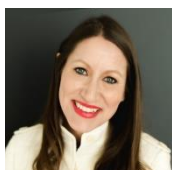


Changing the Face of Tech and Filling the Digital Skills Gap



Annmarie Lanese

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By now, you’ve probably heard “the future of the economy is in STEM” given that everywhere you look in the United States there are more jobs for computer coders than people who can code. And while coding jobs pay high starting salaries, with much room for raises and advancement, the high-tech industry continues to be dominated by white males – making it harder for women and people of color to see themselves in careers like [health information management and health information technology](#).

The digital skills gap and related lack of diversity in high-tech industries are harmful to employers, who can’t find skilled workers and harmful to underrepresented groups who are barred from lucrative careers.

Increasing Access to Computer Literacy

Technology changes fast, and digital skills are needed at all levels of the digital fluency spectrum, from beginner computer training to more advanced computer programming skills.

Since 2016, [CanCode Communities](#), a nonprofit organization I founded and where I serve as CEO, has grown from a local pilot program in Albany, New York, to an organization committed to increasing access to computer literacy for underserved individuals of all ages across New York State and beyond.

In the fall of 2021, we kicked off a partnership with the New York State Office for New Americans (ONA) to expand the [NewAmericansCanCode](#) program, which was [originally launched in 2020](#) to ensure low-income immigrants, particularly those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, have access to digital literacy education.

The 10-week program is available to any immigrant living in New York, regardless of status, who meets income eligibility requirements. Students gain basic computer skills at their own pace and learn:

- Microsoft Office
- How to manage calendars and email
- Basic internet safety skills
- Basic computer usage

Digital literacy is essential for building a career in today's information economy, and by equipping more people – especially women and people of color – with those critical skills, we are enhancing the tech talent pipeline to support the needs of employers.

The Myth of Digital Natives

The many community colleges that CanCode Communities works with are seeing trends that those entering college now have fewer digital skills than a decade ago. While young people can navigate platforms like social media (i.e., Instagram, TikTok) and gaming, few are crossing into higher levels of digital fluency; their digital workplace productivity skills levels have significantly decreased.

One might argue or believe “digital natives” (our younger generations) are not going to need digital skills training as they age, however, they need digital skill building for the jobs of the future.

And even the most advanced technology users (those with the highest level of digital fluency) are in constant exploration and learner mode.

Digital technology, as a medium, is constantly a new frontier for even the most fluent among us due to the constant speed of new technological advancements.

We will never get beyond skimming the surface of true digital equity when the knowledge of creating digital tools is in the hands of so few.

The need for digital fluency training and digital skill-building will be necessary for our society for generations to come.

About CanCode Communities

CanCode Communities is a 501(c)3 nonprofit founded in 2016 to develop non-traditional talent and advocate for a vibrant, inclusive tech talent pipeline in New York State. The organization designs and delivers workforce training courses, hands-on K-12 coding programs, and community code literacy workshops, in alignment with the needs of employers, educators, talent, and the community in general. Its mission is to shift the mindset about who can work in technology, remove cultural and economic barriers to joining the tech workforce, and establish and promote pathways to tech careers throughout the region.

About the Author

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Founder & CEO, CanCode Communities

Annmarie Lanese operates on the conviction that communities thrive best when economic and cultural barriers to human development are addressed directly. In her capacity as CEO of custom software development firm Greene Tree Technology, Annmarie's successful hire of a fully self-taught Ruby on Rails developer inspired the vision for what is now CanCode Communities. In 2015, she was the recipient of the Harriet Rifkin Award for “her work in creating opportunities for women to achieve personal and financial independence,” and in 2016, she was named a “New York State Woman of Distinction” by Senator Neil Breslin. Annmarie holds a Bachelor of Science in Electronic Art Media and Communication and a Master of Fine Arts in Integrated Electronic Arts from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, where she received the RPI Founders Award of Excellence.