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## Working With Broadband

For communities, the key to economic vitality isn't just getting broadband but also using it effectively.

In the 1990s, when internet access first became common, no one talked about using the internet effectively. There wasn't much to do online, and what there was, wasn't difficult. Searching, emailing, buying books and airline tickets, participating in a chat group – who needed help with any of that?

At around the same time, business scholars began talking about “disruptive technologies,” but in those days, few people understood how profoundly the internet would disrupt the world of work. Then secretaries and travel agents began to vanish, and social media strategists and eBay sellers appeared in their place. Lifetime jobs disappeared, and job-hopping and “alternative work” took over.

Fast forward a couple of decades, and all of life seems to have migrated online. Today, there's a lot to learn. Chatting with friends isn't enough – chatting with customers is necessary, too. Researching a vacation destination is simple, but researching potential new markets requires skill.

In the broadband age, employers and employees must keep reinventing themselves, learning new skills and thinking in new ways about running businesses and managing careers.

Community leaders now accept that the key to economic development isn't simply obtaining adequate internet service – though that's still a major challenge – but also teaching businesses and workers to leverage their internet access and thrive in the new economy. Strategic Networks Group, whose research has often been presented in this magazine, has argued for years

that many businesses, especially small businesses, still use only the simplest internet tools but could succeed and grow by adopting solutions such as e-commerce, web-based customer service and telework.

### REINVENTION

This issue of **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** is filled with examples of individuals, businesses and communities reinventing themselves. From a Vermont town attracting creative workers with its “weird and decrepit” vibe to displaced tobacco farmers and textile workers learning to supply produce to high-end restaurants, to a local Minnesota paper attracting a new generation of readers through Facebook, to a Kentucky boutique owner giving customers virtual glimpses of the newest fashions, to a manufacturer of mineral processing equipment seeking new markets, to workers learning to navigate the gig economy – all these and many others are finding opportunities that never could have existed without broadband. Because they are getting help from organizations dedicated to community planning and training, much of what they are doing is replicable.

The United States has been called a land of second chances. Now it will have to be a land of second, third and fourth chances. Fortunately, Americans have a long history of ingenuity and resourcefulness. We'll need those qualities in the times ahead. ❖

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