



## **Youth and ICT Skills in African Labour Markets, With Particular Reference To Ghana<sup>1</sup>**

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Globally, the role of ICT as a catalyst for national development has long been acknowledged. The potentials of ICT have been dramatized by rapid transformation of production, distribution and exchange, and consumption systems as well as the way work is organized. Skills required by employers, especially in the area of ICTs has hence changed and highlighted the need for accelerated development of ICT infrastructure, including facilities for ICT skill enhancement among the youth. It is important to note that whilst many developing countries, including those in Africa, have embarked upon programmes for installing ICT infrastructure with a view to expanding access and usage the related issue of training especially for young and new labour market entrants has been largely ignored, especially in Africa. Furthermore, though most policy

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<sup>1</sup> The opinions expressed in this paper are strictly those of the author and do not represent the position, view or policy of the UN Economic Commission for Africa.

makers can appreciate the importance of ICT in the realm of information production and management, it is obvious from the numerous official documents on employment creation that the potential influence of ICT in unlocking employment opportunities is being overlooked.

The importance of ICT in dealing with the youth employment problem lies in the fact that ICT touches on both sides of the employment market. On the supply side, ICT provides the required employable skills. On the demand side, ICT facilitates production possibilities and thereby enhances job creation. ICT also creates bigger opportunities for the youth, far beyond the labour market. A recent UN Report notes that ICT provides the opportunity for young people to “develop a global consciousness” (UN ECOSOC 2003).

In response to the widening gap between youth labour demand and supply, Governments have been encouraging the youth to take to self-employment. But this area of employment requires new training, more so because the “new industries” are information technology-intensive, whether they are in agricultural exports or in services.

From the labour market perspective, ICT skills may be defined to include: Internet communication skills; competency in word processing; awareness of advanced database and statistical, accounting and human resource management applications, etc.; ability to break down data and analyze their inter-relatedness; language proficiency, that is, ability to express oneself clearly and concisely in writing or orally, and ability to engage in persuasive discussions. Studies in skills demand indicate that the prosperity of youth globally is tied with knowledge in ICT.

In Great Britain, for example, about 74% of workers in 2003 used computers at the workplace, compared with 19% in 1985 or 28% in 1990 (Borghans and ter Weel, 2002). The level and pattern of computer use have been observed to be similar among developed countries, and the depth and extent of use have increased dramatically in most developing countries in last ten years. As shown in the table below, between 1981-2003 an increasing proportion of jobs in the Ghanaian labour market required ICT skills, as defined above. That is, from 1% in 1981-89 period the proportion of advertised job vacancies that explicitly required young workers (below age 35) also required ICT skills increased to 45% in 2000-2003.

Advertised jobs for workers aged 35 or below that required ICT skills as % of total advertised

Skills	1981-1989	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2003
Computer/analytical	1.0	15.2	25.7	44.9
Communication	3.2	2.9	10.4	32.1

Source: Boateng (2006) Skills Demand Database

On average the ratio of jobs requiring IT skills to total number of advertised vacancies for young workers increased from about 1% in 1981-89 to 15% in 1990-94, 26% in 1994-99 and to 45% in 2002-03. In 2002 the data shows that 61% of jobs for those aged 35 years or below (“youth jobs”) required computer skills, compared with 0.5% in 1981, 5% in 1990 and 31% in 1999.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, 33% of “youth jobs” required communication skills in 2002 compared with 4% in 1981 and 18% in 1999. Thus, ICT requirement of jobs for young workers has been increasing.

Furthermore, computer, analytical and communications skill requirements of jobs for young workers are observed to be generally higher than for the overall population. For example, in 2001-2003, the average proportion of youth jobs requiring computer and analytical skills was 45% compared with 36% for the overall population of jobs. However, computer skill requirements are higher in some occupations than in others. Among “youth jobs”, the demand for IT skills is highest in management and professional jobs and in the utilities and NGO sectors. In these jobs and sectors at least 50% of advertised vacancies for which a young worker is explicitly required also required IT skills.

Similarly, communication skills requirements are higher in some occupations than in others. Among youth jobs, communications skills are highly required in management, professional and semi-professional jobs and in the NGO, services, utilities and mining and manufacturing sectors. In these jobs and sectors at least one-third of advertised vacancies that specifically require youth applicants also require communication skills.

Given the above findings, the issue then is: Do young workers have access to ICT? What are the implications of unequal access among youth? From the table it may be discerned that the chance of a young person without IT skills accessing jobs explicitly requiring young workers in the Ghanaian labour market has declined from 99% in 1981 to just about 55% in 2003. In contrast the employment chances of a young person with IT skills has improved by about 44%, during the same period. This fact has implications for both aggregate performance and equity in

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<sup>2</sup> “Youth jobs” may be defined, as job vacancies for which only those persons aged 35 years of below are eligible to apply.

employment opportunities for the youth and therefore intra-generational distribution of income, especially in the absence of equal access to ICT facilities in Ghana's educational system. Young people who have access to ICTs, because of school or parental background, would have better access to employment than those without.

For the above reasons, there is need for governments of African countries to not only intensify the process of ICT development and utilization but also embed this process in national development. Efforts should be made to reduce the prohibitive cost of practical ICT training. At the present low level of ICT development the social benefits of ICT training are likely to be higher than the private costs. There is thus the need for national strategies to mobilize public financial and human resources for investment in ICT.

In conclusion, employment generation for the youth will require an expansion in ICT capacities and capabilities in developing countries, since the new and growing sources of employment are tied to information technology, whether they are in agricultural exports or in the service industry. Furthermore, skill requirements, notably IT and communications skills, for jobs available specifically to young persons are increasing. Formal educational institutions should therefore be fully endowed to provide the training facilities required to equip young graduates with ICT skills, especially schools in low-income regions. Furthermore, appropriate policy interventions such as fiscal incentives embedded in a socially responsible regulatory framework, should be established for private providers to play their complementary role in the provision of sound training in ICT skills.

## **Resources**

L. Borghans and B. ter Weel (2002). Computers, skills and wages. Maastricht University. Working Paper. May.

UN (2003). World Youth Report, 2003. Report of the Secretary-General, Commission for Social Development. ECOSOC. February.

Some web resources:

<http://www.wsisaccra2005.gov.gh/stakeholdersI.htm>

<http://www.dgroups.org/groups/aisi-youth-I>

<http://www.ayinetwork.org>, [www.uneca.org/aisi](http://www.uneca.org/aisi)

