available to download or copy in a Google folder.

*Computer Basics
Curriculum & Program
Replication Toolkit*



*GYSBO Curriculum &
Program Replication
Toolkit.*



Key Learnings

Several important insights emerged from this pilot that will guide future digital upskilling investments.

- ✓ **Digital literacy is an ongoing need.** The initiative demonstrated that programs like Computer Basics must be offered regularly and updated frequently to keep pace with technology. While internet and device access are improving, there are still too few programs that teach digital competence in a way that ensures technology can be effectively used by those with no experience with digital tools.
- ✓ **Removing barriers expands participation.** The initiative prioritized equity by providing wrap around supports such as free devices, stipends, bilingual curriculum, short-term courses, and classes offered at night and in community-based locations—making it possible for those most in need to participate.
- ✓ **Reaching those most in need requires creative outreach.** The initiative increased engagement among immigrant communities, English-language learners, and older adults by partnering with trusted community-based organizations, attending local events, and using culturally relevant outreach rather than relying solely on digital marketing.
- ✓ **Instruction in native languages expands equity.** The initiative improved participation and learning outcomes by offering entire courses taught in Spanish, not just translated materials. This approach removed language barriers and enabled many learners to enroll and succeed for the first time.
- ✓ **Partnerships enable scale and sustainability.** By embedding programs within adult schools, community colleges, and nonprofits, the initiative ensured long-term continuity, leveraged existing expertise, and built capacity for ongoing delivery beyond the pilot period.
- ✓ **Learning digital skills is about more than technology.** Participants in the Digital Upskilling Initiative reported an increase in confidence and in their desire to further their training and education.



II. Introduction

The [Ventura County Digital Upskilling Initiative](#) was launched in 2022 by the Economic Development Collaborative (EDC) and multiple regional partners, with the vision of **equipping job seekers, current workers, and small business owners in Ventura County with the digital skills and confidence needed to participate in the rapidly digitalizing world.** The initiative was made possible by California State Assemblymember Jacqui Irwin, who secured \$5 million in the 2021–2022 state budget for a three-year digital upskilling pilot in Ventura County with the goal of creating processes and programs that can be scaled across California.

The initiative offered three distinct training pathways:



Computer Basics for people with limited to no digital skills who needed basic digital skills to get a well-paying job.



Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Upskilling for workers who already had some basic digital skills but needed specific ICT upskilling to help them move into a better-paying job.



Get Your Small Business Online (GYSBO) for entrepreneurs and small business operators who needed to establish an online business presence to stay relevant and competitive.

The program focused on residents with little to no digital experience, providing them with essential computer skills, access to devices, and the confidence to keep learning. Participants in the Computer Basics program started with the basics—turning on a computer, using email, connecting to the internet—and received help accessing education, jobs, and resources that were previously out of reach. Small business owners received tailored support through a program designed to help them establish an online presence, expand into digital marketplaces, and access new customers. A third track focused on workers who already had basic digital literacy but needed more advanced training to enter the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) sector and pursue higher-wage career pathways.

EDC President/CEO Bruce Stenslie explained, *“What this funding delivers is not only a resource to deliver training immediately for the benefit of workers and business, but also an opportunity for investing in local partners and drawing on national best practices for assuring our capacity to remain continuously competitive in workforce skills.”*

At its core, the Ventura County Digital Upskilling Initiative represents a commitment to economic mobility. By strengthening digital literacy and technical capabilities, the program has opened pathways to better jobs, higher wages, and more resilient businesses. It also offers a replicable model for how regional partnerships can create sustainable, scalable, and lasting community impact across California.



What is Digital Upskilling

Digital upskilling is the process of teaching people how to think, act, and thrive in a digital world. It provides employees with the opportunity to gain the tools and skills they need to adapt to a world with ever-changing technologies. Along with teaching technical skills, such as how to use a specific device or navigate a particular software, digital upskilling ensures that employees have the fundamental knowledge required to understand new technologies.¹

III. The Need for Digital Upskilling

Digital skills have become a prerequisite for nearly every aspect of modern life and work, and economic mobility—the ability for individuals and families to improve their income and social standing over time—is increasingly tied to digital proficiency. Without digital skills, individuals are locked out of job opportunities, get overlooked for career advancement, and miss out on opportunities and resources that can enhance daily life.

Basic computer skills are increasingly needed in all industries, and people without digital skills are in danger of being left further behind as digitalization continues to expand. As technology changes, current workers need more-advanced digital skills and training to stay employed and advance in their careers. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this reality—moving hiring, benefits, commerce, and even health care online—and in the process widened the digital divide. Those already underserved, including women, people of color, English language learners (ELL), immigrants, seniors, and low-income communities, were disproportionately impacted. Additionally, when businesses cannot find employees with the necessary digital skills, both company performance and overall economic growth suffer.

When the Digital Upskilling Initiative was being ideated in 2019, 12.9% of Ventura County residents lacked access to a computer or internet connection, with certain zip codes reporting rates above 20%. Among Latino residents who

comprised 43% of the county’s population, 19% of Spanish-speaking households reported no computer access at home.² Even though the rates of internet access have greatly improved since the implementation of the Digital Upskilling Initiative,

Assemblymember Irwin summarized the urgency, “In today’s rapidly changing world, the ability to use technology effectively is critical in nearly all aspects of our lives. Our success as a region depends on lifting up all workers so they can secure good-paying, high-quality jobs that lead to long-lasting careers.”

digital competence is still greatly lacking. Recent Census/county figures show that around 93% of households have a computer and approximately 90% have broadband, implying roughly 1 in 10 households still face basic access barriers that likely overlap with low digital readiness.

Need for Digital Skills



Digital skills increase economic mobility. People with digital skills have more career opportunities and earn higher wages, with clear pathways into middle- and high-skill jobs.



Digital skills deficiencies disproportionately impact women, people of color, and non-English speakers, compounding existing inequities.



The COVID-19 pandemic widened the digital divide and led to a surge in the use of digital technologies. The shift to remote work benefited those with digital skills, but unemployment surged among workers in line-level jobs without access to technology.



All industries and employers need employees with basic digital skills.



As technology changes, current workers need upskilling to stay employed in an ever-more-automated and -digitalized world




Employer shortages affect the economy.

In the US, the share of jobs requiring high digital skills has grown five-fold since 2002, while low-skill jobs have declined by nearly half.³ Job-posting data combined with state-level estimates indicate that 90% of jobs in Ventura County require at least some digital skills.⁴ Workers with strong digital skills earn significantly more—on average 1.5 to 2.5 times the wages of those in low-skill jobs. Ventura County reflects this dual reality.⁵ On one hand, the county ranks 8th in the nation for median household income and 16th in community well-being. On the other, it is among the least-affordable housing markets in the US, ranks 158th out of 200 metro areas for job creation, and experiences stark inequities in wealth and access.

Digital inequities compound these challenges. **These gaps not only undermine equity but also weaken the county’s competitiveness: all industries now require employees with at least basic digital skills, and sectors like health care, manufacturing, and information technology demand increasingly advanced capabilities.**

To thrive, Ventura County must cultivate an upskilling culture, one that prepares residents for the future of work, strengthens small businesses, and ensures no community is left behind. The Digital Upskilling Initiative was designed to meet this need, piloting innovative training models that expand opportunity while building a foundation for long-term, scalable impact.



“For me, this class has been a miracle. An absolute miracle. . . . I’m going to use the skills that I’ve learned in this class, and I’m also going to enter into interviews with a lot more positivity about what I can bring to a job. So, it’s reaching far beyond just the technical skills. It’s very much opening doors to my future that I wouldn’t otherwise have.”

– Elizabeth
Computer Basics Student

IV. Initiative Overview

Three Training Cohorts

The training program included three different cohorts of learners whom each had different base levels of computer skills and training needs.



New-to-tech learners who needed basic digital skills to get a well-paying job took a Computer Basics course provided by the adult schools across Ventura County. Some participants received a new Chromebook and stipend in order to remove barriers to participation.



Current workers who already had some basic digital skills but needed specific ICT upskilling to move into better-paying jobs could earn one or multiple industry-recognized certificates/credentials in:

- Computing Technology Industry Association (CompTIA) A+ Certificate or CompTIA Security+ Certificate.
- GBL Systems Corporation (GBL) Amazon Web Services (AWS) credentials in Cloud Foundations and Cloud Architecting.



Small business owners who needed comprehensive knowledge and tools—including e-commerce, SEO, and digital marketing—to establish an online business presence to grow and stay competitive enrolled in the Women’s Economic Ventures (WEV) GYSBO course.

Initiative Goals

The initiative was designed as a workforce development program that could bolster the economic mobility of all participants. The initiative had four primary goals, all of which it achieved:

- 1** Train **400** people from underrepresented communities in Ventura County.
 - 200** New-to-tech learners take the Computer Basics course
 - 100** Current workers receive ICT Upskilling
 - 100** Small businesses and entrepreneurs complete the GYSBO course.
- 2** Develop sustained capacity to prepare workers at all levels for digital skills employment opportunities across sectors.
- 3** Develop a sustainable digital upskilling pilot that can be replicated across California as a strategy to increase economic mobility using digital skills training.
- 4** Increase the earning potential of all program completers and help people attain higher-paid jobs.

Program Design Process

The Digital Upskilling Initiative was born during the COVID-19 pandemic when Assemblymember Irwin observed a program in Sacramento that provided ICT training to workers who were suddenly displaced by the economic shutdown. Inspired by this model, she secured \$5 million in the 2021–2022 state budget to launch a similar effort in her own district, with a focus on addressing Ventura County’s digital divide.

From the outset, the program was designed to serve three distinct training cohorts—each with different needs, barriers, and goals. This multi-cohort structure not only allowed the initiative to address a wide range of digital skills gaps across the county but also created an opportunity to pilot approaches that could generate best practices and scalable lessons for the rest of the state.

Whereas the cohorts were identified early, the “how” of training was intentionally left open to ensure that program design was data driven and community informed.

Program Timeline



Four Phases of the Initiative

Phase 1: Research

The EDC led an extensive planning and research process to ensure the program was grounded in evidence, aligned with existing resources, targeted toward the needs of Ventura County residents, and built for long-term sustainability, beyond the three-year funding. The process:

- **Identified community needs** by mapping Ventura County’s digital skills gaps, existing programs, and training infrastructure to avoid duplication and leverage available resources.
- **Reviewed national best practices** by conducting a literature review, examining models and curricula from across the country to identify approaches worth replicating or adapting locally.
- **Analyzed labor market demand** through quantitative research on in-demand digital skills among employers and the most acute areas of workforce shortage.
- **Conducted expert interviews and focus groups** with adult educators, digital skills programs, workforce experts, community-based organizations, employers, and potential participants.
- **Convened a Digital Upskilling Roundtable** of local partners to support the program.

Phase 2: Design

The program design process used the information gathered in the research phase to develop clear objectives for each cohort, outline curriculum, and identify partners that needed to be at the table. The design process:

- **Created cohort objectives** to define goals for each training group and provide guidance to implementation partners.
- **Developed guiding questions** to clarify what to teach, what already existed, how to teach, how to support completion, how to connect with employers, and how to evaluate and scale the program.
- **Built implementation partnerships** through formal agreements with key partners.
- **Collaborated on program design** with partners to design each cohort program.

Phase 3: Implementation

Once the three cohort programs were designed, participants had to be identified, enrolled, and trained. This initiative specifically targeted individuals from underrepresented communities who could benefit the most from free digital skills training and upskilling. This process:

- **Marketed programs** by creating outreach collateral and promoting training opportunities to target communities.
- **Enrolled participants** from underrepresented groups most likely to benefit from free digital skills training.
- **Delivered training** by implementing the three designed cohort programs.

Phase 4: Evaluation and Scaling

Robust feedback and outcome data were collected at the end of each course to understand the impact of the programs in real time and to inform course adjustments as needed. This process:

- **Conducted focus groups** with instructors and participants to assess program design and implement quarterly improvements to curriculum and delivery methods.
- **Evaluated program effectiveness** by analyzing outcomes to ensure programs served those most in need and maximized impact.
- **Identified scaling opportunities** by pinpointing successful practices for broader countywide and statewide adoption.
- **Developed replication toolkits** and shared them through outreach to support other communities in implementing similar models.
- **Provided technical assistance** to partner organizations to teach them how to use the replication toolkits and implement the course.

V. Computer Basics

Need for Computer Basics

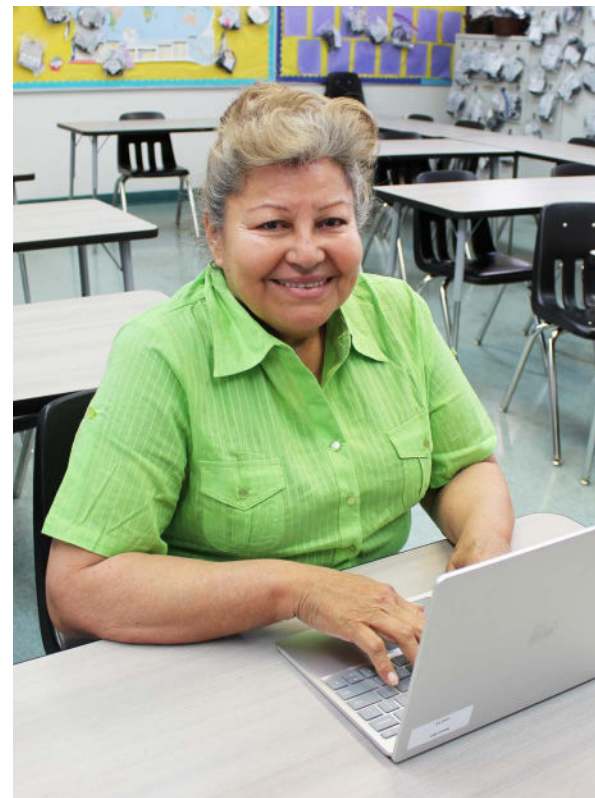
The COVID-19 pandemic widened the digital divide across the US as jobs transitioned to remote work and employers shifted many processes online, including interviews, onboarding, and accessing benefits. Evidence shows digital skills deficiencies disproportionately impact women, people of color and non-English speakers. In 2019, 12.9% of Ventura County residents did not have access to a computer or an internet connection.⁶ While digital literacy rates have improved in recent years such that, in 2024, only 2.0% of Ventura County residents did not have a computer, and only 4.5% of residents did not have an internet subscription,⁷ disparities between specific ethnic groups persist. Latino residents make up 43% of the Ventura County population,⁸ yet they are more likely to lack an internet connection or a computer (35%) than White residents (22%).⁹ As technology continues to change, workers need more advanced digital skills and training to stay employed and advance in their careers.

Gaps in Existing Computer Basics Programs

There are existing computer training programs across the region, but the research process identified several shortcomings in how the programs are provided and who they are offered to. Most notably, many of the programs assume that participants would come with the basic abilities to open a computer, turn it on, and navigate a keyboard—skills that most novice learners do not have. Some notable digital literacy curriculums such as Northstar are tested and proved to be effective, yet they are provided entirely online. This is a disconnect, as it assumes learners can get online.

Some of the identified gaps included:

- **Lack of extremely novice computer basics programs** that focus on pre-word-processing digital skills. Ventura County has many high-quality digital skills programs focused on Microsoft Office, Google, etc.
- **Most programs are longer courses** (four to six months), which prevents those with limited availability from participating.
- **Lack of cohort-model basic-skills trainings.** Most computer basics programs are provided in a one-to-one drop-in model due to varying ability levels. These à la carte models are difficult to scale and replicate, as they are dependent on an instructor providing one-on-one attention to participants as needs arise.
- **Limited programs with non-English instruction.** Ventura County lacks Spanish-language curriculum and programs taught in Spanish.
- **Many programs are online and assume participants have access to devices** and broadband internet, which is not the case for many groups and creates barriers to inclusion.
- **Many training programs focus on one operating system,** such as the Microsoft suite (Word, Excel, PowerPoint), but do not first provide the basics of digital skills.



Computer Basics Course Development

To ensure the course did not duplicate existing programs and that it was designed to be provided long after the \$5 million initiative ended, the EDC collaborated with the Ventura County Adult Education Consortium, adult schools across the region, the Ventura County Community College District, and the Ventura County Office of Education to outline course objectives that laddered into existing adult school offerings. The Ventura County Office of Education then created the initial curriculum and led train-the-trainer support for adult school instructors. Adult schools were contracted to deliver the course and integrate it into existing catalogs to sustain provision beyond the grant.

Piloting the Course

The Computer Basics course was piloted in winter 2023 at three adult schools—Ventura Adult and Continuing Education (VACE), Conejo Valley Adult Education, and Oxnard Adult School—resulting in 62 student completers. To ensure that the curriculum design was effective, WestEd was contracted to evaluate the impact of the pilot and the first cohort after the pilot. Furthermore, adult school instructors were paid to participate in focus groups and robust curriculum-design sessions after the pilot, cohort one, and year one of programming to make iterative curriculum improvements. A robust curriculum-improvement round was conducted in summer 2024 after 28 Computer Basics courses had been successfully provided across the county.

Stipends and Wraparound Supports

During the pilot and first cohort, participants were provided with gift cards to incentivize attendance and increase retention. Additional wraparound supports were built into the program contracts with adult school providers and included funding for meals, student handbooks, and/or transportation. When possible, adult schools provided the course at a location with on-site childcare to support student participation and course completion. The student gift card incentives were administratively difficult to manage and ceased after summer 2024.

Course Outreach

Because learners with limited digital skills are less likely to be reached through online channels, the EDC and partners used guerrilla marketing and direct community outreach. This included engagement through nonprofit organizations, local housing authorities, school districts, and adult schools to connect with those most in need.

“Thank you for the great opportunity to learn how to use a computer. Not only did it help me to be able to help my daughter, but now I can make my payments online. I can look for the information I need. The most important thing is that I will get a better position in my job, and that’s great. Thank you very much.”

– Itzel, Computer Basics Student



Computer Basics Course Overview

The Computer Basics course equipped adult learners with the essential skills and confidence needed to navigate digital devices, participate in the workplace, and access education and training opportunities. The curriculum focused on practical skills such as operating a Chromebook, using a keyboard and mouse, navigating the internet safely, creating and saving documents, sending emails, and participating in video calls.

The Computer Basics course was created to meet the need for a free, short-term computer basics training program that is accessible to communities with little to no prior digital experience. To increase access to the opportunity, the curriculum was offered in both English and Spanish and designed for short six- to eight-week courses that could be taught in classroom settings or at community locations, such as libraries and housing facilities. All participants received Chromebooks for use during the course, and every graduate got to keep the device to continue their learning and digital use.

Course Delivery



FREE to all learners.



Length: short course, 24 to 32 instructional hours over six to eight weeks.



Format: classroom-based instruction with presentations, hands-on practice, and real-world application exercises. Participants had multiple opportunities to practice, apply their learning to real-world applications, and attain competency.



Focus on mastery of skills: at the end of each unit of study, instructors assessed participants' mastery of skills with the included benchmark skills assessments.



Curriculum available in English and Spanish.



Class size: the recommended maximum class size was 10 to 20 participants, with a second instructor or assistant for individualized support.



Lab hours: at least one weekly lab session for guided practice.



Community-based delivery: provided the course in the community when possible—including a community room in a housing complex, an accessible public library, or a local elementary school—to reduce barriers to participation.



Completers got a Chromebook.

Why Chromebooks

The curriculum taught participants to use Chromebooks and Google Docs. Chromebooks were chosen as the standard device for instruction and distribution because they:

Are affordable. Generally more affordable than traditional PCs, Chromebooks often have lower upfront costs and require less maintenance and IT support. This is particularly beneficial for schools with limited budgets or those looking to provide devices for many participants.

Provide access to the free Google suite (Docs, Sheets, Slides, and Drive) which is widely used in schools and workplaces. Teaching participants to use the Google suite of services aligns with preparing them for the future of work.

Support cloud-based storage and collaboration. Chromebooks are closely integrated with Google's suite of cloud-based productivity tools which enable collaboration, file sharing, and access to files from any device with an internet connection. They can be particularly useful in an educational setting where participants and teachers need to share resources and collaborate.

Are easy to use. Chromebooks use a simplified operating system, Chrome OS, that focuses on web-based applications and cloud storage. This simplicity can be advantageous for adult learners who may have limited experience with technology or prefer a streamlined interface.

Unit of Study

Unit Summary

Introduction The introduction provided an overview of the course, resources for participants, and an optional Pre-Course Survey to inform instruction and provide baseline data to evaluate the program.

Unit 1: Basic Computer This unit covered basic computer terminology, identifying different parts of a computer and understanding their functions, and learning how to use a keyboard and mouse. Also covered were proper procedures for turning on and off the computer and how to access the internet.

Unit 2: Exploring the Computer This unit covered fundamentals of using a computer, including exploring operating systems and applications, creating desktop shortcuts, locating, learning how to use keyboard shortcuts such as cut, copy, and paste, and using the mouse to drag and drop, minimize, and restore windows.

Unit 3: Google Account and Email This unit introduced participants to Google accounts and email. This unit covered the creation and use of email and included the creation of a Google Gmail account following guidelines for professional and secure account/ password creation. It also included a review of different email clients, opening, reading, and replying to emails, and identifying suspicious emails.

Unit 4: Chromebooks This unit covered how to set up and work on a Chromebook. Participants learned some of the unique features of Chromebooks vs. standard desktop computers.

Unit 5: Introduction to the Internet This unit covered the fundamentals of using the internet, including conducting a safe search, using various browser tools and website functions, and understanding and managing browser settings. This unit also covered the fundamentals of securing computer data.

Unit 6: Using the Internet This unit taught more features of using the internet such as performing more-complex searches, and understanding different types of web domains. In addition, participants learned the basics of captcha use and its purposes, two-factor authentication, and other safety and security features needed when working online. Participants also practiced completing online forms in various formats.

Unit 7: Word Processing This unit covered the fundamentals of using a word-processing program. Google Docs was introduced. This unit included creating, composing, saving, sharing, and closing documents. In addition, participants learned about file extension types, using spelling- and grammar-checking tools, and fundamentals of formatting such as font, paragraph, and spacing.

Unit 8: Video Calls This unit covered the fundamentals of using video and audio technologies to communicate and collaborate. This unit focused on using Zoom.

Conclusion Instructors distributed Certificates of Completion to all participants who successfully demonstrated mastery of benchmark skills. Participants completed the optional Post-Course Survey (available in English and Spanish).

Computer Basics Outcomes

WestEd, a nonpartisan, nonprofit agency that conducts program evaluation, evaluated the program and found that the course led to significant learning gains, with participants reporting an increase in their ability to use digital tools and secure better jobs.

Formal Evaluation

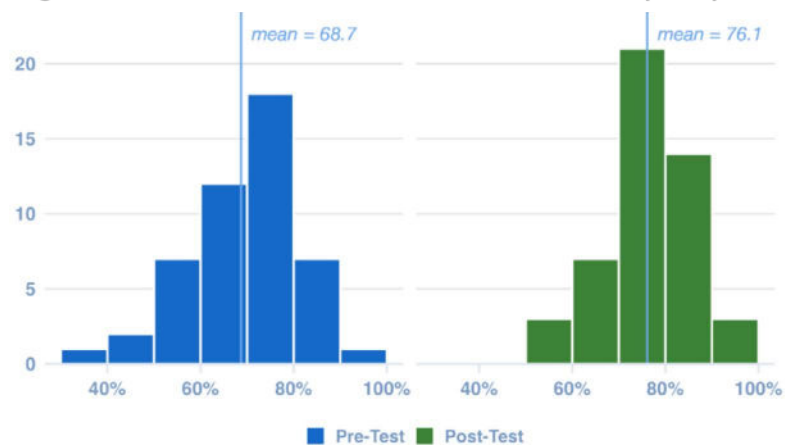
WestEd was hired to develop evaluation tools and evaluate the pilot and first cohort of the Computer Basics program. As part of the evaluation, WestEd provided actionable insights that were used to improve the curriculum and overall efficacy of the course for future administration.

Methods and Data Sources

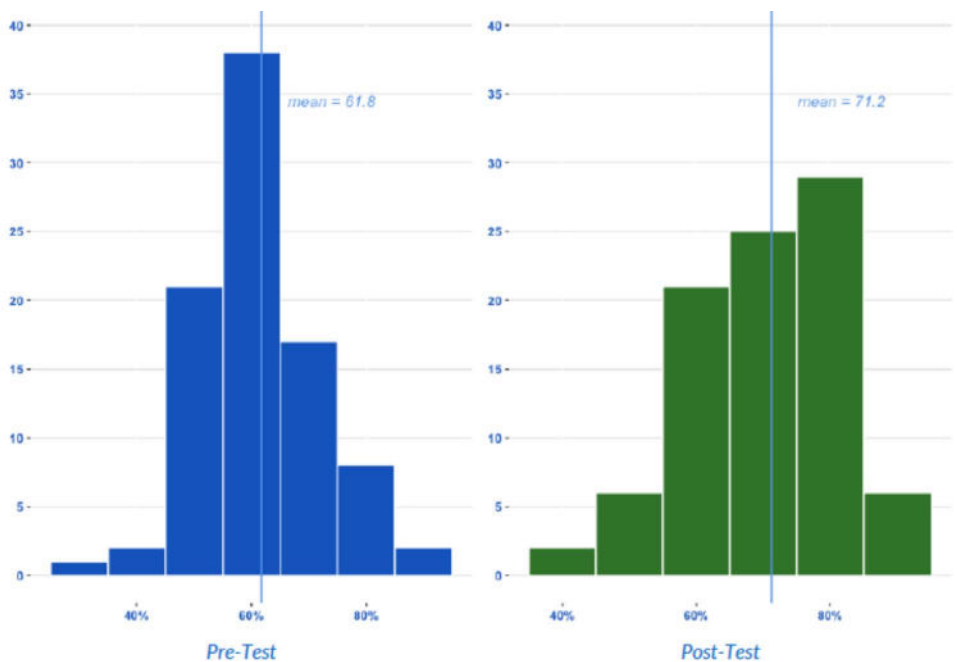
Data was gathered and analyzed from three pilot courses at VACE, Conejo Valley Adult Education, and Oxnard Adult School between January and March 2023. WestEd then evaluated the first cohort across seven different locations by six adult schools—Conejo Valley Adult Education, Ojai Adult School, Oxnard Adult School, Santa Paula Adult Education, Simi Institute for Careers & Education, and VACE.

Learning gains were both perceived and seen in pre- and post-test results. (A paired samples t-test was conducted to determine the effect of the course on test scores.)

Pilot Program Distribution of Pre- and Post-Test Scores (n=96)



Cohort 2 Distribution of Pre- and Post-Test Scores (n=88)



Evaluation Key Findings:

- ✓ **Learning gains were both perceived and seen in pre- and post-test results.** (A paired samples t-test was conducted to determine the effect of the course on test scores.)
- ✓ **The course helped build student confidence and pride using computers.** It also helped minimize anxiety and trepidation about computers.
- ✓ **The primary driver of student enrollment was employment or advancement.**
- ✓ **There were stark differences in access and experiences with devices between English- and Spanish-speaking cohorts.**
 - Both cohorts showed high numbers of smartphone access (81% of English-speaking cohort and 90% of Spanish-speaking cohort).
 - English-speaking cohort was five times more likely to have a computer (53.5% of English-speaking cohort compared to 10% of Spanish-speaking cohort).
 - English-speaking cohort was seven times more likely to have a tablet (35% of English-speaking cohort compared to 5% of Spanish-speaking cohort).
- ✓ **Participants expressed high degrees of satisfaction** with the course, instructors, technology support, and supplemental learning opportunities.
- ✓ **Participants appreciated the Chromebooks provided.** 86% Agreed or Strongly Agreed that having a Chromebook helped them continue to learn and use their computer skills at home.
- ✓ **Participants enrolled in the Computer Basics course for a myriad of reasons,** with personal and professional reasons (e.g., skill advancement or to bolster employment opportunities) as common and consistent themes.

Computer Basics — Six-Month Follow Up

To assess the longer-term impacts the course had on participants, all 63 graduates from the initial pilot were called six months after their course concluded. Researchers asked a few verbal survey questions to assess the longer-term impact the course had on participants' economic mobility. Overall trends of the calls included:

- 👍 Most participants continued to **use the Chromebook** given to them upon completion of the program three to seven times a week.
- 👍 The course gave participants the **confidence to try new things** using technology.
- 👍 80% of respondents wanted to **take another computer class.**
- 👍 Median-wage range of respondents: **\$15 to \$26 per hour.**
- 👍 53% of respondents stated that the course helped them **get a better job.**
- 👍 The course has changed how people **carry out activities in their day-to-day** personal and work lives—increasing their access to online scheduling, education opportunities, and other online resources.

Overall Computer Basics Impact

The Computer Basics program has been a resounding success, with **69 classes already completed across Ventura County and over 1000 graduates** and Chromebooks distributed in Ventura County alone. By partnering with adult schools, the EDC easily exceeded the original goal of serving 200 students and has built a replicable upskilling program that will last in Ventura County. The program's impact is most visible among its participants who represent those typically underserved by upskilling opportunities.

By the Numbers



>1000
Participants
trained



1004
Chromebooks
gifted



69
Classes
(27 in Spanish, 21 in English, 19 bilingual (English/Spanish), and 2 with Farsi or Arabic support)

Scaling the Program



13
Classes training 222 participants
taught by Santa Barbara County
Partners in Education



176
Organizations
have downloaded the
replication toolkit

The Computer Basics program won a “Model Program” designation by the California Adult Education Program. Only about a dozen programs statewide receive this annual recognition!

Participant Demographics

50
Years old
(average age)

~70%
Female

>75%
People
of Color

65%
Native Spanish
speakers

“Before the course, I looked for someone to help me complete computer tasks at work, and now I can do them on my own. Looking towards the future, I recommend this class because it will help you to get a better job and to climb and not stay where you are.”

– Maria, Computer Basics Student



Computer Basics Replication Toolkit

To expand the program's reach and impact, the EDC developed a **free Computer Basics Curriculum & Program Replication Toolkit**. The comprehensive toolkit was designed for ease of use and is available to any organization, school, or community group that wants to teach essential computer skills to others. By expanding the reach of the Computer Basics program, the EDC aims to create lasting economic opportunities for individuals who have historically been left behind by the rapid digitalization of the workplace.

The replication toolkit Includes:

- ✓ **Bilingual (English and Spanish) Computer Basics curriculum** that includes a ready-to-use curriculum with Google Slides presentations and notes for each of the eight units.
- ✓ **Student activities and worksheets.**
- ✓ **An instructor guide** with detailed instructions, lesson plans, and best practices for teaching novices.
- ✓ **Program-evaluation tools** to help organizations measure the impact of their courses.
- ✓ **Program-administration tools** and tips to help organizations implement and scale the program.

How to Access the Toolkit

All materials are available to download or copy in a Google folder.

*Computer Basics
Curriculum & Program
Replication Toolkit* 



"We've had a significant, meaningful impact with this curriculum in Ventura County, and now our goal is to see it be used across the state and beyond. With this toolkit, any community can help bridge the digital divide and empower its residents to succeed in an increasingly digital world."

– Jaime Fall, Workforce and Economic Strategies Director, EDC

Santa Barbara Partners in Education Scales the Course

Santa Barbara Partners in Education, a nonprofit administered by the Santa Barbara County Office of Education, successfully scaled the Computer Basics course using the replication toolkit. By leveraging the toolkit and allocating internal funds, the organization:

- 👍 **Provided 13 free classes** in rural Santa Barbara County
- 👍 **Taught over 222** monolingual Spanish-speaking adult learners
- 👍 **Provided free Chromebooks to over 222 participants** upon course completion

Staff shared that the Replication Toolkit made it possible to deliver training in Spanish by including everything needed—curriculum, student handbook, and instructional supports. The program was intentionally delivered in East County communities where residents have historically lacked access to digital training—especially in their primary language, Spanish.

Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools Susan Salcido lauded the program as a multigenerational tool that strengthens families:

“We know that when students receive support from parents and guardians, their academic outcomes significantly improve. By providing adults with training on the technology that our students use for schoolwork, we are not only empowering families but also boosting the likelihood of student success both in school and beyond. I congratulate the course participants, and also the Partners in Education team, whose commitment to bridging the digital divide is truly commendable.”

SOURCE: Santa Barbara Independent



Computer Basics Challenges and Key Learnings

While the Computer Basics program has been highly successful, several challenges emerged during implementation that provided valuable lessons for future digital literacy initiatives.

- ❗ **Device access is essential but underfunded.** Providing Chromebooks to every participant was one of the most effective strategies to increase access and ensure learning continued beyond the classroom. However, sustaining this practice remains a challenge, as adult schools and program partners often lack dedicated funding for devices. A long-term funding solution is needed to maintain device provision.
- ❗ **Marketing requires creativity.** Traditional marketing methods did not effectively reach those most in need of basic computer skills. Instead, guerilla-style outreach through trusted community partners, housing sites, and local organizations proved most effective. Providers must be trained and supported to use these nontraditional strategies to build trust and awareness.
- ❗ **Student skill levels vary widely.** Participants arrived with highly varied digital experiences and past experiences with devices, making pacing challenging. Smaller class sizes and the use of an instructor plus an assistant were critical to maintaining quality instruction and ensuring no student was left behind.
- ❗ **Curriculum requires iteration.** Multiple rounds of curriculum revisions were necessary to refine pacing, simplify concepts, and incorporate feedback from both instructors and participants. This was also essential to developing the aligned curriculum that was provided across adult schools. Ongoing evaluation and adaptation remain key to ensuring the course stays accessible and effective.
- ❗ **Incentives are hard to manage.** While gift card stipends were initially offered to incentivize participation and completion, they proved administratively difficult and were discontinued. Future efforts may need to test alternative models—such as refundable deposits, stipends tied to milestones, or employer co-investment—to balance accessibility with student commitment.

Together, these challenges highlight that successful delivery of the Computer Basics program requires not just a strong curriculum but also wraparound supports, adaptive instruction, and sustainable funding strategies. The lessons learned in Ventura County will inform the continued scaling and replication of the program across California.

VI. ICT UPSKILLING

The ICT Upskilling cohort was created to ensure that incumbent workers—those already employed but seeking career growth—had access to the digital skills and industry-recognized credentials needed to advance. For many workers, career mobility has stalled not because of a lack of motivation or experience, but because promotions and higher-wage opportunities increasingly demand ICT skills that they have not yet been able to acquire. However, traditional training programs are often costly, time intensive, and inaccessible, leaving too many workers without a pathway to advancement.

Need for ICT Upskilling

The demand for digital skills is urgent. **More than 70% of jobs require at least basic digital skills, yet one-third of US workers lack foundational digital skills, meaning that they lack the training to compete for these jobs.**¹⁰ Over the past two decades, the digital skills requirements of jobs have shifted dramatically: in 2002, 52% of US occupations required only low levels of digital skills, but by 2020, that number had dropped to just 23%. In the same period, jobs requiring high levels of digital skills nearly tripled, from 9% to 26%, and those requiring medium levels of digital skills grew from 39% to 51%.¹¹

These shifts have significant implications for wages and opportunity. On average, jobs requiring high levels of digital skills pay nearly **2.5 times** more than those requiring low levels of digital skills, and medium-level jobs pay about **1.5 times** more.¹² Employers in Ventura County echo this national trend, emphasizing that investments in digital skills training would most benefit frontline workers, opening up opportunities for career advancement within their companies.



✓ Participant Success Story

Jim

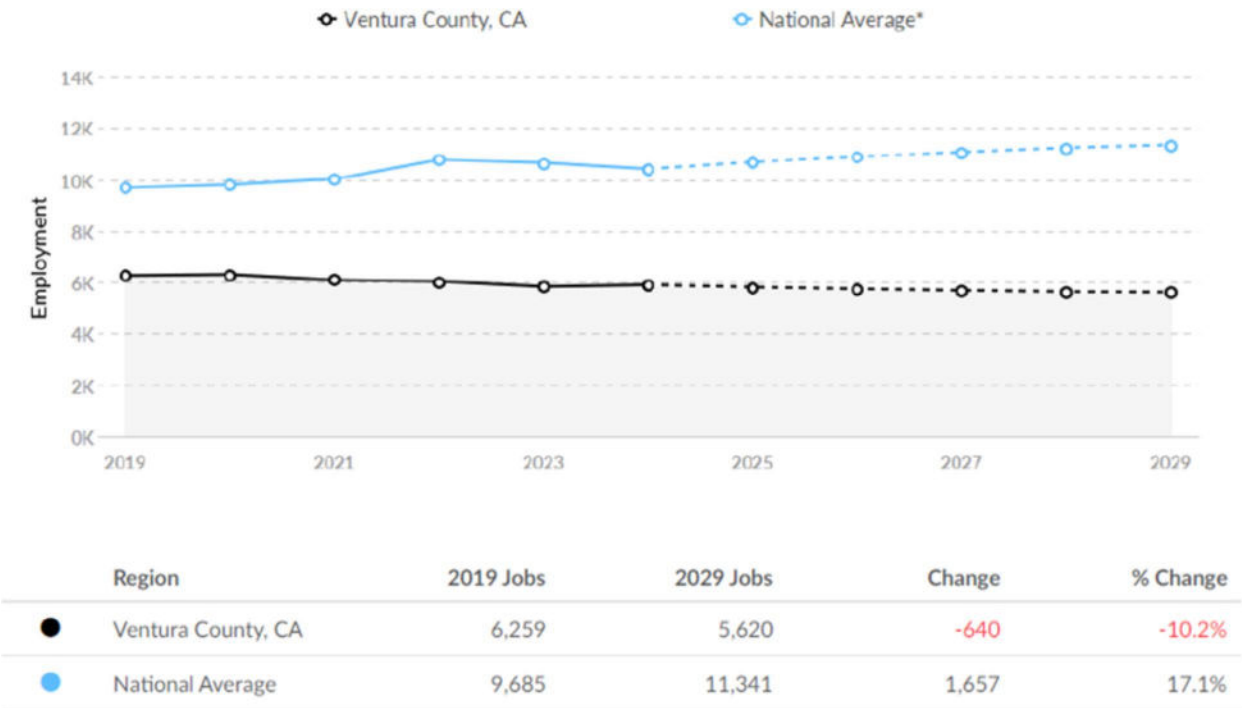
I started getting serious in my IT career in 2019, when I started studying on my own for a certification. In the meantime, I started a job as a PC technician for the Inglewood School District where I built up almost three years of IT experience. Unfortunately, both time and money kept me from pursuing a certification. However, that changed in 2023 when my father told me about the Ventura County Upskilling Initiative, and I enrolled in the CompTIA program. Thanks to the CompTIA program, I learned how to effectively retool my resume to cater to the IT field, and in due time, I landed a PC technician job at KST Data, a company that provides large-scale end-user and enterprise technology solutions, as well as complete lifecycle management services for companies like NBC Universal and UCLA.

Ventura County ICT Industry Overview

Ventura County’s ICT sector is an important driver of high-wage employment.

- Labor force size:** **6,259** workers (compared to a national benchmark of ~9,700)
- Median annual salary:** **\$67,800**
- Job demand:** **2,083** unique ICT job postings September 2024 to August 2025, reflecting steady but below-average activity compared to similar regions
- Regional employers:** **387** companies actively hiring for ICT roles
- Retirement risk:** **1,557** ICT workers are over age 55, signaling a high retirement risk in the near future
- Accessibility:** **39%** of ICT jobs require an associate’s degree or less, making upskilling a practical and impactful strategy to meet demand.¹³

Without additional investment in training programs, ICT employment in **Ventura County is projected to shrink by 10.2% from 2019 to 2029. In contrast, nationwide ICT employment is expected to grow by nearly 17%** during the same period. This divergence underscores the importance of investing in upskilling as both a workforce development strategy and a regional economic imperative.



ICT Upskilling Program Development

To respond to Ventura County's need for higher levels of digital skills, the EDC worked with national training providers, local employers, and education partners to design accessible, affordable, and high-impact ICT training opportunities. The result was the ICT Upskilling cohort, a program intentionally built to expand economic mobility by equipping workers with the digital competencies and credentials that today's economy demands.

Selecting Training Providers

The EDC sought proposals from proven digital upskilling training providers to provide Ventura County residents with online training courses in ITC skills that are needed across multiple industries and to connect participants to employers. Online training was identified as a format that could best complement the many high-quality, in-person programs already available to residents and facilitate participation by incumbent workers with competing priorities.

Training providers were evaluated and selected based on the following criteria:

- ✓ **Proven need** for the digital skills taught in the proposed training.
- ✓ **History of success** providing similar training for participants.
- ✓ **Ability to provide remote, competency-based training** that is flexible enough to serve working adults.
- ✓ **Ability to train at least 50** Ventura County participants.
- ✓ **Program is accessible to individuals without college degrees.**
- ✓ **Connection to local work-based learning** opportunities.
- ✓ **Plan to provide additional support** to participants to help ensure completion.
- ✓ **Award of an industry-recognized credential** upon completion.
- ✓ **Plan to connect completers to employers** and paid jobs in Ventura County.

Two training partners were contracted:

- 1** **CompTIA** was contracted to provide virtual instructor-led training (VILT) that led to CompTIA A+ and/or a CompTIA Security+ certifications for participants. Each certificate training was four months long and included instructor office hours and one-on-one support from career services staff.
- 2** **GBL Systems**, partnered with AWS, was contracted to provide self-paced online training that led to stackable credentials in AWS Cloud Foundations and AWS Cloud Architecting for participants. Once a participant earned a certificate, they received support in creating a LinkedIn profile, resume, and cover letter, as well as connections to internships and career placement. GBL was contracted to provide digital upskill training for fifty currently employed and unemployed workers and at least ten internships.

CompTIA Training Overview

CompTIA curriculum prepared participants to pursue industry-recognized certifications and IT roles in operations, technical support, and security. From December 2023 through February 2025, CompTIA provided training designed to prepare participants for CompTIA A+ and/or CompTIA Security+ certifications—worth over \$5,000 each—for free. The program was marketed through a personalized landing page featuring targeted advertisements, including promotions on social media platforms, tailored to the Ventura County area.

CompTIA's A+ credential was stackable, so it provided the basis for learners to pursue the more complex Security+ credential. These industry-recognized credentials are vendor neutral, meaning that the skills and technologies participants learned are applicable across different industries and employers that need IT support to thrive. In addition to direct employment with major industries, CompTIA A+ certified professionals are in high demand by independent service providers who provide support to small- and medium-sized businesses.

To qualify for participation, individuals had to be adults with a high school diploma or GED, be able to read and write in the English language, be able to legally work in the US, be able to pass a simple aptitude test (ITIQ), and have reliable internet access and the equipment for online learning.

Throughout the program, participants gained essential skills such as building a computer from parts, installing software, troubleshooting problems, and setting up and managing networks. Core topics included mobile devices, networking technology, hardware, virtualization, cloud computing, operating systems, security, software, and operational procedures.

Participants learned to:

- ☑ **Configure device operating systems, including** Windows, Mac, Linux, Chrome OS, Android, and iOS, and administer client-based and cloud-based (SaaS) software.
- ☑ **Troubleshoot and problem-solve core service and support challenges** while applying best practices for documentation, change management, and scripting.
- ☑ **Support basic IT infrastructure and networking.**
- ☑ **Configure and support PC, mobile, and IoT device hardware.**
- ☑ **Implement basic data backup and recovery methods** and apply data storage and management best practices.

CompTIA Course Delivery

Each certificate training was 17 weeks long and included instructor office hours and one-on-one support from Career Services staff. Participants tracked their own progress through CompTIA's learning management system.

Learners chose between two types of training delivery:

1 VILT

A group class with real-time virtual instructor led training, enabling real-time interaction with the instructor and peers. These sessions were designed to provide a comprehensive and interactive learning experience while accommodating participants' schedules.

Duration: 17 weeks

Schedule: Learners met **three times per week for 3.5 hours per session.**
On average students spent 5-hours per week working outside of class.

Total hours: 178 hours of course training

2 Hybrid classes

Shorter live instructor-led sessions with self-paced asynchronous learning. This approach allowed participants to engage in real-time interaction during live sessions while also having the flexibility to complete additional learning modules or activities at their own pace.

Duration: 17 weeks

Schedule: Learners attended **three 1-hour virtual-instructor-led sessions per week** plus asynchronous learning. On average, Hybrid participants spent 6 hours per week working outside of class.

Total hours: 51 hours of course training

Additional Support

Each cohort included three dedicated professionals—an instructor, a student success staff member, and a Career Services staff member—whose singular goal was to support their success.

Student Support Services included weekly office hours for one-on-one meetings with instructors to ask questions, one-on-one tutoring sessions (as needed) for struggling participants, and regular email and phone check-ins with success managers to connect and troubleshoot.

Participants who were preparing to sit for certification exams were provided with virtual instructor-led study sessions for individuals or small groups. These sessions were designed to meet the specific needs of the participants and were conducted in an online setting with a live instructor.

Career Services activities and supports helped participants remain energized as they worked toward certification and the associated career opportunities that came with it. Beginning in week one, career services staff engaged participants in career-development activities such as resume building, mock interviews, developing LinkedIn profiles, and career days. As participants neared program completion, the focus shifted to connecting directly to employers with available job opportunities, with the ultimate goal of helping them secure employment.

CompTIA Outcomes

By the Numbers



124

Participants completed training

94 Completed A+ training

30 Completed Security+ training



57

Participants earned certifications

41 Passed A+ Core 1 and A+ Core 2

16 Passed Security+



21

Participants were placed into jobs

(IT Support Technician, Configuration Specialist, Desktop Support Specialist)

Participant Demographics



>60%

People of Color

(E.g. 36% Latino/a, 12% Asian, 8% Black)

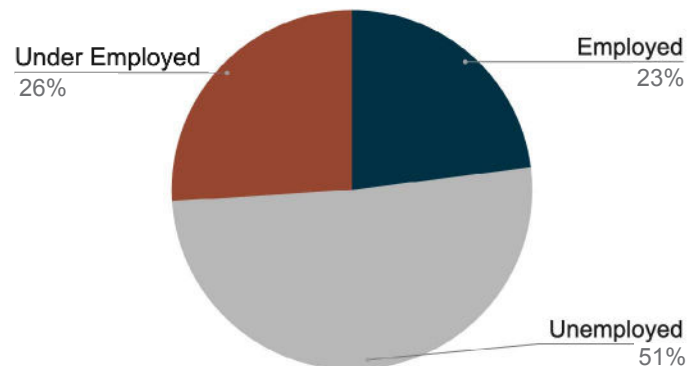


36%

Female

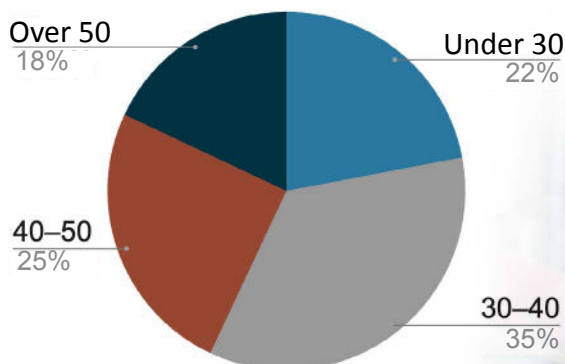
Participant Employment

51% of participants were unemployed



Participant Age

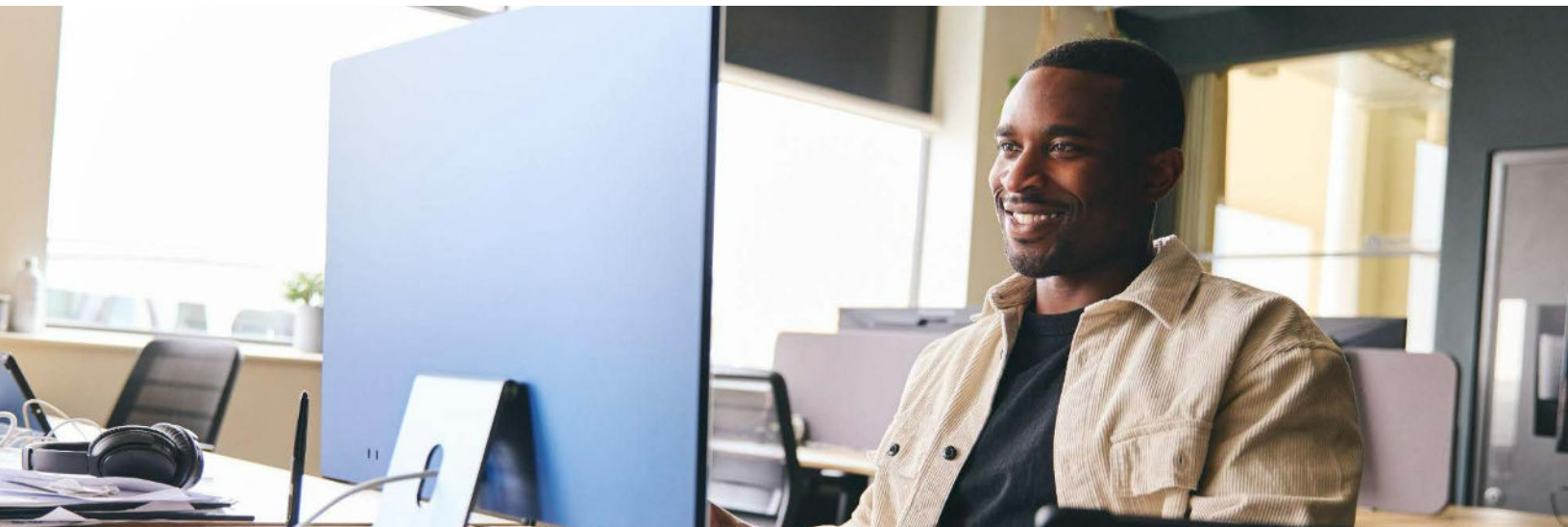
43% of participants were over 40



CompTIA Challenges and Key Learnings

While delivering its program, CompTIA faced challenges that highlight the need for increased engagement strategies, tailored support, and outreach to ensure participants remain motivated and committed to their career development goals.

- ❗ **Maintaining engagement and participation.** Effective long-form training demands a significant commitment from learners, and various life factors can often challenge their ability to engage in and complete upskilling.
- ❗ **Lack of interest in taking certification exams.** These are a critical component of the program's success, and it is crucial to carefully evaluate how certification testing is integrated into learning offerings to ensure learners feel confident and well prepared for their exams. There is a need for tailored support to ensure participants remain motivated and committed to their career goals.
- ❗ **Low enrollment numbers in some cohorts.** This issue further compounded other challenges and led to the cancellation of certain sessions. There is a need for increased outreach that employs diverse marketing strategies to connect with learners effectively—both in terms of the platforms used and the messaging conveyed.



✔ Participant Success Story

Rudy

Before the course, I thought I knew all about computers and the basics. After the course, I was surprised by how much I did not know and how much more there is to still learn. The training is top-tier. Dan, my instructor, was the best instructor I could ask for. He did a great job of sticking to the course material that was most pertinent to the exam, while at the same time being passionate and engaging by sharing personal experiences from the field.

*I passed my A+ Exam in December 2024, and by April of 2025 I got a new job at Insight Enterprises. I got my foot in the door via an email about an opening, sent by CompTIA career services to its alumni. **I would not be where I am today without the training I received from the CompTIA program.***

GBL Systems AWS Training Overview

GBL marketed this program through a website, social media, an email outreach campaign, fliers, newspaper outreach, press releases, and outreach through partner CBOs. The goal was to identify incumbent workers or job seekers who represented Ventura County demographics and were diverse in age, race, gender, education attainment, income level, and employment. Potential participants filled out an interest form online and then were screened by GBL to ensure they met the program requirements of living in Ventura County, having the prerequisite basic digital skills needed to engage in the online training, and not already having a large salary.

GBL offered stackable AWS training to enhance the technical skills of participants: the AWS Cloud Foundations and AWS Cloud Architecting courses. GBL delivered these courses online through instructor-led courses. Participants could also attend office hours and receive additional career preparation support.

- » **The AWS Cloud Foundations** course provided participants with an overall understanding of cloud computing concepts, independent of specific technical roles. It provided a detailed overview of cloud concepts, AWS core services, security, architecture, pricing, and support.
- » **The AWS Cloud Architecting** course built on the skills learned in AWS Cloud Foundations and covered the fundamentals of building IT infrastructure on AWS. Cloud Architecting was available to completers of the AWS Cloud Foundations course or to participants who could prove proficiency. The course was designed to teach solutions architects how to optimize their use of the AWS Cloud by understanding AWS services and how they fit into cloud-based solutions.

Although architectural solutions can differ depending on the industry, type of application, and size of the business, this course emphasized best practices for the AWS Cloud that applied to all of them. It also recommended various design patterns to help participants think through the process of architecting optimal IT solutions on AWS. Throughout the course, participants explored case studies that showcased how some AWS customers designed their infrastructures and the strategies and services they implemented. Finally, the course provided opportunities for participants to build a variety of infrastructures through a guided, hands-on approach.

“I completed the AWS Cloud Foundations course, and it has been instrumental in helping me achieve my career goals. The knowledge I gained extends beyond my experience in food service, providing me with a valuable skill set to offer as I search for new job opportunities.”

– AWS ICT Upskilling Participant

AWS Cloud Foundations Course

95 people initially enrolled in the AWS Cloud Foundations course, but 12 never started the online training and 14 dropped out, leaving a total of 69 participants starting training. Additional attrition occurred throughout the course modules, resulting in 56 of the 69 participants who started training completing the training. This is a high completion rate of 81%, demonstrating the effectiveness of the training curriculum and the support provided to participants. Of the participants who completed the AWS training, 6 participants, or 11%, completed the optional certification credentials for AWS Cloud Foundations.

The table below outlines the initial participant enrollment and final completion for the AWS Cloud Foundations course.

AWS Cloud Foundations course had a **81%** Completion Rate.

# Enrolled	# Started Training	# Earned Completion Credential	# Earned Optional Certification Credential
95	69	56	6

AWS Cloud Architecting Course

Of the 56 AWS Cloud Foundations course completers, 36 participants enrolled in the AWS Cloud Architecting course, but 7 never started the online training. Additional attrition occurred throughout the course modules, resulting in 8 of the 29 participants, or 22%, who started training completing the training. No participants completed the optional certification credential training.

The table below outlines the initial participant enrollment and final completion for the AWS Cloud Architecting course.

# Enrolled	# Started Training	# Earned Completion Credential	# Earned Optional Certification Credential
36	29	8	0

Participant Success Story

Career Advancement Through Training

A late-career professional with a high school education and some basic digital skills entered the AWS Digital Upskilling Initiative to expand his career opportunities. Although he had a foundation in basic digital tools, he lacked the advanced technical knowledge needed to qualify for higher-level roles. Through the program, he received not only technical instruction but also mentorship and encouragement from dedicated instructors, which facilitated his completion of both the AWS Cloud Foundations and AWS Cloud Architecting courses.

Building on that success, he qualified for a career placement internship, in which he was able to apply his skills in a real-world setting. This experience gave him a clear pathway into a more technical career while also raising his confidence and outlook for long-term job satisfaction. His story reflects the power of lifelong learning and shows that it is never too late to open new doors through education and support.

Internship and Career Preparation Support

The AWS program also included career training and placement to ensure that participants secured practical experience and job placements relevant to their newly acquired AWS skills. All 56 participants:

- **Created a professional LinkedIn profile.** GBL provided detailed guidance to help participants complete a LinkedIn profile to support their job search.
- **Developed a cover letter and resume.** GBL provided detailed guidance to help participants complete their resumes and cover letters, ensuring they were well prepared for job applications.
- **Were signed up for the AWS Early Career Talent Network,** connecting them with additional job placement resources and opportunities.

GBL aimed to place 10 participants into paid internships to provide them with opportunities to apply their AWS Cloud training to real-world scenarios and continue to build their skills. GBL worked with AWS to obtain a list of local Ventura County companies and reached out to existing partners in its network to establish internship placements for Ventura County participants.

GBL established partnerships with five local and remote companies and provided paid internship opportunities to 11 participants (20% of the 56 completers). Additionally, the GBL AWS Upskilling Initiative successfully placed 2 participants into employment.

Participant Success Stories

Breaking Barriers for Underrepresented Groups

A Hispanic student in his late twenties, employed at Goodwill Industries of Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties, entered the AWS Digital Upskilling Initiative to strengthen his IT skills and expand his career opportunities. With limited prior exposure to cloud technologies, he knew he would face challenges, but he was determined to succeed.

Through the program's inclusive approach and supportive instruction, he completed the AWS Cloud Foundations course and gained the confidence to continue building his technical expertise. Building on that achievement, he joined Goodwill's internship program where he was able to apply his new skills in a practical setting.

This hands-on experience was pivotal in his development, leading him toward a career as an IT Technical Support Specialist. His journey highlights the importance of creating equitable access to digital upskilling opportunities and demonstrates how targeted support can open doors for individuals from underrepresented groups in the tech industry.

GBL AWS Outcomes

GBL successfully onboarded 81 total applicants into the program and **exceeded their goal of graduating 50 participants** with AWS completion credentials. At the conclusion of the program, **56 participants earned Cloud Foundations credentials, and 8 participants earned Cloud Architecting credentials.** Additionally, 11 participants were placed into paid internships.

The initiative also succeeded in attracting a **diverse group of participants, with 47% coming from ethnically diverse backgrounds**, closely aligning with Ventura County’s demographics. Additionally, the majority of those completing training were under the age of 30 and entered the program with an annual income of less than \$50,000 and only a high school diploma. This highlights the program’s impact on groups from potentially disadvantaged backgrounds who can significantly benefit from upskilling.

By the Numbers

56
Earned
Cloud Foundations
credentials


8
Earned
Cloud Architecting
credentials

11
Placed into
paid internships


2
Internships led to
full-time
employment

Participant Demographics

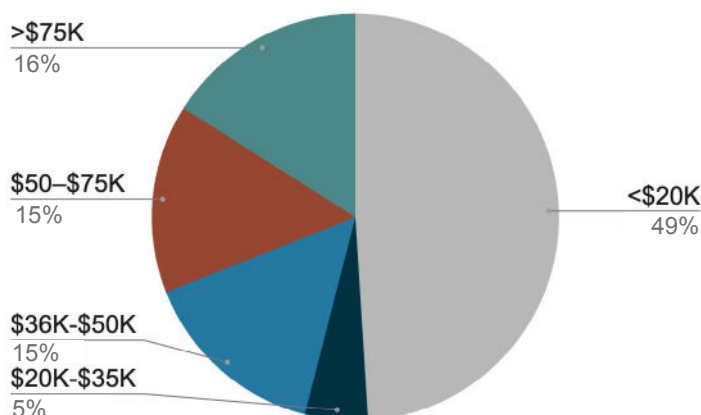

29%
Female


45%
People of Color
(E.g. 32% Latino/a,
5% Black)


52%
Only had a
high school
diploma


63%
Did not have a
four-year
college degree

Earnings of Participants Upon Entry





69%
Made less than
\$50,000
before enrollment

20%
of participants
were **unemployed**

GBL Systems' Challenges and Key Learnings

The Digital Upskilling Initiative was designed as an economic mobility initiative that could serve individuals in need of upskilling to advance their earning potential and careers. Furthermore, the initiative sought to serve those most in need who experienced barriers to participation in other programs due to financial restraints, time, and other challenges. GBL experienced a few challenges when implementing the program, including:

-  **Difficulty reaching those most in need.** Initially, many of the applicants were students with a four-year college degree who wanted additional training, but the EDC wanted to enroll more participants with less previous education and less financial means. GBL adjusted their marketing and outreach strategies to ensure the program enrolled a representative group of Ventura County participants. Adjusted marketing and outreach included direct outreach to nonprofit organizations, collaboration with the Ventura County Workforce Development Board, and targeted social media and email outreach.
-  **Program attrition.** The program experienced a 16% attrition rate among onboarded participants. There was also a gradual decline in completion rates as participants worked their way through the training modules, which could indicate that participants found it challenging to maintain their progress as they advanced through the course content. The targeted marketing helped attract participants who reflected Ventura County's diversity of experience, educational background, and need, but it also likely contributed to attrition, as many participants faced barriers such as limited time, financial stress, and competing priorities, highlighting the need for stronger wraparound supports.
-  **Need for continuous support.** Varied educational backgrounds and learning needs made it challenging to create a one-size-fits-all training approach. To address this, GBL designed the course to include personalized support—office hours and mentoring—to keep participants engaged as course content became more advanced. To address the higher-than-expected attrition, GBL provided additional outreach and support to less-responsive participants to encourage re-engagement in the program and to help participants establish a consistent workflow that would accommodate their diverse schedules.
-  **“No skin in the game.”** The program was free for all participants, and trainers repeatedly commented that attrition rates were much higher than they were used to seeing. Because training was free, some participants may not have fully recognized its market value, leading to higher attrition. For example, enrollment in a typical instructor-led AWS Cloud Foundations course costs \$750.¹⁴ Certification exams cost an additional \$100 to be a Certified Cloud Practitioner, \$150 for associate-level exams, and \$300 for professional-level and specialty exams.¹⁵ Future models might test refundable deposits or scholarship framing to build commitment and underscore the value of the opportunity.

VII. GET YOUR SMALL BUSINESS ONLINE (GYSBO)

Need for GYSBO

During the initial research phase of the Digital Upskilling Initiative, researchers uncovered a significant range of digital skills gaps among small business owners and entrepreneurs. Small businesses without basic digital infrastructure like a website, e-commerce functionality, or online visibility are vulnerable to falling behind competitors, losing out on revenue streams, and becoming virtually invisible in an increasingly digital marketplace. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, restaurants without online ordering systems missed crucial sales during the takeout surge. Likewise, brick-and-mortar stores scrambled to adapt as more transactions moved online.

In today's digital-first economy, **an online presence is no longer just beneficial—it is indispensable.** Between 2022 and 2024, online sales grew from \$5.3 to \$6.3 trillion and are projected to total \$7.9 trillion by 2027. In fact, 23% of all retail purchases globally are expected to occur online by 2027,¹⁶ which aligns with current online shopping behaviors. 64% of consumers researched a product online before purchasing in store,¹⁷ and of note, 34% of consumers shop online at least once a week.¹⁸

But visibility does not end with being found—trust matters. Reviews are a decisive factor: **74% of consumers research online before in-store purchases; 98% of consumers read reviews before making a purchase,¹⁹ and 52% rely on online reviews as part of the decision-making process.²⁰** Further, 88% of consumers are more likely to buy from a company that replies to consumers' reviews, both negative and positive,²¹ further indicating the value of upskilling digital literacy to engage with consumers and establish or maintain an effective online presence. Despite this surge in online consumerism, many small businesses lack the tools and training necessary to effectively reach customers online.



GYSBO Program Development

The EDC includes a Small Business Development Center, but it does not have a history of providing cohort training programs over time. Thus, the EDC engaged SBDC advisors and other training experts to support the creation of a course outline that would help the target audience—microenterprise or small business owners with no or very minimal online presence—get their businesses online, conduct online marketing, and build an online presence.

This research identified some essential program design elements, including:

- ☑ **A short-format, six-to nine-week course** to reduce the barrier of participating in a longer class.
- ☑ **A cohort model** so participants could learn from each other and incorporate peer-learning models.
- ☑ **English and Spanish curriculum.**
- ☑ **Flexible Hyflex training** that would allow participants to participate each week without having to drive to a classroom with an option to join some sessions in person to build community.
- ☑ **One-on-one advising** for customized support that would allow each participant to apply the learning to the specific needs of their business.



The EDC then contracted Women's Economic Ventures (WEV), a local nonprofit with a proven track record of providing cohort programs for small business owners, to design and deliver the Get Your Small Business Online (GYSBO) course. The program curriculum was developed over the summer of 2022 and piloted in the spring of 2023.

Course Outreach

GYSBO outreach was conducted through a multifaceted strategy that included promotional efforts like social media campaigns, tabling at community events, and leveraging Ventura County's Business Forward newsletter. However, one of the most effective channels proved to be word of mouth—highlighting the strength of trust and community in reaching local small business owners. To target those entrepreneurs and business owners who may not have been online, presentations were conducted throughout the community, and guerilla marketing was geared toward brick-and-mortar businesses to boost visibility and generate new leads.

"I've been an illustrator and a mural artist for 27 years, before tech, before online, before social media. I felt very overwhelmed in the next kind of pivot that I was in, so I decided this class was the perfect fit for me. There was a lot of information, but the advisors, the workbook, and the web learning center helped me pinpoint my targeted next steps."

-Traci, GYSBO Participant

GYSBO Program Overview

The GYSBO course equipped microenterprise and small business owners with essential digital skills needed to grow and compete in the online marketplace, guiding them toward a sustainable and strategic digital foundation. Participants learned how to build and launch a professional website, develop email marketing campaigns, increase their search visibility through Search Engine Optimization (SEO), implement effective online marketing and e-commerce strategies, and clearly articulate their business's unique selling proposition (USP) for use in online platforms. Additionally, the course covered how to create compelling social media content and concluded with the creation of a personalized six-month action plan.

To ensure accessibility and impact, the nine-week course was offered in both English and Spanish. Each cohort received a blend of group instruction and one-on-one support, including individualized advising sessions with both the instructor and small business advisors. This high-touch approach created space for learning, reflection, and tailored problem-solving.

GYSBO Program Delivery

Program delivery was designed to be flexible and responsive to participant needs.

- » **FREE to all learners.**
- » **Length:** nine-week course to accommodate busy schedules.
- » **Format:** hybrid model, taught in person and online.
- » **Provided in English or Spanish.**
- » **Small class size:** 15 to 20 participants.
- » **Two FREE hours** of required one-on-one instructor sessions.
- » **Three FREE recommended bonus hours** of one-on-one sessions with a small business advisor, to be completed within three months of the course.

The core components of the program are outlined below:

Program Element	Format	Time Commitment
Class Sessions	Nine group sessions, 2 hours each	18 hours total
1:1 with Instructor (Sessions 2b and 8b)	Two individual sessions per participant	1-2 hours per participant
Follow-Up 1:1 with Small Business Advisor	Three individual sessions per participant	1.5–3 hours per participant

Most cohorts followed a hybrid model, with the first and last sessions held in person and all other sessions conducted virtually. A few courses allowed participants to attend in person or remotely during live class times.

GYSBO Program Outcomes

The program enrolled 199 participants across 11 classes from spring 2023 through December 2025. The participants represented 150 different businesses and have received critical support, guidance, and resources to grow and sustain their ventures. Of those enrolled, 138 completed the program, a completion rate of 69%.

The participant demographics reflect the program's commitment to serving diverse communities. People of color comprised 72% of enrollees, with Hispanic or Latina/o individuals making up the largest segment of this group (62%). This compares to 59% of the Ventura County population who are people of color, proving that the program targeted and effectively enrolled the diverse participants it sought to serve. The average participant age was 47 years old, and the majority identified as female (77%). Geographically, the program primarily reached participants in Oxnard (36.9%) and Ventura (23%), with additional engagement across 11 other cities in the region.

In addition to the impact on individuals, the program has made a notable impact on local economic development. Program surveys highlight that the program has supported the launch of 30 new businesses within one year of enrollment and the creation of 36 new jobs. Participants also experienced significant financial gains; 67% reported increased household income since first enrolled in the program with an average 47% rise. Additionally, business sales increased by an average of 62%, underscoring GYSBO's role in promoting sustainable entrepreneurship and financial resilience.

Participants Increased Earnings
67% increased household income
62% increase in business sales

By the Numbers



13

Classes provided
(9 English, 4 Spanish)



170

Participants completed GYSBO



118

Participants received one-on-one coaching
(255 hours of support)



~160

Businesses received support
(some participants have more than one business)



30

New businesses launched within one year of enrollment



36

New jobs created

Participant Demographics

77%
Female

72%
People of Color
(62% Hispanic or Latino/a)

47
Average age of participants

Qualitative Insights from GYSBO Post-Program Surveys

Post-program surveys from participants revealed consistent themes around growth in digital confidence, business clarity, and practical skill development. Some of the key insights include:

- ✔ **Increase in digital confidence.** Many participants overcame fear or inexperience with technology. They now feel more confident using tools like Canva, ChatGPT, and SEO to grow their businesses.
- ✔ **Increase in clarity and business direction.** Participants gained a better understanding of their ideal clients, brand identity, and steps to build an online presence.
- ✔ **Immediate application of skills learned.** The content was described as clear, relevant, and immediately applicable. Participants began implementing strategies during the program.
- ✔ **Instruction and course format were effective.** Participants praised instructors for being engaging, knowledgeable, and supportive, especially for those with limited tech experience.
- ✔ **Participants valued yet underused coaching.** Participants shared that the one-on-one coaching was a highlight of the course and very helpful in providing individualized attention to their business challenges; however, many participants did not use their full allocation of free coaching hours.
- ✔ **Program was accessible.** The no-cost structure was essential for many, especially those facing hardship. Participants expressed deep gratitude for the opportunity and support.

“I work with many small business owners whose occupation did not used to need computers. . . . However, the world is changing and these successful business owners are realizing that they need computer skills in order to get loans online, market to new customers, run payroll, manage their books, and learn new trade skills.”

– Sylvia Martini, SBDC Advisor



GYSBO Replication Toolkit

To expand the reach and impact of the program, the EDC developed a free *Get Your Small Business Online Curriculum and Program Replication Toolkit*. The comprehensive toolkit was designed for ease of use and is available to any organization or community group that wants to teach the program to others.

60 organizations have downloaded the replication toolkit.

The replication toolkit Includes:

- ✓ **Full bilingual curriculum** in English and Spanish, ready-to-use or modify Google Slides presentations, and instructor notes.
- ✓ **Student activities and worksheets.**
- ✓ **An instructor guide** with detailed instructions, lesson plans, and best practices for teaching.
- ✓ **Program-evaluation tools** to help organizations measure the impact of their courses.
- ✓ **Program-administration tools** and tips to help organizations implement and scale the program.



How to Access the Toolkit

All materials are available to download or copy in a Google folder.

GYSBO Curriculum & Program Replication Toolkit.



“It felt like a full college course in eight weeks—with real impact.”
- GYSBO student

Challenges and Key Learnings

Throughout the implementation of GYSBO, several key challenges emerged that offered important insights for future program delivery.

- ❗ **Retention is difficult in a free, virtual program.** This program experienced a higher student drop-off rate than other WEV classes that have a participation cost. The free tuition reduced barriers to access, but also led to lower commitment among some enrollees. To address this, WEV offered a session zero to set engagement expectations as well as implemented an over-enrollment strategy, enrolling approximately 23 participants per cohort to achieve a target of 15 completers.
- ❗ **Difficulty maintaining engagement in a virtual environment.** To manage this challenge, WEV introduced printed workbooks to reinforce curriculum and structured the course to begin and end with in-person sessions. This blended model fostered accountability, community-building, and stronger connections between participants and instructors. These learnings underscore the importance of flexibility, wraparound supports, and proactive planning to ensure that participants not only enroll in but complete the course.
- ❗ **Significant differences in technology access and skill levels created barriers to participation,** especially among Spanish-speaking small business owners lacking computers, internet, or online experience. EDC provided Chromebooks to a few participants who did not have devices, while WEV offered hands-on instruction, printed materials, and hybrid classes. The wide range of abilities—from beginners to advanced users—underscored the need for differentiated course tracks to better tailor pacing and content, improving engagement and outcomes.
- ❗ **The wide range of participant skill levels also posed difficulties for curriculum delivery.** Some participants had no online presence, while others sought to expand or refine existing digital strategies. This disparity highlights the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach and the potential value of differentiated course tracks—for example, a “Getting Online Basics” track for beginners and a “Next-Level Online Growth” track for more-advanced learners. Such tailoring would allow instructors to better match pacing and content to participant needs, improving engagement and outcomes across cohorts.
- ❗ **Challenge finding host community sites with sufficient technology infrastructure.** The hybrid-model course with in-class instruction and virtual participation addressed some challenges, but it introduced the challenge of finding sites with adequate equipment, internet connectivity, and availability. For example, the Oxnard Library agreed to host the class, but the site did not have sufficient broadband internet to host the course effectively. Identifying long-term community partners with adequate infrastructure remains essential to expanding program access in high-demand areas like Oxnard.
- ❗ **Underutilization of follow-up one-on-one support.** Although the program offered one-on-one small business advising as a core component, uptake was consistently low. Many advising hours went unused, suggesting a disconnect between availability, participant understanding about the value of the free advising, interest, or scheduling capacity. One possible solution for future courses is to provide one-on-one advising early in the program, ideally before or immediately after the initial class session. Early advising could serve as both an onboarding and vetting tool, ultimately improving retention and engagement.

Participant Success Stories

Bruna – Easy Street Crafts

At 92 years old, Bruna brought both energy and decades of entrepreneurial experience to the fall 2023 GYSBO course. Bruna founded her business, Easy Street Crafts, in 1981 and has been a creative force in the craft community ever since. After her husband’s passing, Bruna made the intentional decision to learn new technologies that would support her in preparing for a graceful and empowered transition into retirement.

Throughout the course, Bruna enthusiastically embraced digital tools, especially the use of Artificial Intelligence. She even created her final presentation with the help of ChatGPT, showcasing her commitment to innovation and adaptability. Bruna’s six-month action plan included making her website mobile friendly, launching an Instagram account, and establishing an email marketing platform to stay connected with her loyal customers. Bruna’s journey is a powerful reminder that it’s never too late to learn, grow, and take control of your business future.



Clara – Encanto Jewelry

When Clara signed up for a Spanish GYSBO course, she had a straightforward goal in mind: make more sales and grow her business. But as the weeks went on, things started to shift in a big way. She went through ups and downs, and there were moments when it all felt like too much. Still, Clara kept going, fueled by the reason she started in the first place—turning her passion into something real and sustainable. What really helped was knowing she wasn’t alone. Seeing other people on the same path gave her the push to stick with it.

One of the biggest breakthroughs came when Clara finally figured out who her ideal customer really was. Once she had that clarity, she was able to speak directly to her audience, present her products with more purpose, and shape a brand that resonated. Her business wasn’t just a catalog anymore. It became something meaningful, with personality and heart. Her goals also grew to include building a brand, engaging with customers, and boosting her online presence.

Looking back, Clara described her experience as “reveladora”—eye-opening. She discovered new things about her business, but even more meaningfully, about herself. Her confidence grew, and so did her belief that she could really make this work. Her advice for other business leaders thinking about taking the course is, “Go for it! Even if it feels scary or overwhelming at first, the growth and lessons are totally worth it. You come out not just with new skills but with a renewed sense of what’s possible.”

VIII. OVERALL IMPACT, KEY LEARNINGS, AND PATH FORWARD

Overall Impact

The Ventura County Digital Upskilling Initiative demonstrates the transformative potential of digital upskilling and the importance of regional collaboration to implement and sustain equitable economic mobility efforts.

In four years, the initiative:



Served over 1,362 Ventura County residents, far exceeding the original goal of 400.



Strengthened collaboration and built lasting partnerships across direct service providers, adult schools, community-based organizations, and employers.



Created measurable impacts on economic mobility, from new job placements and internships to increased small business revenues and household income.



Built lasting capacity to deliver ongoing digital skills training and prepare workers at all levels for the modern economy.



Served those from underrepresented communities, including Spanish speakers, women, people of color, and older adults.



Developed a sustainable digital upskilling pilot that can be replicated across California as a strategy to increase economic mobility using digital skills training.



Developed replication toolkits that are already being adopted by others across California.



Develop sustained capacity to prepare workers at all levels for digital skills training.

Scaling and Sustaining the Initiative

One of the initial goals of this initiative was to pilot innovative digital upskilling programs that can be scaled across California. Throughout the entire initiative, the EDC has intentionally developed partnerships and tools that could support the scaling of this initiative and all of the key learnings along the way.

The replication toolkits for **Computer Basics** and **GYSBO** provide ready-to-use, bilingual resources that enable schools, libraries, and nonprofits across California to replicate proven models. Already, partners across the state are adopting these materials to expand access. Furthermore, the EDC is actively seeking funding to continue providing these two essential programs across the region.

Key Learnings

Several important insights emerged from this pilot that will guide future digital upskilling investments.

- ✓ **Foundational demand is persistent.** The need for basic digital literacy is not going away. Programs like Computer Basics require ongoing delivery and regular updates to remain relevant. While internet and device access are improving, there are still too few programs that teach digital competence in a way that ensures technology can be effectively used.
- ✓ **Wraparound supports drive completion.** Barriers such as childcare, transportation, and lack of devices prevent many residents from participating. Programs that provide supports—free devices, bilingual curriculum, stipends, or flexible class locations—see higher enrollment and completion rates, especially among underserved groups.
- ✓ **Reaching those most in need requires creative outreach.** Traditional marketing via online platforms or emails often misses immigrant communities, ELL, and older adults. Service providers must meet people where they are through trusted community organizations, local events, and direct, culturally competent engagement.
- ✓ **Instruction in native languages expands equity.** Translated materials alone are insufficient. Courses delivered fully in Spanish (and other languages) have significantly increased participation, comprehension, and retention. For many learners, language-accessible courses were the deciding factor in their ability to enroll and succeed.
- ✓ **Program value framing influences engagement.** Free programs reduce barriers but can also reduce commitment. Future models should test approaches like refundable deposits, stipends, or employer co-investment to reinforce program value and maintain engagement.
- ✓ **Partnerships are essential for sustainability and scaling.** Embedding programs into the existing infrastructure of adult schools, community colleges, and nonprofits has ensured continuity beyond the pilot. Building trusted partnerships expanded reach, leveraged existing expertise, and created a pathway for long-term sustainability.
- ✓ **Build on regional assets, don't duplicate.** The initiative began with a deliberate mapping of existing resources and gaps. This avoided duplication and instead strengthened the regional ecosystem. For example, the Computer Basics curriculum was co-created with all regional adult schools, the Ventura County Community College District, and nonprofit partners, ensuring alignment with existing offerings and providing learners with a clear pathway to higher-level digital courses.

“Not every initiative should be delivered at large scale, but if the aim is to expand and deepen the impact of a particular project, program, innovation, or approach, then designing with scale in mind from the start is a must.”

– The Brookings Institution

Ongoing Needs

While the Ventura County Digital Upskilling Initiative has made significant progress, several ongoing needs must be addressed to sustain and expand impact.



Evergreen device fund. Access to devices remains a persistent barrier. Adult schools have identified funding for instructors but lack resources to provide learners with computers. Establishing a dedicated, ongoing fund for Chromebooks would ensure that participants in Computer Basics and other digital literacy courses can continue practicing skills beyond the classroom.



Smartphone literacy. Despite the ubiquity of smartphones, very few programs teach people how to effectively use them (and use them securely) for everyday tasks such as applying for jobs, managing finances, accessing health care, and running small businesses. Adding smartphone-focused modules would expand relevance and reach. The Computer Basics course could add content to each module or add modules focused on phone first digital skills that are common in daily use.



Multilingual program expansion. A shortage of digital skills programs in Spanish and other languages continues to limit participation among immigrant and ELL communities. Instruction in native languages—not just translated materials—remains essential for equity and accessibility. It would be great to translate the materials into other languages including Mandarin, Farsi, Hmong, etc.



Small business support. Many small business owners, particularly in fields that historically required little technology (e.g., dog trainers, fishermen, mechanics), now find digital skills essential for survival and growth. Programs must expand to cover not only digital marketing but also basic business computer skills such as online banking, digital recordkeeping, and back-office operations.



Need for courses and upskilling for specific subpopulations.

Provision of the three cohort programs highlights the need for various population-specific programs and content to ensure appropriate application of skill and respect for learners. Some of these groups include:

- **Seniors.** There is a dearth of programs for seniors and older adults who can benefit from digital upskilling. Senior-centered programs are needed to help adults adapt to rapidly changing technology in a supportive, low-stress environment.
- **Immigrants and ELL communities.** Digital upskilling for immigrant communities must be taught in native languages, focus on safe online practices, and use group-learning models to build trust and peer support. Online security training is especially important for communities communicating regularly across borders.
- **Veterans.** Many veterans possess valuable technical skills or security clearances but lack the certifications needed to translate them into civilian careers. Digital upskilling paired with industry-recognized credentials can provide a direct pathway into high-demand IT roles.
- **Individuals with disabilities.** Digital skills programs often move too quickly or lack accessibility adaptations. Tailored courses with adaptable pacing, accessible interfaces, and inclusive teaching strategies are necessary to ensure individuals with disabilities are not excluded from digital opportunity.

IX. CONCLUSION

The Ventura County Digital Upskilling Initiative has achieved more than a set of training milestones; it has built a foundation for lasting economic mobility, equity, and competitiveness. By equipping residents with digital skills, supporting small businesses, and strengthening the regional workforce system, the initiative has proven that targeted investments in digital upskilling can yield outsized returns.



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