DATA&
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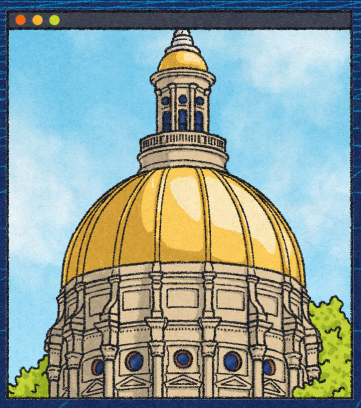
POLICY BRIEF

(404) Job Not Found

How Government Can Help AI Education Deliver Real Benefits for Workers



Serena Oduro and Anuli Akanegbu, PhD

Introduction

Federal and state governments are increasingly promoting "AI literacy" as a necessary skill for the American workforce, with the Trump administration claiming that "the AI infrastructure buildout will create high-paying jobs for American workers."[1] The administration's AI Action Plan, which it calls a "worker-first AI agenda," prioritizes actions to grow AI literacy in the American workforce, such as by directing federal agencies to utilize education and workforce funding streams for AI skills development. At the same time, the administration is terminating funding aimed at bridging the digital divide and cutting federal funding that supports childcare services, as well as other programs and services that are vital to workers' livelihoods.

In cities across the country, many workers — especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds — are grasping in the dark when it comes to AI. Many are taking online courses and enrolling in training bootcamps, aiming to"get a foot in the door," only to find that the door leads only to short-term, low-wage, and unsteady work. Even with the desire to build their AI literacy skills, many Americans find themselves unable to engage in educational programs while saddled with the myriad responsibilities required to get by day-to-day.

Digital skills are increasingly necessary for navigating an AI-driven labor market, even as those skills do not guarantee economic security or mobility. Yet while it is invoked with increasing frequency, the concept of "AI literacy" is not well-defined. This is particularly true when it is positioned as a standalone solution to the mismatch between employer expectations and worker capacity. Training programs and employers may use "AI literacy" to encompass a variety of skills, from knowing coding languages like Python to understanding how to successfully prompt generative AI systems like ChatGPT. Meanwhile, tech companies often deploy the term as a political smokescreen, using it to bolster capital expenditure and paint a picture of inevitable technological change.

By contrast, we consider AI literacy as part of a broader category of digital skilling that comprises just one part of a much larger set of socioeconomic conditions that shape the career outcomes of workers. **Investments in workers' skills can be most valuable when they are connected with efforts to address the broader socioeconomic conditions that shape career outcomes.** This means that AI literacy efforts must be coupled with policy efforts that remove barriers to participation in educational and training programs.

In our report, ***(404) Job Not Found: What Workforce Training Can't Fix for Black Atlantans in the Age of AI***, researcher Anuli Akanegbu interrogates the lofty promises of digital transformation by investigating the experience of Black workers and community leaders in Atlanta as they attempt to accrue and spread AI skills. In her research, Akanegbu found workers attempting to patchwork digital and AI skills together, unsure of what qualifies as AI literacy or how specific skills might translate to work opportunities. The lack of clarity on what AI literacy means, and the skills needed to achieve it, leads to strategic abstraction. *Strategic abstraction* creates purposeful confusion that empowers government and industry efforts to push the integration of AI into people's lives, framing it as a necessity to spur investment into the AI economy — all while it remains unclear whether and how AI's power can be harnessed for the benefit of workers.

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1 The White House. 2025. "America's AI Action Plan." The White House. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Americas-AI-Action-Plan.pdf.

Ultimately, this report rejects the myth that workers can save themselves through upskilling and reskilling alone. While they can be beneficial for workers, efforts at digital skilling cannot replace the broader worker protections that will truly protect and uplift the American workforce.

The South Got Something to Say, and Other Regions Should Listen

For most of the past decade, Atlanta has had the highest levels of income inequality in the US. The city has an ecosystem of industry and nonprofit-led training programs that provide digital skill training with the aim of helping workers achieve economic mobility. However, Akanegbu found that in Atlanta's ecosystem, **structural deficits inhibit workers from gaining and leveraging the digital skills they need to advance in an increasingly AI-driven labor market.** Without policies that address the persistent inequities workers continue to battle — racism, sexism, unequal and discriminatory access to support services, to name a few — they are unlikely to reap the purported benefits of AI. In this brief, we use the findings from Akanegbu's research in Atlanta, which highlights the gaps left by public-private partnerships, to provide recommendations for policymakers who want their communities to achieve the economic prosperity promised by proponents of AI literacy.[2]

Georgia has a deep history of championing public-private partnerships, so much so that the state has its own brand for it. "Public-purpose capitalism" — having public defined goals and needs, like the construction and management of an airport or sewer system, that are realized by private capital — has helped Georgia become the financial powerhouse it is today. Coined by former mayor Andrew Young, public-purpose capitalism creates a tight relationship between government and industry. Public infrastructure efforts become industry projects; as Young said in a 2012 speech to the National Conference of Black Mayors, "we let them not only fund it, we let private contractors build it and manage it — but we set it up."[3] Yet while public-purpose capitalism and public-private partnerships have created bridges between government and industry, this approach to governance has also created deep economic divides, unequal access to economic opportunity, and weak links between Atlantans and the government, hampering the government's ability to provide the resources workers need to thrive.

Akanegbu's research found a major structural difference between the digital skills training offered to "blue collar" and "white collar" workers. "Blue collar" workers were offered training that, while technically free, required them to sacrifice paid work to participate and thus had a significant indirect cost. Meanwhile, "white collar" workers were able to learn as they earned, because their companies offered training programs they could complete while at work. While free programs are valuable, they do not provide the structural support most workers need to participate. One career and life coach for an adult workforce development nonprofit highlighted to Akanegbu the lack of support systems (i.e. childcare, transportation, digital access) that would actually make participation in training programs possible for many people. She noted that "we get these grant dollars and we're just expected to make things happen," and described how a lack of wraparound services like childcare and flexible scheduling leads her to warn program participants to be "very

2 Akanegbu, Anuli. 2025. "Why Atlanta Is the Focus of My Sociotechnical Research." Data & Society Research Institute. June 18, 2025. https://datasociety.net/points/why-atlanta-is-the-focus-of-my-sociotechnical-research/.

3 Ibid.

intentional about which [programs] you pick."[4] Her organization's IT bootcamps run Monday through Friday, from around 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., disqualifying many who are working low-paying full-time jobs in areas such as fast-food, retail, and warehouse work. While self-paced online courses like Google Coursera are also an option, they too pose challenges for full time-workers who cannot afford to stop working to complete an IT bootcamp. As she told Akanegbu, "You have to teach yourself…you have to have the self-discipline to stay on a schedule…By week two or three, you probably forgot you got that Google certification license that you should be working on."

AI literacy programming must be informed by the layers of structural inequality that often dictate workers' education levels and exposure to technology. As Anthony, a program manager at a workforce training organization who is familiar with the on-the-ground realities of AI skilling and AI preparedness said, "We have different populations, different demographics that we serve… we can't expect somebody who's low education, probably close to the poverty line, to come into class, we start spitting out all this AI jargon, and turn them into an AI machine learning engineer tomorrow." Anthony's professional observations align with the research from National Skills Coalition, a nonprofit that advocates for inclusive skills training, which found that approximately one-third of workers in the US lack even basic digital skills, such as the ability to highlight onscreen text or use a computer mouse. Histories of exclusion from education and digital infrastructure mean workers of color are particularly disadvantaged.[5]

To succeed in the labor market, workers need the government's efforts to rectify these systemic inequalities. As states increasingly seek to develop an AI literate workforce through public-private partnerships with technology companies, which often fail to deliver high-quality jobs at scale, we urge policymakers to view AI workforce development as poverty policy: one that must be aligned with broader government efforts to address discrimination and economic disenfranchisement, the digital divide, childcare affordability, and paid training opportunities.[6] People who are most in need of economic opportunity are often unable to participate in training to advance in the workforce. AI literacy efforts that do not address context-specific barriers to participation may not only have limited effectiveness, but lead to greater income inequality.

AI Literacy for All? Moving from Survival to Skillbuilding

The following recommendations are aimed at ensuring that AI literacy efforts — at the federal, state, and local levels — actually address the struggles and needs of American workers.

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4 Akanegbu, Anuli, PhD. *(404) Job Not Found: What Workforce Training Can't Fix for Black Atlantans in the Age of AI*, Data & Society Research Institute, 2026. https://doi.org/10.69985/00TF6452.

5 Olugbemiga, Ayobami. 2020. "New NSC Analysis Finds Significant Digital Skills Gaps for Workers Across Industries, With Workers of Color Most Likely to Have Limited or No Digital Skills." National Skills Coalition. https://nationalskillscoalition.org/news/press-releases/new-nsc-analysis-finds-significant-digital-skills-gaps-for-workers-across-industries-with-workers-of-color-most-likely-to-have-limited-or-no-digital-skills-2/.

6 Greene, Daniel. *The Promise of Access : Technology, Inequality, and the Political Economy of Hope*, MIT Press, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6534505.

1. Clearly define "AI literacy"

While our research found that the calls for AI literacy were loud, the actual meaning remained unclear. Attending AI conferences around Atlanta, Akanegbu regularly found conference organizers and speakers highlighting the importance of fostering AI literacy through credentialing and education. Yet when attendees asked about the most-in-demand skills and what workers needed to succeed, they were consistently met with a contradictory and inactionable response: as tech skills like coding lose value, human judgement and creativity are more valuable.

Without determining and defining the meaning of "AI skills" and "AI literacy," workers are unsure what kinds of training to pursue in the first place. This strategic abstraction — purposeful confusion that spurs government and industry to invest further in AI literacy while its benefits remain abstract for workers — creates an environment where program providers promote training programs and courses that may not help workers achieve meaningful career advancement. Government guidance that explains the meaning of AI literacy, the skills needed to achieve it, and the job pathways and opportunities that these skills will lead to would provide much-needed clarity for both job training programs and the workers who pursue them. As companies shift job market requirements due to their own implementation of AI, government guidance should be rooted in evidence-based research, outlining which skills truly provide job opportunities for American workers — whether they be AI skills like prompt engineering or broader digital skills, such as cybersecurity, data analytics, or data science.

2. Fund AI literacy efforts that provide paid work

Paid working opportunities that include benefits, peer support, and professional development are essential to build an AI literate workforce. Workers should not have to choose between survival and skillbuilding, especially under a training model that does not come with employment guarantees. Derrick, a research participant who completed a now-closed computer science training course, noted the financial struggles participants were experiencing while engaging in unpaid training programs: "[T]here's people in the class that are going through hard times, right now. But they're sticking through, trying to finish up the course in the hopes that this will pay off. [I]t kind of feels like a carrot and stick, you know?"

As explored in our report, Georgia Institute of Technology's DataWorks program is an effective model, providing adult learners from historically marginalized communities with on-the-job training. DataWorks hires data fellows for a one-year paid work training program where they learn tools like Microsoft Excel and Python while also completing data projects for businesses, nonprofits, and organizations. Since they are employees of Georgia Tech, fellows also receive health insurance.

On-the-job training paired with full-time work and benefits holds a greater chance of worker participation, learning, graduation, and success. In addition to employment and healthcare benefits, programs that provide critical infrastructure like childcare, transportation, broadband, and hardware will help open AI literacy efforts to all workers.

3. Ensure AI literacy pipelines actually lead to quality jobs

Despite training to "get a foot in the door," many workers find a path leading only to short-term, low-wage, and unsteady work. Initiatives to improve AI literacy must be accompanied by policy attention to job quality. Federal and state governments should make funding for AI literacy initiatives contingent on verified pathways to stable employment with livable wages. Jobs and infrastructure buildouts that truly benefit workers will provide good wages, paths for career growth, health insurance and benefits, and preserve the ecological and social fabrics of communities. Public funding of AI literacy efforts must also demand clear signs of effectiveness and worker success. Enrollment in and completion of AI literacy programs are not enough to dictate success; whether workers are securing stable employment, earning a living wage, or advancing in their careers will determine the true effectiveness of AI literacy efforts. To know whether programs are in fact uplifting the public or reinforcing disparities, it is necessary to have disaggregated data on program outcomes for participants across race, class, gender, ability, and neighborhood.

The high-paying technology jobs that once seemed like a guaranteed ticket to economic prosperity are not as secure as they used to be; the tech industry's record capital expenditure (largely fueled by investments in AI) has been coupled with massive layoffs across the sector. As big tech companies continue to bet on AI and see it as a reason to lay off many of their own workers, other sectors see a tool that can help them shrink their workforces, too.[7] Policymakers should advance economic security protections (e.g. a living wage, paid sick days, the right to unionize) to shield workers from the uncertainties of the AI economy.

4. Expand the stakeholders involved in designing and implementing AI literacy efforts

Because workers' ability to attain AI literacy is intertwined with issues of affordability, discrimination, and economic opportunity, AI literacy efforts must be government-led initiatives shaped by multi-stakeholder collaborations that include unions, worker and civil rights advocates, nonprofit training program providers, and local communities. From California's partnerships with Google, Adobe, IBM, and Microsoft to Mississippi's partnership with Nvidia, private-public partnerships have dominated AI literacy efforts across states.[8] However, public-private partnerships are not enough to address the structural issues workers face to accrue AI skills and transition to new areas of work. Most public-private partnerships that address AI literacy create programs to familiarize government workers, K-12, and college students with specific technology products, which Akanegbu found often confuses product familiarity with technological fluency, further muddling the distinction between corporate branding, education, and employability.

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7 Abril, Danielle, and Federica Cocco. 2025. "Why One of the Nation's Most Prosperous Industries Is Shedding Jobs." The Washington Post. November 18, 2025. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/11/18/big-tech-layoffs-ai/.

8 "Governor Newsom Partners with World's Leading Tech Companies to Prepare Californians for AI Future | Governor of California." 2025. Governor of California. August 7, 2025. https://www.gov.ca.gov/2025/08/07/governor-newsom-partners-with-worlds-leading-tech-companies-to-prepare-californians-for-ai-future/.; Skelton, C.J. 2025. "State of Mississippi to Advance Artificial Intelligence Education, Innovation and Workforce Development with NVIDIA." Office of Governor Tate Reeves. June 18, 2025. https://governorreeves.ms.gov/state-of-mississippi-to-advance-artificial-intelligence-education-innovation-and-workforce-development-with-nvidia/.

Our research shows that the economic barriers that prevent workers from engaging in digital skill programming require government interventions, created for and with the public. By expanding the kinds of stakeholders involved, policymakers can pursue solutions that better address the barriers workers face. If unions have adequate representation on state and local workforce boards, for example, they will be positioned to help workers access training opportunities, including *before* job losses.[9] Nonprofit training providers, who have on-the-ground knowledge of workers' current digital skill levels and the programming they need to attain new employment, can help devise more informed and effective training opportunities.

Conclusion

To ensure that AI literacy efforts benefit workers, policymakers should focus on removing the barriers workers face in accessing training. Ensuring workers' access to and success in training initiatives requires shifting AI literacy efforts from an ill-defined goal spurred by public-private partnerships to place-based, multi-stakeholder collaborations that address the connected issues of affordability, discrimination, and economic opportunity. Moving beyond survival to skillbuilding requires resources that support sustained learning and job transitions that lead to economic mobility. By clarifying AI literacy and AI skills and investing in the support systems that allow workers to attain them, we create the chance for AI literacy efforts to uplift American workers, instead of leading them to a dead end.

9 American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). 2024. September 2024 Letter to the Senate on WIOA Reauthorization. September 30, 2024. https://aflcio.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/SENATE%20WIOA%20Reauthorization%20September%20Correspondence%20%281%29.pdf.

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