

Digital literacy: A call for awareness, understanding, and action

Literacy has long been a dividing line between the privileged and underprivileged, and also a telling indicator of an individual's future prospects. Over the past three decades, technology has created a similar and equally troubling divide.

Digital literacy has become a very real crisis, one that many don't see. But Ed Christmas, founder and president of Cisco partner [Sology Solutions](#), is determined to raise awareness of the problem and inspire others to follow his lead in confronting it.

"The digital divide has been growing for some time, but the pandemic was a huge wakeup call," says Christmas, whose company specializes in IoT-driven technology services. "While many of us were able to adapt and push forward with things like remote work, distance learning, and online services, millions of people who don't have access to computers or the internet were falling further behind."

For most of us, technology has become an essential component and enabler of everyday life, helping us

stay informed, connected, and productive. Without those critical capabilities, our realm of opportunity becomes much smaller. According to the U.S. Department of Education, adults who are not digitally literate have a lower rate of labor force participation and tend to work in lower skilled jobs than their digitally literate counterparts.¹

Amidst the crisis, Christmas sees opportunity.

"This is an untapped resource pool," says Christmas, a small business owner who often has to compete with larger companies to expand his workforce. "I believe in conscious capitalism. Doing good is good for business. And it's in all of our best interests to promote digital literacy and pull forward the communities that have been left behind."

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Ed Christmas
Founder and President,
[Sology Solutions](#)



The importance of awareness

Addressing the problem starts with awareness – on both sides of the digital divide. Those of us with technology-privileged lives must be cognizant of the crisis at hand, who it affects, and the impact on our society as a whole. And those without access to technology need to understand the importance of digital literacy and the possibilities it can open.

“For many young adults in underserved communities, they’ve been robbed of vision and hope. They primarily

see poverty and crime in their neighborhood, not role models with successful careers. How can you dream of getting into sales or customer service if you’re not aware those jobs exist? How can you apply for and perform those jobs in today’s day and age without basic computer skills?” Christmas asks rhetorically. “You can’t be what you can’t see.”

That’s why Christmas is heavily involved in the [All Stars Project](#), which creates free, after-school development programs for inner-city youth and their families. He says

the program changes lives forever, and he encourages other companies, both large and small, to get involved in their local community.

“It’s important to give back,” he says. “The kids and families often have a much bigger impact on a business and its employees than the other way around. It’s eye opening.”



It can be difficult to confront a problem you can't see. And with the majority of the population moving swiftly forward into the digital future, it's easy to lose sight of the minority being left behind.

"We need to bring all walks of life together and have open conversations about digital literacy," Christmas says. "Sharing different experiences and perspectives leads to awareness, understanding, and empathy – and those are the catalysts for change."

Relationships, tools, and training

Change must take place on two levels, Christmas explains. The first is on an interpersonal level, forming new relationships and partnerships that bring together both sides of the digital divide.

Christmas is a founding member of [Digibridge](#), a nonprofit organization that forms coalitions of stakeholders within academia, community organizations, and public and private companies. The coalitions work together to bring broadband internet and digital literacy to underserved communities.

"Public and private partnerships can have a huge impact," Christmas says. "Not only in bringing connectivity and technology to poor communities, but also in nurturing the quality of life and economic well-being of people within those communities."

If bridging the digital divide on an interpersonal level is the first step, providing access to modern tools and training for how to use them is the second.

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"This isn't just about internet connectivity," Christmas says. "The long-term goal is to improve digital literacy, expand workforce development, and increase entrepreneurship and commerce within underserved communities."

It requires a collective effort, he adds. Nonprofits, academia, local government agencies, and the private sector must all work together to break down walls, form new relationships, and solve problems.

"Politics and bureaucracy slow everything down and impede change, especially at the federal and state levels," Christmas says. "Corporations are nimbler and faster, and they can form mutually beneficial partnerships with local municipalities, schools, and nonprofits."

Small businesses, in particular, can lead the way.

"You can't just throw money at the problem. You need to be present, have the pulse of the community, and actively bring people together. Proximity has power," Christmas says. "At first, the digital divide seems overwhelming. But if you change one life, you can be a force multiplier."

Learn more about [Corporate Social Responsibility at Cisco](#) and see how Ed Christmas' company, [Sology Solutions](#), is [connecting the unconnected within its community](#).

