



From Janitor to Digital Navigator

Digital Skills Gave Me a Career Pathway

Juan Rivas

BEFORE YOU READ: What digital skills do you use for work? And for other areas of life?

Mops, Brooms, and Digital Devices

For four years, my job was basic cleaning. I mopped floors and dusted desks in the Google buildings in Redwood City.

But in recent years, janitorial work has changed. In addition to mops and brooms, we use digital devices. We need digital skills to do our jobs, report incidents, participate in training, clock in and out, and navigate HR tools and pay systems. To get and keep our jobs, janitors need digital and language skills!

Classes for Workers

This is why Building Skills Partnerships (BSP) is so important. I first learned about it at my workplace.

I started training with BSP three years ago. I took a course called Green Janitors Education Program, focusing on environmentally sustainable cleaning. After that, I was selected to participate in BSP's Digital Navigator Program. This course



The author at work.

trains janitors to become teaching assistants in digital literacy training for other janitors. It is peer-to-peer training. The instructor was great, and the classes were in Spanish, so learning in my language was very helpful. I received training in how to use different kinds of devices, the internet, email, search engines, Office Suite, Google Workspace, and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software.

We Need Digital Skills in All Areas of Life

During and after the pandemic, most products and services went online. Some janitors found it difficult to do simple things like online banking and telehealth, requesting services, or simply filling out forms online. In the workplace, the reporting systems and the HR processes are all

Union-Employer Partners

Building Skills Partnership (BSP) is a nonprofit organization that trains property service workers (janitors and airport workers) in different skills, including digital literacy, ESL, and financial literacy. Their work stems from a collaboration between employers, like C&W Services and the Service Employees International Union–United Service Workers West (SEIU-USWW).

online now, so in order to clock in our hours, review our paychecks, or report malfunctioning equipment, we need to use different software, sometimes complex systems, using phones or tablets.

Opening Doors

This training opened many doors for me. Soon after I ended the first part of the training, my boss promoted me to Group Lead. Then I was promoted again to Ticket Coordinator, which put me in charge of organizing the daily work. In this position, I used Google and other online programs. Shortly after that, I became part of the company's staff as Special Projects Supervisor.

So, I am living proof that learning digital skills can unlock career pathways in the cleaning industry. But I didn't just unlock the pathway for myself. Now, other janitors feel comfortable to learn digital skills, because they see I did it. After I trained to be a Digital Navigator, I provided IT support to other janitors through a service called Compuayuda (in Spanish) or Compuhelp (in English). I was an assistant teacher and offered training and IT support to 100 workers who received computers donated by BSP. Since then, I have continued to give IT support in BSP's digital literacy classes.

For the janitors that I help, it is very important that I am a janitor as well. I can relate to their struggle because I've been there. I can talk to them in their language and even share my own experience. That creates trust, which is critical to learning.

This experience has been great, because it has given me the opportunity to give back to other janitors, to help them just as I was helped. I tell them, "If I could do it, you can too." At the end of the training, I hear things like: "This class changed my opinion about technology. Now I think it's easy!" Or, "Now I can talk to my mom using Zoom," or "I can now help my kids with their homework."

Every day in Google buildings, thousands of workers like me need the opportunity to climb the

What Is SEIU-USWW?

When Juan was a janitor, he was a member of the Service Employees International Union–United Service Workers West (SEIU-USWW). A union is an organization of workers. By joining together, workers are in a more powerful position to negotiate with employers about salary, benefits, training, and workplace procedures.

career ladder by developing their skills. Language and digital skills are the first steps, but there can be many more. Why not? Employers, unions, and non-profit organizations can change these workers' lives for good. I know it is possible for them because it was possible for me.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. In a couple of sentences, tell the author's story in your own words.
2. Write a list of your digital skills. Consider including these skills on your resume. What skills would you like to add to the list?

Juan Rivas came to the U.S. from El Salvador six years ago when he was 21 years old. He now works as a Human Resources Generalist at C&W Services at Tesla, and he is a peer digital navigator at Building Skills Partnership. In 2023, he received the Si Se Puede Award at the BSP Mike Garcia Scholarship Gala. He takes ESL classes at Sequoia Adult School in Redwood City, and he lives in Hayward, California. This article is an edited version of a speech that Juan gave at Horizons 2023, a workforce development conference hosted by Jobs for the Future.

