



## HARNESSING NEW ENGLAND'S "INVISIBLE" ASSETS

Along Massachusetts' high-tech corridor, you might think that a young adult would have an easy time finding an entry-level job.

Not true, says Sylvia Beville, executive director of the Metro South/West Regional Employment Board, a Framingham-based resource center that provides career training and services to unemployed and underemployed workers.

"Among 16- to 24-year-olds in our area, the unemployment rate today is among the highest we've had since 1948," Beville says. The Bay State has many young workers competing for jobs in an economy still sluggish from the dot.com bust. "And if you don't have computer skills," Beville says, "you're at an extreme disadvantage."

That's a problem for thousands of young, unskilled adults in the suburbs and small towns served by Metro South/West—people Beville describes as "invisible" because they are high school dropouts, don't know what they want to do with their lives, or are turned off by the idea of college or formal job training.

But new efforts are aimed at helping these young people and others realize their potential by acquiring computer skills needed in today's workplace. Metro South/West and the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC) are two of nine workforce development agencies nationwide that recently received grants of cash, software, and a new digital literacy curriculum from Microsoft. The company is sponsoring the two-year, \$3.5-million

workforce development program in alliance with the U.S. Department of Labor.

In a creative twist, Metro South/West is reaching out to disaffected youth by promoting its computer classes at popular gathering places such as hair salons, barbershops, pizza parlors, and convenience stores.

Meanwhile, the Boston PIC is partnering with community organizations to offer computer-skills classes to the homeless and recently homeless, young adults with disabilities, and residents of low-income public housing.

According to Boston PIC staffer Dennis Rogers, the goal is to use relationships that other organizations already have established in the community. Once people feel comfortable learning about computers, the idea is to demonstrate their value by helping clients use computers to look for work.

***In the knowledge economy,  
computer skills open doors.***

"We believe that by giving people access to computers and a purpose for using them, like doing an online job search and presenting their skills in a resume, we'll be able to engage people and help them build the basic computer skills they need for the workplace," Rogers says.

With other nations embracing technology as a tool for economic growth, and with even entry-level jobs requiring at least basic computer skills, the workforce development programs getting under way in Massachusetts will play an important role in helping U.S. workers and businesses compete in the fast-paced knowledge economy.

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