



Technology for employability in Latin America

At-risk youth and people with disabilities

TECHNOLOGY & SOCIAL CHANGE GROUP

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RESEARCH BRIEF

DISABILITY, YOUTH, EMPLOYABILITY | LATIN AMERICA

Community technology centers in Latin America serving at-risk youth and people with disabilities provide services that can lead to employment — but they need to emphasize employer outreach, complementary services, community participation in program management, longer-term funding, and policies that engage workplace law and increase access to low-cost assistive technologies.

Background

Information and communications technology (ICT) skills are often cited as a means to empower marginalized populations. Over the last decade, technology training programs have been established throughout Latin America to promote employability, competitiveness, and social inclusion. This study examines the technological and socio-economic issues that shape the relationship between community technology centers and employability for two distinct groups: at-risk youth and people with disabilities. Three questions framed the research: What drives users to technology centers? How do expectations of ICT trainees compare to labor market experiences reported by program graduates? What challenges do users and managers face?

This work is the latest installment of the Technology & Social Change (TASCHA) Group's ongoing research on information and communication technology (ICT) training and employability in disadvantaged communities. Since 2005, this work has been supported by a grant from Microsoft's *Unlimited Potential Community Technology Skills Program*.

Research design

Centers were selected to ensure comparable size, programming, client populations, and funding sources. In Brazil and Guatemala we sampled centers serving at-risk youth. In Guatemala, Mexico, Venezuela, and Ecuador we sampled centers targeting people with disabilities. Using a snowball sampling method beginning with Microsoft Community Affairs and POETA grantees, we conducted 130 semi-structured interviews with program participants, family members, program administrators, government officials, and employers at 27 technology centers between February and July 2009.

Findings

Successful programs attract clients by offering valued services. Computers are widely perceived as transformative, even by the poorest and most disadvantaged. However, while most interviewees viewed ICTs as required for modern life, they associated use with young people. (Older respondents feared that they could not effectively use ICTs and assumed that youth could do a better

job). In Brazil and Guatemala, interviewees cited technology second only to sports as an activity likely to attract at-risk youth away from illicit activities. People with disabilities reported being attracted to technology centers as spaces to build community and enhance self-esteem. Training programs are valued by both populations as sources of formal education and increased access to employment. At-risk youth saw technology skills training as a point of entry into the labor market and as a way to overcome stereotypes surrounding individuals from low-income neighborhoods.

Computer training can spark technology-related career aspirations. Such aspirations were frequently expressed by people with disabilities and somewhat less by at-risk youth (see Figures 1&2). Among the trainees with disabilities, a full 50% found jobs in the formal sector. Of those, 40% worked at the technology center where they trained. Entrepreneurship, though often touted as a goal by program administrators, proved uncommon.

Figure 1 Aspirations for technology jobs, people with disabilities

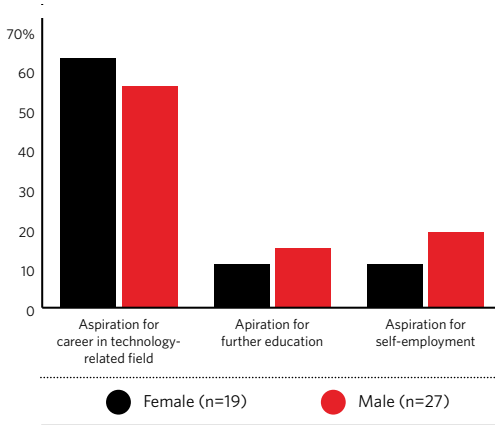
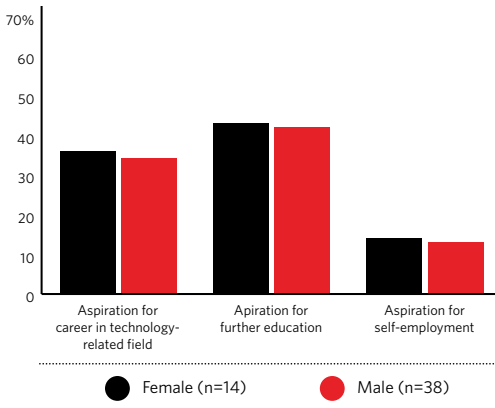


Figure 2 Aspirations for technology jobs, at-risk youth



Employment requires more than training. Most interviewees were confident of the value of their computer training and certification, but employers were not. This limitation is important because access to formal jobs depends heavily on employer perceptions and social connections. Effective technology training programs reach out to employers in a variety of ways, including disability awareness, placement recommendations, and post-placement follow-up. Individuals with hearing or visual impairments faced significant accessibility challenges — workplaces lack assistive technologies and, although most technology centers receive donated productivity software, many cannot afford accessibility software, such as screen readers.

Recommendations

Design programs to complement computer skills. Certification is most useful when the skills are relevant in the local labor-market and certificates are issued by an organization trusted by employers. For successful job outcomes, technology centers must cultivate employer relationships. Further, participants’ overall experience with centers was more positive when services went beyond ICT training, such as help with resume writing, job placement, and counseling.

Place representatives from target populations in leadership positions. Among both populations, the presence of program managers “they could identify with” enhanced participation. At-risk youth expressed encouragement when peers worked at the technology center — it showed the potential for finding work after training. Likewise, people with disabilities related better to trainers with disabilities. In a labor market where few people with disabilities have white-collar jobs, their presence as project administrators was important and symbolic — providing a model and increasing public visibility.

Provide long-term program support. Start-up funding for technology training does not guarantee self-sufficiency. Long-term support is essential, especially when sustainable revenue is not feasible because target clients cannot afford training. Support for community technology centers that provide services for people with disabilities can be seen as part of a larger effort to improve access to socio-economic rights. State funding may play a critical role.

Invest in accessibility research and awareness. We often found assistive technologies to be unreliable and unavailable. Having observed several innovative local solutions, we recommend funding small initiatives that promote local development of assistive technologies. Workplace access and regulatory compliance also needs to be improved. More coordination and collaboration among legislators and agencies already working in this space would also represent an important step.

Research sponsors

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Source

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