

## **Education and Training**

# **Break Through Employment Barriers with Computer Skills**

**By Monita Sen,**

**Over the last decade I have worked with job seekers facing multiple barriers to finding work. Some have gaps in their work history, others lack proper references, or do not have the relevant work experience. However, a common obstacle to finding work has been a lack of basic computer skills. I am not talking about being an advanced Microsoft Office user. I am referring to those who don't know the basics of how to type, use the mouse, or work within a Windows environment, let alone how to use the Internet or send E-mails.**

**With the advent of the Internet and electronic mail, employers, when they post job opportunities, do so online and expect applicants to respond online. On job search sites such as Monster.ca and Workopolis.com there are few employers offering the option of sending resumes and cover letters by fax and rarely by regular post. I have seen the anxiety this creates for those with few or no computer skills. It not only affects their speed in responding to the job ad; sadly they find themselves feeling frustrated, overwhelmed and intimidated. Employers Demand Computer Literacy**

**One job seeker, Heather, explained to me how she feels about her lack of basic computer skills, "I tend to get down on myself, and self conscious. It's hard on the ego." Heather is an experienced and skilled healthcare professional but left her last job because the organization became completely computerized. Heather felt she wasn't able to "wing it and get by." Even though Heather had the opportunity to take in-house training at her company, she was embarrassed that it took her longer to learn the concepts than it took her co-workers. Reflecting on her recent job loss, Heather said, "I should have been more proactive and expressed myself, but I felt very embarrassed."**

**As Grace Rivers, Director of Corporate Relations, at Adecco, the largest full service placement agency in the world, pointed out, "You don't have to be an expert on MS Office, but you can't have this fear of using computers." Rivers went on to say that even industries that traditionally didn't require computer literacy such as light industrial and some manufacturing jobs, now require basic skills such as turning**

**on a computer and navigating around a computer screen. Some employers in the industrial and manufacturing fields expect workers to be able to input simple data into a company database.**

**In today's technologically evolving labour market, job seekers can't afford not to know the basics. The Conference Board of Canada, an independent, not-for-profit applied research organization, in its Employability Skills 2000+ study reports three critical skills you need in the workplace: Fundamental Skills, Teamwork Skills and Personal Management Skills. According to their research, use of technology is a Fundamental Skill in order to communicate, manage information, use numbers and think and solve problems.**

### **Computers: Part of Everyday Life**

**"Like them or hate them, there's no getting away from computers in this day and age! With more and more daily activities, such as banking, shopping, booking hotels and holidays, etc. becoming more automated, it has become a necessity to be computer literate" says Jennifer, a mature administrative professional, who was surprised by how many job seekers don't know how to type or use the mouse. Her advice? "Learn how to type and how to use the mouse! Become somewhat computer literate. There are plenty of courses available, some for free at local libraries. Basic computer literacy is not really difficult to learn; it just may take time, if the person has never used a computer before."**

**Here are some simple steps you can take to bridge the computer skills gap. The sooner you decide to learn the basics, the better chance you will have in today's competitive workforce.**

### **Computer Basics You Should Know**

**Whether you pay for your computer training at a community college or make use of free or low cost community resources, you need to know the basics which include:**

- Knowing how to type a minimum of 25 words per minute**
- Using the mouse to get around a desktop, get into a software program and make use of toolbars**
- Being able to use Microsoft Word to type, format, save documents, and organize computer files**

- **How to use the Internet for research and understanding how to use E-mail to send and receive document.**

#### **Be Proactive and Get Started**

- **Call 211 by telephone for free information about community programs that are free or low cost, or go online to [www.211toronto.ca](http://www.211toronto.ca)**
- **Go to your local library and ask if they offer free workshops or if they know of places in your community that offer them**
- **Contact the Toronto District School Board about low cost, daytime or evening classes**
- **Find out about courses offered at the colleges, how much they cost and what requirements they have for you to enroll**

**At Times Change Women's Employment Service, we have responded to the technological demands of the labour market by offering free computer services to women looking for work. Self directed tutorials are offered on how to use the keyboard, mouse and in demand Microsoft Office programs such as Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access and Outlook. We also offer basic, instructor-led introductory computer workshops on Microsoft Office Programs, Internet for Job Search and Emailing. Educational Counseling is available for women who know the type of training or education they are looking for but need help finding the right program. For more information, call 416-927-1900 visit [www.timeschange.org](http://www.timeschange.org).**

#### **What Are You Waiting For?**

**The key to success is to get out of the house, enroll in workshops and courses in your community and meet others who are first time learners for support and motivation. There is absolutely nothing to be ashamed of or to be embarrassed about. Even the most advanced computer users had to start somewhere and succeeded in learning through consistent and dedicated practice. Once you've mastered the basics, you can break through the barriers to employment, resulting in opportunities to secure a job and advance in the workplace.**

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