Lessons in lit

In a v
forklift driver needs
computer skills, the
opportunities are few if
you lack them. But many
non-profit groups are
helping people become
computer literate —
and land better jobs.

BY HEATHER FINLEY
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Picture this: Your homeland is at war, so you uproot your family to Canada. You're prepared to work hard to learn the language, but find that since you don't know how to use a computer, no one wants to hire you — regardless of what language you speak.

Or this: Your job's been downsized out of existence. But guess what? During all those years of hard work, you never learned to use a computer — and you're finding that work is hard to come by for someone like you.

Computer literacy has become just as much of an issue as reading literacy. And there's little doubt that computer skills are no longer just a middle-class luxury — they've become a must for researching, applying for and keeping jobs.

Job hunters today will find that a lot of technology jobs are advertised on-line, enabling computer-savvy applicants to e-mail letters and résumés within minutes of spotting an ad.

But if you don't have a computer, let alone the skills to operate one, by the time you've finished paying someone to develop an attractive résumé and type up a cover letter — not to mention the time it takes to get the letter there by conventional mail — the opening may well be filled.

And even if you are invited for an interview, most jobs these days require a minimum of elementary computer skills.

'Technology is becoming more and more essential to all that we do. It's becoming a component of our daily lives," says Karen Haffey, the strategic partnerships co-ordinator for Access for Success (A4S), a not-for-profit group that provides online services to other not-for-profits.

"Because so many people communicate through technology, I think technology has a very vital role to play in community development."

Many others agree. And, fortunately, there are many non-profit organizations out there available to help. They offer programs in basic computer skills as well as specific programs — sometimes at little or no cost. Some also provide a range of other programs, such as English as a second language or job counselling. All of them offer hope for a brighter future.

Take the Learning Enrichment Foundation, a community-based non-profit group that offers business and computer courses, as well as an industrial skills program that includes both forklift driver training and computer basics.

"Just about any job you want needs computer skills," says training manager Peter Rapsey. In the past, "a forklift operator would unpack a truck, but today they have to operate a computer and enter the info from the packing slips into the computer themselves."

Or take the Seeds of Hope Foundation Learning Centre on College St., which caters to the unemployed. Executive director Trevor White says the average client is 45 years old, has been unemployed for more than two years, worked in unskilled or semi-skilled labour for 20 to 25 years, and has never used computers. Seeds of Hope offers free training to about 200 students a year in the basics of *Windows* and the *Microsoft Office Suite*.

Offering similar training is COSTI, a northwest Toronto organization originally created to assist Italian immigrants after World War II. The organization has since expanded its constituency to include all newcomers to Canada, and has a thriving computer-assisted program in English as a second language.

"These programs are over-subscribed," says Mario Calla, COSTI's executive director. "People know that computer literacy is important if they're going to access jobs here."

The organization's computerized ESL tutorials are popular because students can practise basic computer and keyboarding skills while they improve their English, Calla says.

At Dixon Hall's Regent Park Learning Centre, the Family Computer Literacy Program serves people who defy the stereotypes about violence and gangs in the area. Program

manager Cheryl Ward's clients include struggling families and individuals trying to put together a "normal" life.

"With our group there are a lot of other barriers to break down," Ward says. "With immigrants, they may be working with language barriers, so computer training is just one of the steps in getting to that process."

One client, Ebtessan Alhussain, was a primary school teacher before she left Syria seven years ago. Now separated from her husband and living in Regent Park with three children, she needs skills today that weren't necessary in her old life.

"Most offices use computers," she says, adding that before she came to Canada, "office jobs in Syria used files, paper and pen."

But the computer training is doubly complex for her.

"The alphabet is different," Alhussain points out, "and I am learning how to type."

But it's not just computers in the office that are an issue for Alhussain. Her children go to nearby Lord Dufferin School, where they have weekly access to computer labs for working through educational programs. The process ensures that these children will have basic computer skills and a general level of comfort with computers as day-to-day tools.

Alhussain wants to understand the media her children are being exposed to, so she can remain connected to the next generation.

And like so many things, children seem to take to new technology a little more easily than their parents.

"I've got 5-year-olds and up coming in just to play," says Ward. "Mastering the keyboard and the mouse is a challenge. The educational software that we have helps, too."

Scadding Café is a project developed by the Scadding Court Community Centre on Dundas St. W. near Bathurst St. Visitors can enjoy a nutritious bite to eat while they access e-mail, produce résumés, use the Internet or practice other computer skills for $1 per half-hour.

Co-ordinator Krista Fry has herself benefited from the services offered. A few years ago, Fry was a single mother on social assistance. She became involved with Scadding Court through a parenting group, and from there was asked to help run the café, which she says was created in part to help local women move into the workforce.

When she first took the job, Fry gave up some of her subsidy and began earning a small income from her work. Her initiative paid off in promotions and raises, and she now supports her family solely from the café. And on top of her day-to-day work running the café, "I help people write up their résumés, get on the Internet and look for stuff."

Like Alhussain, Fry wants to understand and be involved with the technology-based work her children do.

Her 9-year-old son, one of two kids in his class who don't have computers at home, comes to the café once a week after school to do research on the computer. "I'm helping him with that and he helps me, too," she says.

Goodwill Toronto also offers a number of programs that teach computer skills, along with some others that incorporate them. Two programs in call-centre training for handicapped youth and "at-risk" youth are particularly popular because there are guaranteed jobs at the end.

And these kids definitely aren't the telemarketers who phone at dinnertime, either. The training is for customer service, the guaranteed jobs are with companies like Rogers Communications, mBanx and St. John Ambulance, to name a few, and the jobs are upwardly mobile.

Francisco Morra, a graduate profiled in *The Star* last year, went from being homeless to earning over $30,000 a year in a unit of the Royal Bank Financial Group.

Seeds of Hope's White has similar stories. He tells of the two clients he trained in *Windows* software basics so they could get service jobs in restaurants.

But even with some basic computer training, it's not all hearts and flowers.

"There are just as many dead-end jobs in the technology sector as in other areas of the economy," says Kate Baggott, a research specialist who studies how children and teens use interactive technologies.

"Getting these skills is a means to being able to sustain yourself, but this is the new manual labour. Working a tech support line for $10 an hour is not a great job — it's a 'get-by' job — but getting technology training can help someone do that and can keep them alive."

Still, it's a means to a means, just like knowing how to use the telephone.

But even if you lack computer skills, these programs are not for everyone.

At Seeds of Hope, for instance, the dropout rate is about 50 per cent, White says.

"Going on a training program requires self-discipline and motivation," he says. "Most have the motivation, but in some cases they just aren't ready for it."

To sort out those who aren't sure and to build up commitment in those who think they are, Goodwill's programs have very stringent requirements.

For example, the call centre program has a five-stage screening process. And once accepted, participants are expected to give the program 100 per cent. If they can't meet the commitment, they may be asked to consider an alternative program.

These programs are funded a variety of ways. In 1999, Goodwill Toronto received more than $2 million from Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) — the primary funder of the call centre program — and Toronto Social Services. They also received a $2.9 million grant from the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services. As well, corporate partners contribute time, co-op work terms and a commitment to hire graduates.

Even so, "80 per cent of our revenues are through you cleaning out your closet," says Jill Kehoe, Goodwill's director of communications.

Seeds of Hope get no government funding and relies on corporate donations and the proceeds from bingos, says White. Except for himself, the centre is run entirely by volunteers.

Scadding Court Community Centre, which oversees the Scadding Café, gets yearly grants from HRDC and the Trillium Foundation. These grants have to cover a variety of programs, including the recently launched *WorkWaves.com* job search site.

"Community centres are competing to get those grants," says staff member Randall Terada. "Our quandary is, should we hire more technical staff, or does the tech salary go to after-school programs like basketball? But you've got to be online, chatting with other members of the community, so there's got to be a digital infrastructure.

"But you've still got programs — Meals on Wheels, after school programs . . . we need a balance."

But there is help to be had for the digital infrastructure, too, in the form of technical not-for-profit groups created to assist other not-for-profits.

Access for Success (A4S) is an initiative of SMART Toronto, a business association for technology and new media. A4S offers free Web site hosting and online conferencing for community-based organizations. They have recently joined forces with two others to offer a more comprehensive package to community-based groups, reBOOT Canada and WoW@Work.

reBOOT Canada is a charity that offers refurbished hardware with networking and technical support for very low prices. WoW@Work, a division

of Toronto Webgrrls — Women on the Web, provides free Web site design.

Then there's the Community Access Program, developed by the federal government to provide low-cost Internet access and computer training. The program began in 1994 with a rural focus, but is now available in urban settings, offering eligible groups up to $17,000 for hardware and Internet access.

There are programs that help the people who need them, but there are programs to help programs, too.

And for taxpayers worried about where their money is going, a quick peek at Scadding Café's lineups to use the computers tells us the money isn't being wasted.

As Bruce MacDougall, executive director of Dixon Hall says, "If you can give people skills to get jobs, then they are able to support themselves in new ways, pay taxes and become productive citizens."

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Resources

- **Access for Success:** Free access to shared online services to community organizations in Toronto and York Region. (416) 926-8125, *www.a4s.org*
- **Community Access Program:** Federal funding for schools, libraries, community centres to provide computer support and training to the public. 1-800-575-9200, *http://cap.ic.gc.ca*
- **COSTI:** Provides training and employment services to immigrants. (416) 658-1600, *www.costi.org*
- **Dixon Hall:** Helps residents of Regent Park public housing, as well as the homeless. Free use of computers and Internet. (416) 863-0499, *www.dixonhall.on.ca*
- **Goodwill Work Training and Employment Centre:** (416) 362-8649, *www.goodwill.on.ca*
- **Learning Enrichment Foundation:** Helps train people for employment. (416) 769-0830, *www.lefca.org*
- **reBOOT Canada:** Refurbishes donated computers and sells them at low cost to other not-for-profits. (416) 534-6017, *www.reboot.on.ca*
- **Rexdale MicroSkills:** Helps women achieve self-sufficiency. (416) 247-7181, *www.rmskills.org*
- **Scadding Café:** Provides low-cost computer use, faxing. (416) 392-0702
- **Seeds of Hope:** Trains the unemployed in basic computing skills. (416) 944-0381
- **WoW@Work:** Free Web design for not-for-profits. *www.torontowebgrrls.com*
- **Wired Woman Society:** Networking, career resources, community and academic presentations, mentoring. *www.wiredwoman.com/toronto*

Turning tragedy into triumph

In June, 1996, Jeremy D'Souza was running for the bus at a Scarborough intersection when a pickup truck going through a yellow light hit him. After a week in a coma, he awoke at Sunnybrook Hospital, unable to recognize his own family.

D'Souza — a high-achiever who had spent four years at Royal Military College and had just completed his first year in information systems at St. Lawrence College — had damage in a crucial area of his brain.

He spent two weeks in intensive care then 2½ months in rehabilitation, undergoing speech pathology and occupational therapy, and had to learn to walk again. He also found that his memory and some thinking abilities were impaired.

Then he tried to start working. But because he could no longer multi-task, keep track of time or remember things the way he once did, he was fired from three jobs.

The physical and professional struggles left him frustrated and angry, too, making rehabilitation even more painful.

Then D'Souza signed up for Goodwill Toronto's Webmaster/Developer program for youth with disabilities, a 32-week intensive course that includes counselling and life-skills courses, internships and training in specific programming languages.

Scotiabank, a Goodwill corporate partner, agreed to hire him as a condition of his being accepted into the Goodwill program. And last June, at the end of his training, Scotiabank gave him a permanent job.

Happily, D'Souza, 29, is now a technical trainee working toward a position as data security officer with the bank's data centre in Scarborough.

He loves his work, and says the company understands and supports his disabilities — even going as far as moving him into an internal computer support position after he found his original Web development position

was too difficult for him. Now he's helping other bank employees and programmers with computer-related problems.

Goodwill even sent in a job coach to help him cope with the time-management problems the brain injury had left him with.

Like any new employee, D'Souza worried about fitting in. But when he had his first performance appraisal, he came out feeling very positive about his future.

"They're very happy. In no way am I being held back, in no way am I being babysat."

Programs such as the Webmaster/Developer course have distinct benefits to non-disabled, too, says Jill Kehoe, communications director of Goodwill Toronto.

"You're getting well-trained people entering the workforce, becoming taxpaying members of society. In many cases these people have never felt the self-esteem or satisfaction of working."

— Heather Finley