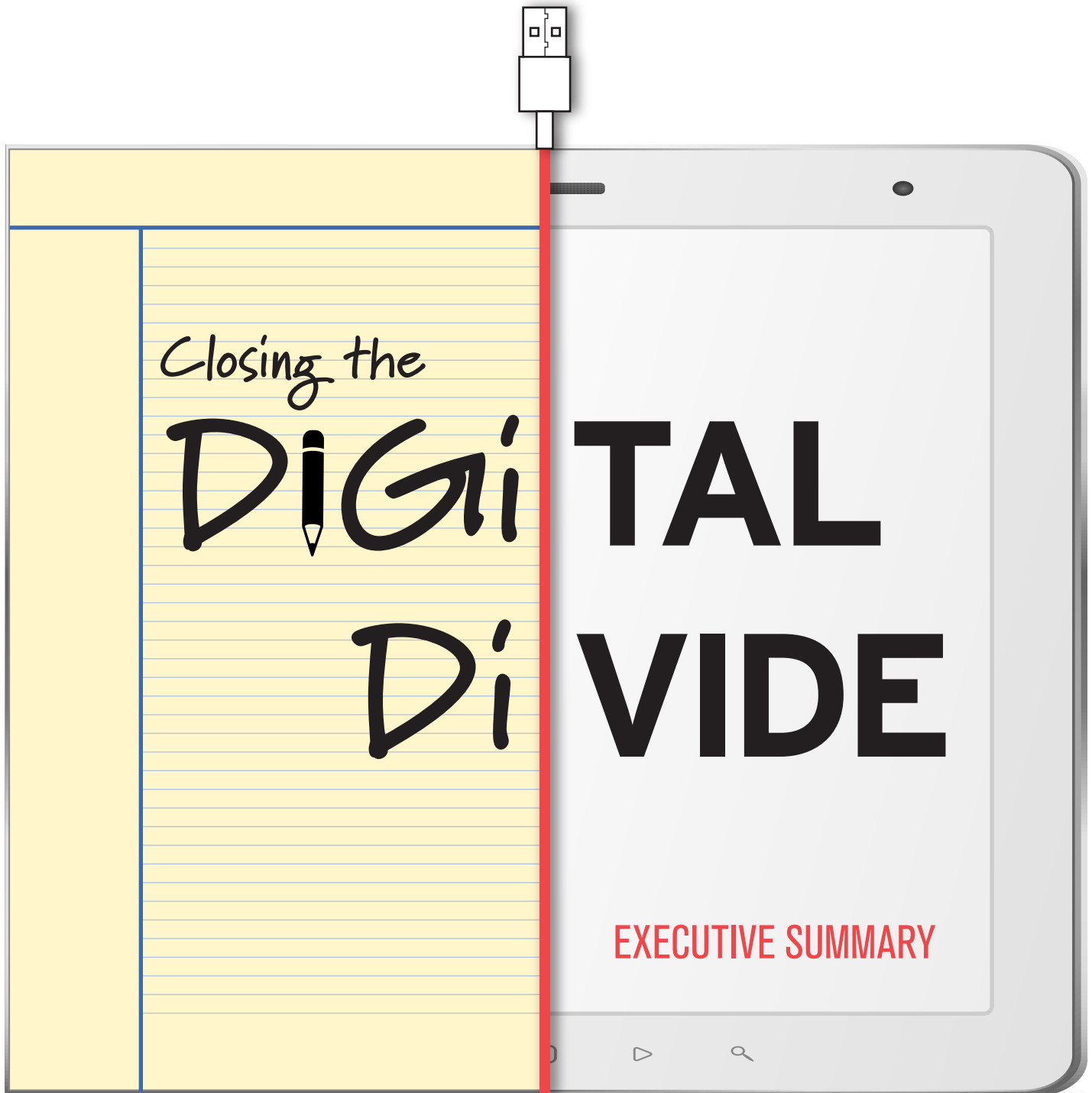# BC CCC

BOSTON COLLEGE
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Closing the DiGiTAL DiVIDE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

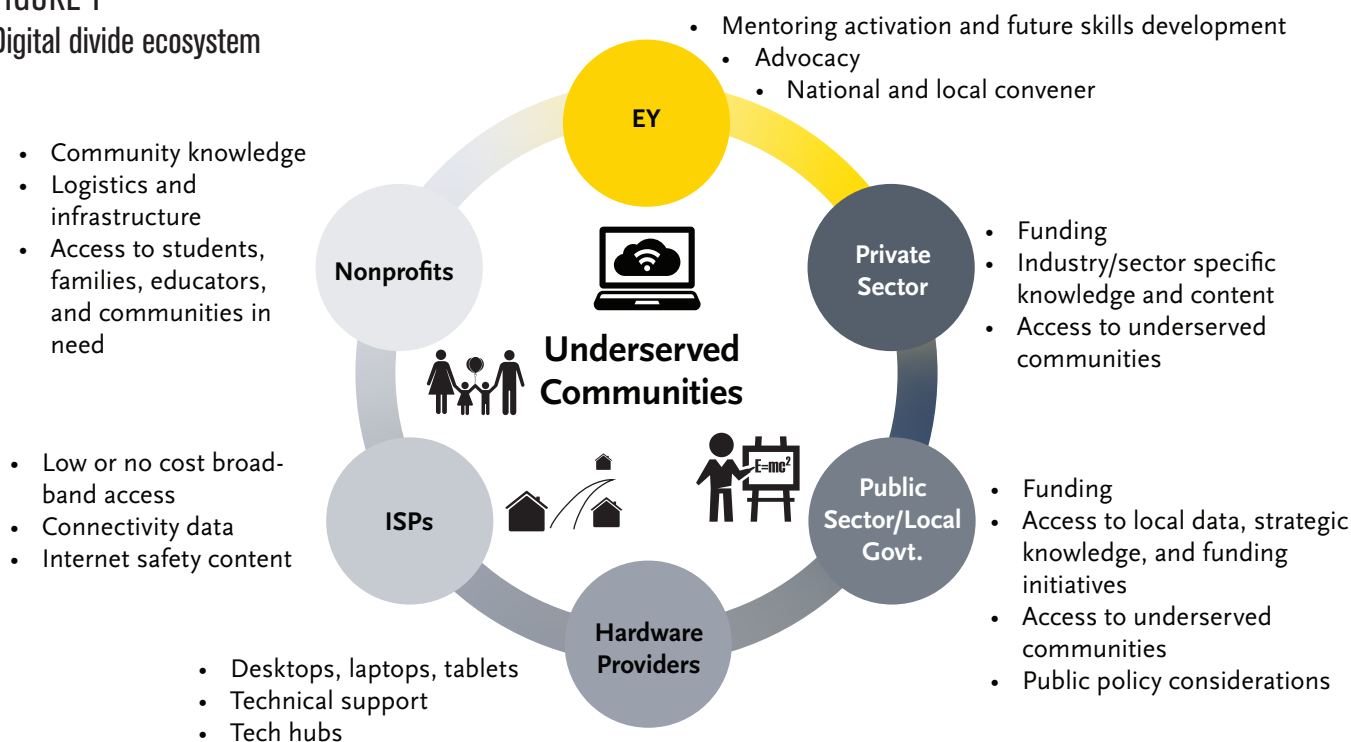# CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE
WHAT IS THE DIGITAL DIVIDE?

The digital divide refers to the gap between those who can access and take full advantage of computers and the internet and those who cannot. For those who cannot, the reasons range from lack of access to devices or internet to lack of access to digital training.

It's a form of inequality that can limit opportunities for those on the wrong side of the chasm. The digital divide can exist for a variety of reasons and can occur in different contexts.

The digital divide reflects and can exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities, including those based on race and ethnicity. In many countries, including the United States, people of color and people experiencing poverty are often less likely to have access to high-speed internet, digital devices, and digital literacy education.

FIGURE 1
Digital divide ecosystem

- Community knowledge
- Logistics and infrastructure
- Access to students, families, educators, and communities in need

- Low or no cost broadband access
- Connectivity data
- Internet safety content

- Desktops, laptops, tablets
- Technical support
- Tech hubs

- Mentoring activation and future skills development
- Advocacy
- National and local convener

- Funding
- Industry/sector specific knowledge and content
- Access to underserved communities

- Funding
- Access to local data, strategic knowledge, and funding initiatives
- Access to underserved communities
- Public policy considerations

Nonprofits

EY

Private Sector

Public Sector/Local Govt.

Hardware Providers

ISPs

Underserved Communities

Source: EY, *Bridging the Digital Divide: The Path Forward.*

> **"We couldn't do what we're doing here without our offices activated in unison. We're seeing multiple small teams across the country who are using their local contacts to really understand the local needs, who the players are, how big is the gap, and what funding can they get access to and then beginning to create customized solutions by city with local clients and local companies."**

Kevin Brown
Principal, Consulting Services and Life Sciences Technology Lead
EY US

The EY commitment to addressing the digital divide

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, EY citizenship leaders including Kevin Brown identified concerning trends, including that one-third of young people (disproportionately Black, Latinx, and/or low-income) lacked access to broadband and devices at home. This disparity was intensified during the pandemic. To address this issue, the firm created several anti-racism interventions, including the Ernst & Young LLP (EY US) Bridging the Digital Divide initiative. EY people were inspired to use their time and connections to close the divide in their local communities. EY US noticed that there was a need for private sector leadership on the issue, so the organization used its network and influence to activate multiple stakeholder groups across the country and raise millions of dollars in support of the cause. The foundation of EY US's commitment to this issue is through its mentoring programs, where EY people volunteer to help upskill beneficiaries on how to succeed in a digital age.

In the three years since the Bridging the Digital Divide initiative was launched, the program has:

- Impacted more than 600,000 lives via programs that provide mentoring, hardware, and/or connectivity.
- Established targeted local programs involving more than 4,300 EY professionals and including dozens of mentoring and learning programs.
- Raised $4.3 million through public-private coalitions and an additional $4.8 million in charitable contributions from EY professionals through the company's annual United Way giving campaign.
- Engaged the support of and established collaborations with other corporate leaders, including clients whose mission and purpose align to the firm's.
- Convened more than 200 collaborations with other organizations, including coalitions of education departments and public sector agencies, nonprofits, community service organizations, and the private sector.

The toolkit: Concrete actions companies can take to build the bridge across the digital divide

Multiple types of digital technologies make us more efficient in our work. AI gets the lion's share of attention in the news media—and rightly so. Its adoption and impact are unprecedented in scope and impact.[1] However, the types of technology employed and impacts of digital technology are pervasive across all industries—from agriculture to advanced manufacturing. Because machines will soon be able to perform analytic, computational, and natural language processing at unprecedented speeds and levels, skills needed by workers will (once again) shift. Physical effort and basic cognitive skills will not be as important as they once were. While coding, engineering, and network and technology skills have been emphasized as crucial work skills related to digital technology, critical skills predicted to become more important with next-generation technology include critical thinking, leadership skills, emotional intelligence, and management. Importantly, these are skills that are best learned by working with great mentors in great corporate cultures.

It's also important to note that while some industries are at risk of job displacement, AI and automation are predicted to create new jobs that didn't exist before. In some sectors, digital technology might not displace jobs but rather change them, with humans working with new technology to become more productive. As such, reskilling and upskilling will be crucial strategies to help workers adapt to these changes. While formal training and professional development are important to reskilling efforts, apprenticeship and mentoring are equally effective supports for this kind of learning. The toolkit in the following pages is intended to help other companies benefit from the lessons learned by EY US over the last decade.[2]

Where can companies make a difference?
Elements of the digital equality ecosystem
- Bridging the digital divide is a monumental task that requires the collaboration of stakeholders, including governments, corporations, nonprofits, and individuals. It won't be solved overnight, but with concerted effort, significant progress can be made. The following represent just some of the actions that require public/private partnership.

Policy
- Develop a universal understanding and definition of what the digital divide is and its implications in today's world.
- Engage with policymakers at local, state, and national levels working to address the digital divide to share perspectives.
- Explore solutions to help companies provide affordable high-speed internet in underserved areas.

Broadband equity access and deployment

High-speed internet is no longer a luxury—it is necessary for Americans to do their jobs, to participate equally in school, to access health care, and to stay connected with loved ones. Yet more than 8.5 million households and small businesses are in areas where there is no high-speed internet infrastructure, and millions more struggle with limited or unreliable internet options.

Just like how Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Rural Electrification Act brought electricity to nearly every home and farm in America, in June of 2023 the Department of Commerce announced funding for each state, territory, and the District of Columbia for high-speed internet infrastructure through the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) program—a $42.45 billion grant program created in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and administered by the Department of Commerce.

President Biden's American Rescue Plan also included over $25 billion for high-speed internet, including:

- The Department of Treasury's Capital Projects Fund (CPF) provides $10 billion to states, territories, and tribal lands and communities for which high-speed internet is an eligible use. Today, over $7 billion has already been dedicated to high-speed internet deployment and connectivity across 45 states.
- The State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) delivered funding across the country to support the response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. About $8 billion is being used by states, territories, tribes, and local governments for high-speed internet deployment and connectivity.
- The FCC's $7 billion Emergency Connectivity Fund program helped schools and libraries close the "homework gap," providing schools and libraries with 10.5 million connected devices and over 5 million internet connections.
Additional information is available at InternetForAll.Gov.

Investment in infrastructure
- Collaborate with internet service providers, government agencies, and nonprofits to fund and build necessary infrastructure in both rural and low-income urban areas.
- Explore public-private partnerships to accelerate the process.
- Invest in long-term, sustainable tech solutions like 5G, satellite internet, or community broadband to cover remote areas.

Digital literacy education
- Implement digital literacy programs in schools and community centers.
- Develop adult education programs focused on digital literacy, targeting particularly those who have traditionally lacked access to technology.
- Ensure educators have the necessary training to impart digital literacy skills.

Device accessibility
- Support efforts to offer more affordable device options.
- Create device recycling programs where old but still functional devices are donated or sold at low cost to those in need.

Research and data collection
- Conduct comprehensive research to identify gaps and monitor the progress of digital divide initiatives.
- Use data-driven insights to continually adjust and optimize the strategies.
- Advocate for transparency from ISPs about pricing, speed, and availability.

Keeping talent on track for digital careers

> Given the fast-paced evolution of our world, we must proactively equip today's talent for future challenges by fostering an innovative mindset and essential skills. Achieving this and bridging the digital divide requires widespread involvement, particularly robust support from the private sector. Their skilled professionals are well positioned to educate and influence emerging talent."

Ken Bouyer
D&I Recruiting Leader
EY US

Upskilling and reskilling as paths to inclusion

Increasing diversity in technology fields is a crucial goal. Diverse perspectives can drive innovation and produce solutions that are more representative of and beneficial to a broader spectrum of society. Here are several strategies for providing inclusive pathways to employment in a technology-enabled economy.

1. Improve access to education
- Implement programs that offer scholarships, internships, and mentorship opportunities specifically to groups who are underrepresented in technology fields.
- Support initiatives that provide resources to schools in disadvantaged areas to improve their access to technology and mentoring programs.
- Encourage partnerships between schools and technology companies to provide resources, tutoring, internships, and mentorship for students in underrepresented communities.

2. Promote early exposure
- Introduce technology concepts at an early age to cultivate interest in and dispel stereotypes about these fields.
- Incorporate hands-on technology-enabled activities into early childhood education and elementary school curricula to stimulate interest.

3. Mentorship and role models

- Promote successful women and people of color to inspire others. Make sure that those role models are given substantial support to continue their own research and professional development so that their progress is not derailed.
- Establish mentorship programs where experienced professionals can provide guidance and support to those new to the field.
- Celebrate the achievements of women and people of color in technology to increase visibility and inspire others.

4. Create inclusive work environments

- Support programs that aim to reduce the education gap, promote diversity in technology education and careers, and support underrepresented groups.
- Ensure fair and transparent hiring practices and promotions in tech jobs.
- Promote learning to reduce unconscious bias and foster an inclusive work environment.

5. Foster collaborative networks

- Create or support networking groups and professional organizations specifically for women and minorities in tech. These can provide opportunities for mentorship, collaboration, and career advancement.
- Provide platforms for sharing experiences and advice and for building supportive communities.

It's important to remember that change in these areas takes time and requires the commitment of people across the firm. The benefits of this work, however, are well worth the effort, leading to more innovation, a more representative workforce, and a more equitable society.

EY US inspires interest in STEM careers

In collaboration with the United Way National Capital Area, the EY Greater Washington office supports students in Prince George's County (PGC) school district through the Pathways to College and Digital Literacy Program. EY volunteers demystify access to college and provide digital upskilling to help students build a digital foundation to thrive in higher education and beyond.

Hosted in the fall and spring of the 2021 academic year by EY volunteers, students attended two sessions per week over the course of four weeks. During these sessions, students learned about the requirements for college, how to apply, the difference between two- and four-year institutions, and the basics of the financial aid process. Students were upskilled with digital software such as Microsoft Excel and Word. As part of their participation in the program, students were provided with a laptop to help them utilize their learnings and apply to college. The program and laptops were funded by the EY Greater Washington office Digital Divide fundraising, which to date has raised over $150,000.

Since its launch, the Pathways program has upskilled 120 students in the Prince George's County school district. Working to expanding on their efforts and leverage their ecosystem of collaborators, the team will be launching a STEM Career Exploration series in the spring of 2024 to help expose students of Prince George's Country to the fields and professions of the future.

This is an executive summary of the Closing the Digital Divide report. To read the full report, including information on economic inequality, economic benefits of closing the divide, the future of work, tools for mentors, and reinforcing feelings of belonging in the workplace, visit **https://ccc.bc.edu/EY-digital-divide**.

References

1   Ourworldindata; UK Government; Statista Market Insights, June 2023.
2   "Unleashing Artificial Intelligence's true potential: How generative AI could empower innovation, redefine productivity, and transform the workforce," 2023, *Statista website*. First-Year Undergraduate Students," *Journal of Science Education and Technology*, 12 February 2020.

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140 Commonwealth Ave., Chestnut Hill, MA 02467 | **T:** 617 552 4545 **F:** 617 552 8499 **E:** ccc@bc.edu