

# PUBLIC LIBRARIES & DIGITAL LITERACY

## DIGITAL LITERACY

### TECHNOLOGY ACCESS

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

### EXPERTISE

Public libraries offer expertise that helps people understand technology and Internet resources

### TRAINING

Public libraries offer a wide range of free computer, Internet use, and resource instruction to help people locate, evaluate, and use online resources

### E-GOVERNMENT

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

### EMPLOYMENT

Public libraries provide technology instruction opportunities that increase people's job qualifications

With 99% of public libraries offering public Internet access, public libraries provide a vital community link to the Internet, technology, and information. Public libraries are essential providers of employment, educational services and resources, and e-government.

**93.5%**

Libraries report offering classes on general Internet use\*

**57.7%**

Libraries report that technology training is important in their communities

**78.8%**

Libraries report offering point-of-use technology training

**92.9%**

Libraries report offering classes in general computer skills\*

Public libraries play a vital role in bridging the digital divide, the gap between “haves” and “have nots” in the digital age. Public libraries provide free access to workstations and Internet services to those who could not otherwise access these resources. Public libraries also provide training and assistance to those who lack technology skills or who have difficulty using Internet services.

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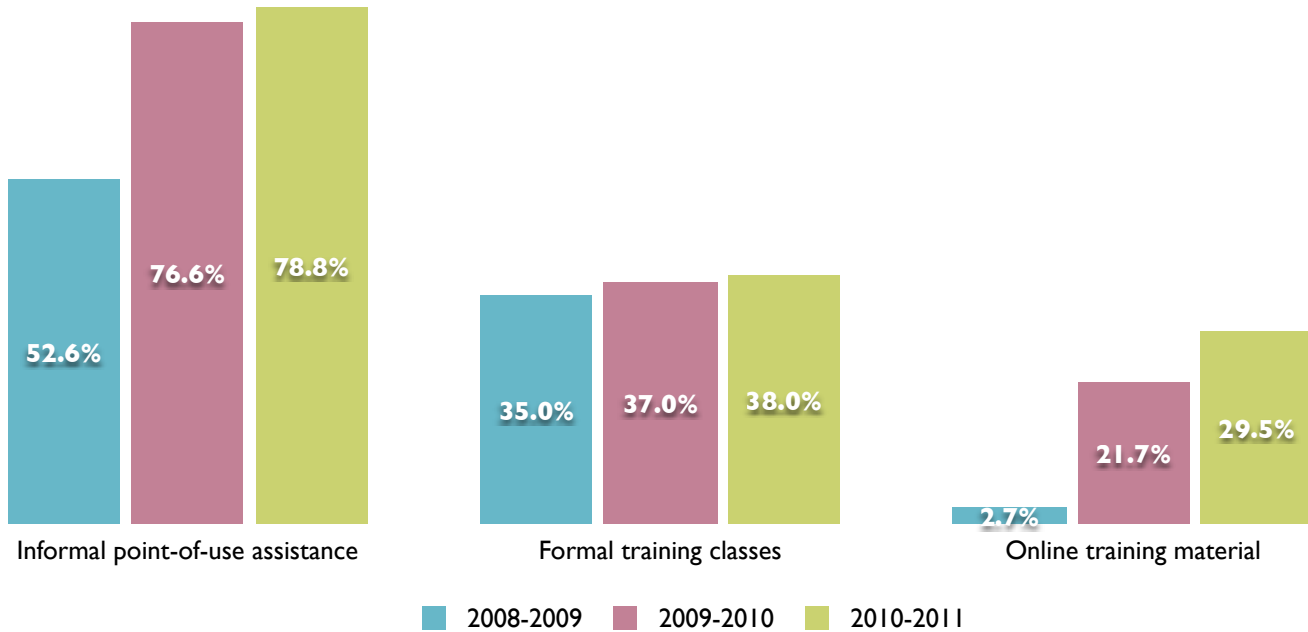


Figure 1. Public Library Technology Training Opportunities.

## Digital Literacy

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

## Digital Divide

In an information and Internet-driven age, where information, services, and resources are increasingly available only online, people without access to a computer or the Internet are at a considerable disadvantage. They may lack the ability to access information resources, or the

knowledge to use these resources effectively. This lack of ability or knowledge is likely to have a negative impact on their ability to succeed by limiting their access to employment and E-government resources, educational achievement, as well as informational and recreational resources. Public libraries play a vital role in providing people with both access to computers and Internet and instruction in the use of resources, helping to bridge these gaps.

## Technology Training

The technology training services offered by libraries are an important component of the services they provide to the community, with 87.3% of libraries offering some type of training (see Figure 1). Librarians report that usage of patron technology training classes has increased at 26.7% of libraries and only 4.0% report a decrease. Librarians recognize the value of these services, ranking technology training 3.8 out of 5 in terms of the importance of services offered to the community (5 being the highest importance).

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## Types of Service

Public libraries offer a variety of patron technology training opportunities, and they offer these services in different ways:

- 78.8% offer informal point-of-use assistance;
- 38.0% of libraries offer formal technology training classes;
- 29.5% offer online training materials; and
- 28.1% offer one-on-one sessions by appointment.

Of those public libraries offering formal technology training classes, a range of topics are covered. Most of these libraries (92.9%) report offering classes in general computer skills, and 79.5% of libraries offer classes in general software use. Additionally, many libraries offer classes on general Internet use (93.5%), or more specifically on Web searching (81.9%).

## Building the Next Generation Workforce

Information and technology skills are essential for developing a competitive workforce. Public libraries teach people how to

find and use the information they need, use technology, use the Internet and Internet-enabled technologies and services, and enhance their knowledge.

Public libraries combine these workforce development skills with a number of critical services and resources:

- 90.9% of libraries provide access to jobs databases and job opportunity resources;
- 77.0% of libraries provide access to civil service exam materials;
- 74.5% of libraries offer software and other resources to help people create resumes and other employment materials; and
- 71.9% of libraries help people complete online job applications.

In doing so, public libraries create a skilled and knowledgeable workforce able to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

## Key Issues and Challenges

In spite of the importance of these services, public libraries face a number of challenges in their efforts to provide access to and instruction in digital resources. Increased use of technology

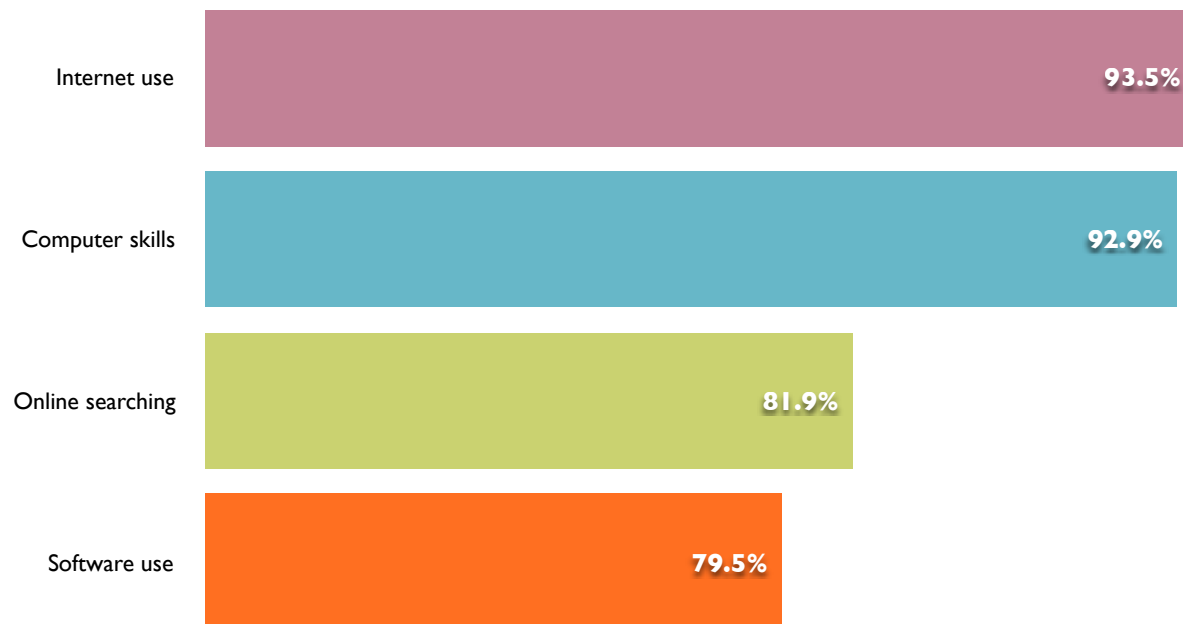


Figure 2. Public Library Formal Technology Training Classes.

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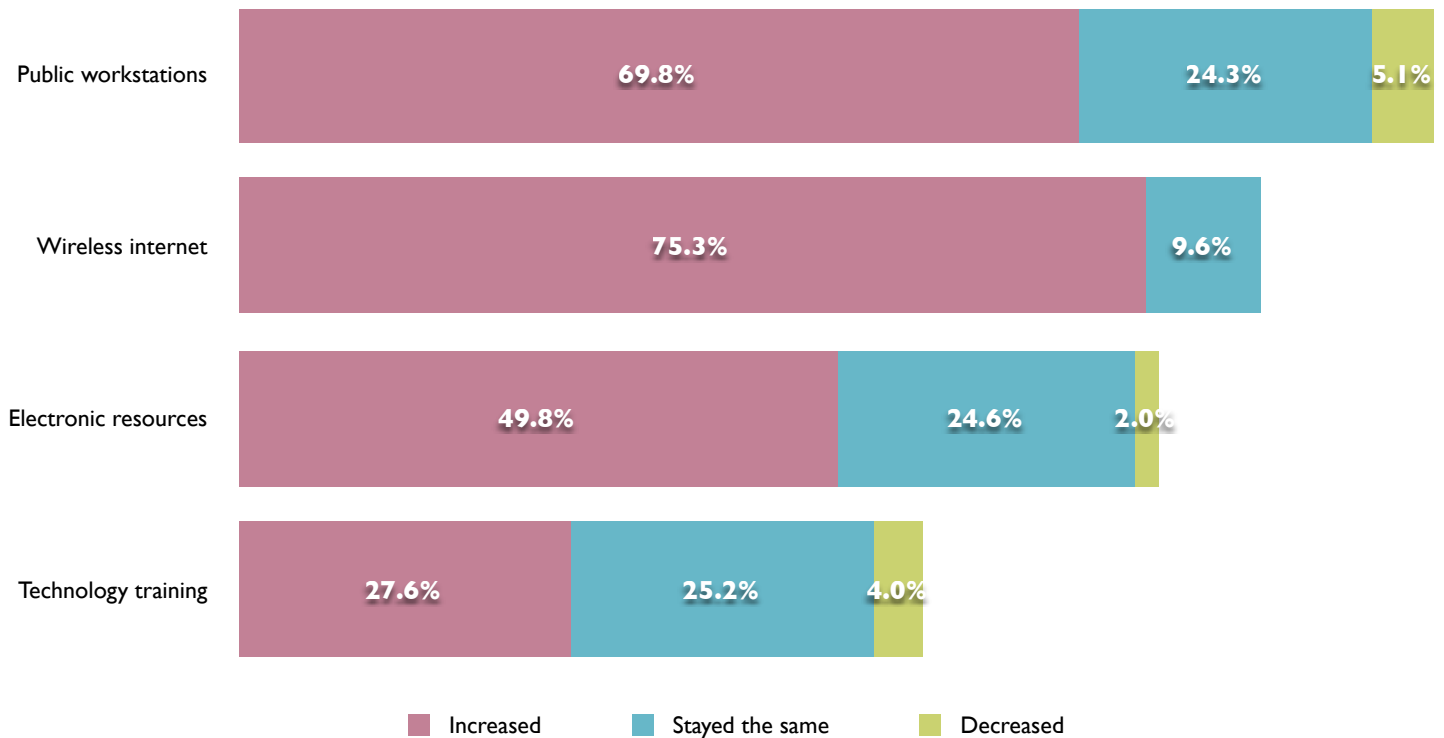


Figure 3. Use of Public Library Services.

training classes coincides with increased use of library resources across the board, representing an increase in demand on library resources and staff (see Figure 3).

Approximately three quarters (76.2%) of libraries report having insufficient public access Internet workstations to meet patrons’ needs during at least some part of a typical day. Most libraries (69.8%) report an increase in the usage of public access Internet workstations in the last fiscal year. Increasing demand means many libraries have established time limits for patrons using public access workstations, which has a significant impact on people who lack other means of access this information.

Technology training competes with other library services in its importance to the community. Job seeking services and E-

government services are consistently ranked amongst the most important services to the community provided by libraries. That the public library is the only, or one of few, community resources addressing these issues means librarians often must combine digital literacy instruction with other services.

## Conclusion

Just as community access has become an important component of public library services, so too has patron technology training. Although public libraries face many challenges in their efforts to provide access and instruction services, they are embracing their role bridging the digital divide, and they continue to expand their services and innovate in their practices.

## References

<sup>1</sup> American Library Association. *Presidential Committee on Information Literacy. Final Report.* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1989.)

\* Percentages are out of those libraries that reported offering formal technology training classes.