

Exploring the SkillRise Course

By [Sam Peterson](#) | EdSurge Solutions Studio

Observing the often lofty predictions made on the future of work, one envisions a far-fetched and distant sci-fi Utopia in which humans live harmoniously alongside intelligent automatons to finally realize the peak potential of civilization. But this scenario is hardly science fiction; as it turns out, [that future is here and now](#).

Today's workforce already demands that employees across all strata regularly interact with sophisticated technology in order to perform even the most basic functions of their roles. Consequently, a number of working adults—especially those with lower levels of digital literacy—[are in danger of being left behind](#) as job requirements rapidly evolve beyond current skill levels and training programs struggle to keep pace.

SkillRise, an ISTE initiative made possible through funding from the Retail Opportunity Network, is confronting this reality head-on. Serving an audience of adult learning organizations—including teachers, administrators, coaches and project managers in adult basic education, English language acquisition and workforce development—the program provides structure and support to ensure that digital-age skills are prioritized for adults in the workforce. A primary goal is to help these organizations reach working

adults who may be considered lower- or middle-skilled and help them “upskill” to meet new professional challenges.

The SkillRise team is committed to a founding principle: Through the strategic use of education technology, adult-learning and workforce-development organizations can transform the lives of today's workers, enabling them to thrive in their careers, now and into the future. And as SkillRise sees it, an effective career-training strategy for the



digital age hinges, above all, on the appropriate selection and use of technology to provide learning experiences that prepare workers and jobseekers for the future of work.

“There’s a lot of irresponsible purchasing of tech that happens right now without a plan,” says Jeff Goumas, Digital Learning Lead at World Education and collaborator on the SkillRise framework and course. “We want to help organizations focus on responsible technology integration,

their own organization, getting the buy-in, helping people understand why we are doing this and what the goals are for this technology initiative that they want to embark upon. You must have a vision for what you want to accomplish with your learners. Everything starts with that.”

Yet, he notes, a vision alone is insufficient. Readiness requires sharing that vision with all stakeholders in order to gain buy-in across the organization. This sets the stage

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and not just focus on a tool itself, but the strategies to implement that tool.” For some institutions, this may mean a change from little or no tech usage to a fairly robust solution, such as the addition of a distance learning option for adult learners who aren’t able to attend in-person classes.

To assist organizations in the development of sustainable technology implementation plans, SkillRise offers a free, 10-week “Upskill With Edtech” course where learners collaborate to establish their plans and receive ongoing feedback from edtech coaches. The course aligns with the [SkillRise framework](#), which is divided across five separate action categories. And while each is deemed essential to the success of any tech initiative, Goumas emphasizes the critical importance of the very first category: Vision & Readiness. “If you’re really trying to be strategic about what you’re doing, you have to have a north star,” he asserts.

“The biggest, most important piece is the component of vision. It sets the tone for a cohort or an individual taking the course, not just in terms of formulating the plan that they come out of the course with, but also setting forth within

for the work to come. “The result is stronger when you have group involvement, as opposed to an individual working in a vacuum, which of course makes sense on any organizational level,” says Goumas.

With that in mind, SkillRise recently revamped its enrollment advising process. After hearing from members of their winter cohort that the course may serve groups better than individuals, they encouraged organizations to enroll several colleagues as a team in summer 2020—to great success. This collaborative approach enables each participant to leverage individual expertise to the benefit of the greater organization. For example, administrators may lead budget conversations while teachers offer guidance on supporting positive learning outcomes for students.

Throughout the course, a good deal of SkillRise’s effort is spent on helping organizations establish an actionable plan for implementing digital-age learning, one that makes sense for their unique circumstances and their particular learner-worker population. “Completion of the course, in terms of getting a credential, is the completion of an

implementation plan,” explains Goumas. “What we’re doing is all about the planning.”

As SkillRise works to bolster support for its enrolled cohorts, the team is gathering formative feedback from participants and advisors, conducting surveys, logging anecdotal observations and keeping a close eye on key data points, such as course completion rates, which jumped from 29 percent in 2019 to 68 percent in 2020. Additionally, the initiative completed a developmental evaluation with Public Profit, combining data review, field research and interviews with both internal and external stakeholders.

The evaluation’s early findings point to a number of successes within the program, citing the high quality and accessibility of SkillRise resources, as well as their clear alignment to the expressed needs of the adult education field. The creation of adult-specific digital competencies is seen as particularly valuable. Some areas for future consideration have also been identified. For example, the team will be releasing micro-learning opportunities in fall 2020, which will enable anyone to sample portions of the course.

Considering the potential impact of the SkillRise initiative, Goumas takes a broad view. “There’s so much happening right now in the tech space around microlearning, lifelong learning, skill-based learning and workforce training,” he notes. “That’s great, but the fact of the matter is, you have this massive part of the population whose academic and digital skill levels preclude them benefitting from these innovations. They’re not in those mid-level jobs. We have to consider the disparate needs that they have—the disparate access and equity issues—and equip them with what they need, not just to get their next retail job, but to actually have a pathway to mobility.”



For Goumas, SkillRise plays a pivotal role in laying the groundwork to create deep, sustained change. Revealing a core aspiration, he adds, “I want organizations to see this framework and this course as a way to leverage technology to give learners exposure to necessary tools as part of whatever their trajectory is—developing in those learners the skills that they need to be successful, regardless of what their pursuits are. That might be work- or learning-based, it might be civic participation-based, or just being able to do the day-to-day things that workers more and more need to do with technology.”

To date, SkillRise has enrolled over 100 individual participants from 20 separate organizations across 15 states. Given that each of these organizations typically serves between 500 and 2,000 students, this group alone has the potential to reach a population of adult learners ranging into the tens of thousands. Looking to the near future, SkillRise hopes to deepen that impact through the release of its [Profile of a Lifelong Learner](#). Modeled on the ISTE Standards for Students, this document will provide adult learning organizations a specific guide for aligning their curricula and programmatic resources—in other words, the “north star” that Goumas proposes. ■