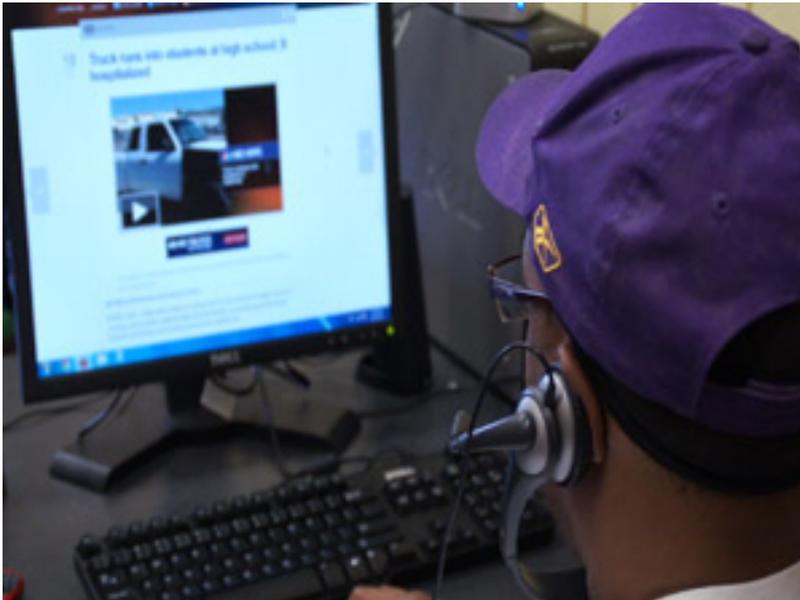


Technology training a way to stimulate our economy

Written by Britta Anderson

Sunday, 07 October 2012 12:06



Can you imagine not knowing how to turn on a computer? For many low-income individuals throughout the Twin Cities metro area this is a harsh reality. In today's technology infiltrated world there is an increasing divide between those who have access to and are able to use computers and those who are not. This separation leads to a multitude of inequalities and creates a sizeable disadvantage in the job market. The University of Minnesota's Broadband Access Project (BAP) aims to close this gap through the development and enhancement of 12 public computer centers in four federally designated poverty zones in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Run by the University of Minnesota's Urban Research and Outreach/Engagement Center the goal of this project is clear: to lessen the digital divide by increasing broadband access, awareness, and use. Each of the computer labs is outfitted with various numbers of up-to-date units with high-speed Internet capabilities as well as Microsoft office. The project is funded through a federal grant from the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program as well as matching gifts from the University of MN. In its final year of a three-year timeline, the project is looking to find funding in order to continue its services.

Because leaders of the project understand that computer adeptness has become a key job skill, the development of computer literacy through education is an important aspect of the BAP. Group classes targeting all levels of proficiency are offered at the larger BAP computer labs. These classes cover topics regarding Microsoft Office, financial support, social media for business use, and even Internet programming and design. What also sets the BAP apart from other public computer centers is the presence of a trained apprentice at each location. This apprentice is employed by the university and is able to help users with any variety of questions they might have.

At the lab in the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center a young, energetic man named Xavier Nash is the apprentice. He explains the various ways he will help those who enter the lab by creating an email account, working with Microsoft office tools, and even walking them through the most basic computer skills among many other things. The help he is able to give people and seeing the satisfaction they experience are things that he loves about his job. "The joy I get out of this job is really seeing people's facial expressions when they figure out that they can actually

Technology training a way to stimulate our economy

Written by Britta Anderson

Sunday, 07 October 2012 12:06

do things... they're really, really excited," he glowingly remarks. Even as a technologically savvy young man who can't imagine not being able to turn on a computer, he is exceedingly patient with people of all levels of knowledge who will come in and need his help. "I believe it's important to the community around me because we have one-on-one lessons, like if somebody comes in and really doesn't know anything we can sit there, and if it takes us all day it's just gonna take us all day," Nash remarks. Unlike public computers at the libraries, there is no time limit for use at BAP centers. Their smaller size (there are twelve computers at the Phyllis Wheatley center) and emphasis on personal attention makes them a rich place for learning. As Nash says, "Instead of going to a library where the lady sits behind the desk and there's a lot of people it's a closed space so they feel comfortable and we give them more attention than these people may be afraid to ask for at any other computer lab."

Access to these computers has vastly increased quality of life for many of their users. They aid with job search and resumes, finding information from the IRS, helping children with schoolwork and a multitude of other things. Even beyond these specific things, the computers allow users to feel a sense of empowerment and fuel a curiosity about the world. Marshall Flippen, a middle aged man that visits a BAP center most days of the week is impressed by the amount of information that is available to those who have access to computers. "It's at my fingertips, the world is out there," he says, "I can do everything in the world at one of these offices here." Nash also tells a story of a man who was inspired to share his stories after learning how to type, "The other day a guy came in and he didn't know anything about Microsoft so we got him typing and next thing you know he can't stop typing! He's been in here every day just 'I've got to write another story, I've got to write another story.'"

Lillie Harris, a mother who often uses the computers to find information about her son's school, was intimidated by computers but with the help she has received at this center now realizes how great of a resource they can be. "I'm a person that don't like technology as much, but I'm seeing it's getting to be very important because it helped me with a matter I needed help with. I see now that technology is quite useful." One person at a time the Broadband Access Project is closing the technological gap in the Twin Cities and it hopes to continue to do so. For more information or to find a lab near you visit www.bap.umn.edu.