

International Literacy Month: Why we need to talk about digital literacy

By [Jackie Carroll](#)

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We can no longer talk about literacy and numeracy without also talking about digital literacy.

Learners and adults of all ages need to be able to read and write proficiently as well as work effectively with numbers. But increasingly, they also need to be able to work on a computer and online if they are to succeed in their academic and professional lives. The pandemic has only made this need more apparent.



Source: Elliott Reyna via [Unsplash](#)

Earlier this month, on 8 September, the world marked International Literacy Day. Founded by UNESCO in 1966, International Literacy Day emphasises the importance of literacy for individuals, communities and societies, and the need for intensified efforts towards more literate societies.

This year's theme, "Literacy for a human-centred recovery: Narrowing the digital divide", speaks to the evolving understanding of literacy.

"The Covid-19 crisis," UNESCO says, "has disrupted the learning of children, young people and adults at an unprecedented scale. It has also magnified the pre-existing inequalities in access to meaningful literacy learning opportunities, disproportionately affecting 773 million non-literate young people and adults."

In addition, Covid-19 has highlighted the fact that access to learning opportunities is not evenly distributed. The move to online and distance learning has shone a spotlight on the divide between those who have connectivity, infrastructure, and technical ability, and those who do not. In countries such as South Africa, this divide is stark.

A first-hand perspective

When Covid-19 hit, every single one of our workforce education and training sites was temporarily suspended. Like countless businesses across the country and the world, everything ground to a halt in a matter of days. But we have always been ahead of the game in terms of integrating technology into our work. When our business started in 1996, we were the first and only company to provide computer-assisted training for adults, and we haven't relaxed our hold on digitising our content since.

Instead, we have gone from making our learning material available on floppy disks, to offering online courses and virtual support. Covid-19 reminded us of the value of this service and forced us to accelerate it.

This journey has not been without its challenges. While connectivity and infrastructure are obvious issues, even securing buy-in has been tricky. At the beginning of the pandemic, many businesses battled to adjust to remote working. By the same token, they found it hard to accept that their teams would be able to complete their learning remotely, or even that a blended approach would work, when restrictions started to lift and we reintroduced some limited face-to-face contact.

But as time wore on, the proof of this transition was in the pudding. Not only did our learners adapt to virtual and blended teaching, but we started to develop solutions around South Africa's prohibitively high data costs. We began by ensuring that a lot of our content was available offline and that learners were able to continue without the constant need to access the internet. And we choose to work with low-data platforms that our learners were already familiar with, such as WhatsApp and Telegram.

Over time, these processes gained momentum, and they have helped to ensure that our learners' ongoing education hasn't fallen by the wayside as a result of the pandemic.

Meaningful implications

The implications of this are far-reaching. In our niche market, we are helping to narrow the digital divide among the individuals we teach, and we're furthering their digital literacy. We're also demonstrating the value of this form of literacy to their employers.

Both schools and businesses are remiss if they think that the interventions that Covid-19 necessitated aren't going to be required in the long term. Not because I am making any predictions about future pandemics, but because one of the most valuable lessons this period has taught us is that we have been neglecting digital literacy for far too long. Today, we all need to know how to communicate and work digitally if we – and our businesses – are going to stay relevant.

Creating resilient and sustainable economies depends on digital literacy being prioritised and the digital divide being overcome. This process involves installing infrastructure in remote and rural communities and providing the necessary training for it to be maintained and widely used. If we collectively – as government, the private sector and civil society – take this on board, we're likely to create a national workforce that is fundamentally equipped for the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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