

Digital skills shortage leaves EU youth a step behind

European policy makers have identified a large shortfall in computing and IT skills among young people that threatens to dent Europe's ability to compete and could exacerbate youth unemployment in the coming decade.

While young Europeans may be good at using mobile smartphones and playing video games, they lack basic digital skills that could make them more easily employable in a rapidly digitizing economy, research from the European Commission shows.

The Commission estimates the shortfall of school leavers and graduates with required IT and digital skills could hit 700,000 by 2015, a deficit that will particularly affect leading digital economies such as Britain, France and Germany.

The findings add to concerns about growing unemployment across Europe, where 24 million people are out of work. Youth unemployment is a particular concern, with more than 50 percent of young people unemployed in Spain and Greece.

"Young people need to appreciate the professional aspects of the new digital world," said Antonio Tajani, the European commissioner for industry and entrepreneurship, as he launched a series of events labeled "e-skills week" to draw attention to the problem and generate ways of tackling it.

"This is more important than ever in the current economic context. And it is crucial to increase creativity which will favor entrepreneurship and new start-ups."

Europe continues to battle the impact of the eurozone debt crisis, with Italian labor reform talks and continued poor economic performance in Spain dampening hopes for a recovery.

At the same time, there are signs of economic recovery in the United States, Europe's largest economic rival and the world's most digitally advanced economy, while China continues to grow at an annualized rate of around 8 percent.

According to the Commission, jobs for highly-qualified people are expected to rise by 16 million by 2020, while those held by low-skilled workers will decline by around 12 million.

That gives the EU only a fixed amount of time to try to bolster IT and digital skills among young people if they are to become productive members of the global workforce.

"Supply (of skilled workers) has become a bottleneck for growth in the tech sector,

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creating a leaky pipeline that threatens to hamper European innovation and global competitiveness," said Tajani.

(Writing by Daniel Rolle, editing by Luke Baker)

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