

## International Literacy Day 2021



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*Special to Postmedia Network*

**T**he number of Canadian seniors using the internet has more than doubled in the last decade, rising from 32 per cent to 68 per cent. Add the dwindling number of print newspapers across the country and the boom of online socializing this past year has necessitated, and it's reasonable to guess that the number of seniors online will only increase.

Still, compared to the rest of the population, older adults are not spending nearly as much time online as younger generations. While the pros and cons of this are debatable, one fact remains true: digital literacy is lower among the elderly.

Literacy was once a much simpler thing to define. However, the internet era has people trading pages in books for pages on the web. This contextual shift means learning about the system around the words we read is just as important as the words themselves when it comes to understanding information online.

For older adults and the people who support them, this requires a new mindset — one that recognizes digital literacy as a lifelong pursuit.

Adult learning nonprofit ABC Life Literacy Canada

defines digital literacy as “having the knowledge, skills and confidence to keep up with changes in technology.” Others point out that adults who are digitally literate are comfortable accessing information through digital platforms — from booking health appointments to spotting misinformation on social media.

This form of literacy shifts at the speed of technology. For those who aren't immersed in tech through school or work, where cell-phones and laptops are now an irreplaceable tool, a concentrated effort to stay up to date with digital developments is important. A failure to keep pace with new ways that information is shared has a range of effects, from isolation and loneliness to serious issues of safety and security.

National data shows that fraud is the number one crime against the elderly in Canada. Online scams in the form of emails are among the most common. Requests for credit card information or a social insurance number are made from email addresses that seem safe on the surface to the victim — the sender's address may include the name of a familiar person or company. Although this type of issue is loosely linked to literacy in the traditional sense, the problems that arise aren't a result of someone's ability to read. It's the lack of understanding about bad actors in the online space, and how to spot them, that impacts whether or not a user becomes a victim.

The effects of online misinformation became a life or death issue during the pandemic. From vaccine hesi-

tancy to skepticism towards lockdown measures, misinformed social media posts contributed to a host of challenges nationwide.

An Ontario Medical Association study found Ontarians aged 55 to 64 were most likely to spread misinformation on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. For an age group at high risk of fatal complications from the virus, digital literacy has become an essential capability this year. An inability to spot bad information online could be deadly.

Organizations across the country are helping older adults stay ahead of the trends, good and bad, when it comes to accessing and understanding information online. Volunteer organizations like Connected Canada are using digital literacy sessions as a way to combat

loneliness in senior citizens, while at the same time making them more tech-savvy through connecting them with volunteer tutors. British Columbia's Project Literacy has also shifted its focus to bridging the gap between seniors and the digital realm, providing one-on-one sessions for seniors who want to create social media profiles or email with ease. Federally funded programs for digital literacy exist in every Canadian province.

These initiatives show that the definition of literacy is evolving. Skillful online navigation is an essential complement to the ABCs learned by youth. Literacy is more than just reading in the internet era. It requires a lifelong effort to understand the ever-evolving contexts in which we encounter words in today's world.

SPONSORED BY ALPHA-TORONTO

# Empowering Francophone adults to dream big

Many Toronto-area learners are refugees, immigrants

LINDA WHITE

*Postmedia Content Works*

Gabrielle dreamed of getting off social assistance and becoming a registered practical nurse so she could help others while earning a good salary to take care of her family. Patrice was tired of working dead-end jobs and wanted to build a reliable career in the skilled trades.

Each lacked the necessary qualifications to achieve their dreams, but a free program delivered in their native French language served as a stepping-stone to success.

Those are the types of inspirational stories Alpha-Toronto celebrates at its annual graduation. More than 150 certificates are handed out, representing the tenacity needed to overcome

obstacles and, perhaps most importantly, new beginnings.

“The ceremony is very moving. Most of our learners are here with their families and everyone is dressed to the nines,” says Alpha-Toronto executive director Renaud Saint-Cyr. “Many are the first person in their family to receive a certificate of any kind. It's an important first step.”

Alpha-Toronto is a Toronto-area literacy and basic skills (LBS) program for Francophone adults, a part of the Ontario Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development's Employment Ontario initiative, which helps adults develop and apply workplace-related essential skills, including communication, numeracy, interpersonal and digital skills. Some

of those adults left high school before graduating, while others graduated but need to upgrade their marks to prepare for the next steps on their journey.

Between 80 and 85 per cent of learners are refugees or immigrants from countries where French is the official language of communication, while the remainder are Canadian born. Between 70 and 80 per cent are living in poverty and need some form of social assistance, housing, health services or counselling.

Certificate in hand, many graduates are empowered to find a job, launch a career or improve their work performance, which is key to both retaining a job and career advancement. Some will transition to employment directly, many will con-

tinue on to an Academic Career Entrance (ACE) program and then college, a skilled trade apprenticeship or in some cases university. All will enjoy greater independence in their daily lives than ever before.

All francophone adults in the Toronto area are eligible for the program as long as they need to upgrade their essential skills. Each learning plan is tailored to meet a learner's personal needs and goals. Some will pursue a communication qualification, while others will pursue both communication and math qualifications.

“It all depends on what they want to do,” Saint-Cyr says. “That might be registered practical nursing, business administration, social services, early childhood education, personal

support worker, skilled trades or other professions. The idea is to give them what they need so they can take the next step

with confidence.”

To learn more, visit [alpha-toronto.ca](http://alpha-toronto.ca) or call 416-542-1574.

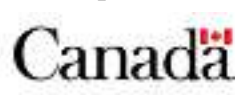


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**Alpha-Toronto delivers Employment Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program to Francophone adults.**



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