

# Ads for all ages

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How age-biased are  
job adverts in the UK,  
and what can we do  
about it?

Part of the **Good Recruitment for  
Older Workers (GROW)** project

April 2021



in partnership with:

# About us

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## Centre for Ageing Better

The UK's population is undergoing a massive age shift. In less than 20 years, one in four people will be over 65.

The fact that many of us are living longer is a great achievement. But unless radical action is taken by government, business and others in society, millions of us risk missing out on enjoying those extra years.

At the Centre for Ageing Better we want everyone to enjoy later life. We create change in policy and practice informed by evidence and work with partners across England to improve employment, housing, health and communities.

We are a charitable foundation, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, and part of the government's What Works Network.

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## The Behavioural Insights Team

The Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) is one of the world's leading behavioural science organisations, working around the world to improve people's lives.

Through its teams in the UK, France, US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore, BIT works in partnership with governments, local authorities, businesses and NGOs in over 30 countries, often using simple changes to tackle major policy problems and deliver improved public services and social outcomes.

BIT was established by the UK government in 2010 and in 2014 became an independent social purpose company, owned by the Cabinet Office, innovation charity Nesta, and BIT employees.

For more information on our work and our team visit [www.bi.team](http://www.bi.team)

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# Introduction

**More than a third of the UK workforce is over 50 (ONS, 2021), and many of those workers will want to move jobs or re-train in different industries as they work for longer.**

This means it is particularly important to make sure that older workers are not discriminated against in the recruitment process and that everyone has a fair chance at finding a job or getting a promotion.

While some employers are aware of the benefits of having older workers in their workforce, older jobseekers still feel that they are disadvantaged in the recruitment process (Centre for Ageing Better, 2021b). This report concentrates on one aspect of the recruitment process and illustrates the negative impact ageist language can have on older workers.

However, language in job adverts alone is unlikely to be a 'silver bullet'. Employers and recruiters need to consider how this part of the

process feeds into a broader understanding of how and where ageism operates throughout the whole recruitment process. Employers can demonstrate their commitment to fairness in recruitment by becoming an age-friendly employer. Our research suggests that adopting practices such as flexible working as standard, ensuring everyone has the health support they need and encouraging career development at all ages are amongst the best ways to appeal to older workers and jobseekers (Centre for Ageing Better, 2018).

This is the third report in a series from Ageing Better's Good Recruitment for Older Workers (GROW) project. This report, which summarises the findings of research commissioned by Ageing Better and undertaken by the Behavioural Insights Team, looks at the language used in job advertisements and how this impacts older workers. Previous reports have looked at the recruitment landscape (Centre for Ageing Better, 2021a) and individuals' experience of recruitment (Centre for Ageing Better, 2021b).



# Key findings

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## **1. Words and phrases have a bigger effect on older candidates' perceptions of their success than on their stated likelihood of applying.**

Most words did not significantly affect candidates' likelihood to apply. However, some words and phrases affected how successful older candidates thought their application would be.

Several of the terms relating to younger age-stereotypes were identified by the older group as being off-putting, and this negatively affected their perceptions of both fit and potential success in the application process.

- Younger-age stereotypical words such as 'innovative' and 'adaptable' were associated with a lower perceived likelihood of getting an interview and getting an offer.
- The word 'innovative' also had a negative effect on whether older jobseekers felt like they would 'fit' within the recruiting organisation.
- 'Technologically savvy' had a negative effect on perceived likelihood of interview, job offer and fit.

The inclusion of benefits, such as generous pension contributions and flexible working opportunities, was associated with a higher stated likelihood of older jobseekers applying. Flexible working is a wider part of being an age-friendly employer, and is the main practice that people say would help them to work for longer (Centre for Ageing Better, 2020). Additionally, recent research on a large UK job site has found that offering flexible working arrangements increases job applications by up to 30% (Londakova et al, 2021).

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## **2. Younger-age stereotypical words are more commonly used in real job advertisements than older-age stereotypical words.**

The words and phrases which are more likely to appeal to older applicants are less commonly used in job advertisements than those which appeal more to younger candidates. For example, 'knowledgeable', which has a stronger appeal to older workers, is used significantly less than 'innovative' or 'dynamic', which both appeal more to younger workers.

However, the benefits listed in key finding one are not commonly included in job adverts (see Figure 2), whereas younger-age stereotypical words are.

### 3. Using language that appeals more broadly to older candidates does not deter younger applicants.

None of the words and phrases that positively influenced older jobseekers' stated likelihood to apply had opposing effects on younger jobseekers. The use of older-age stereotypical words did not seem to affect how likely younger people were to apply for a job. However, it did affect their perceptions of their success.

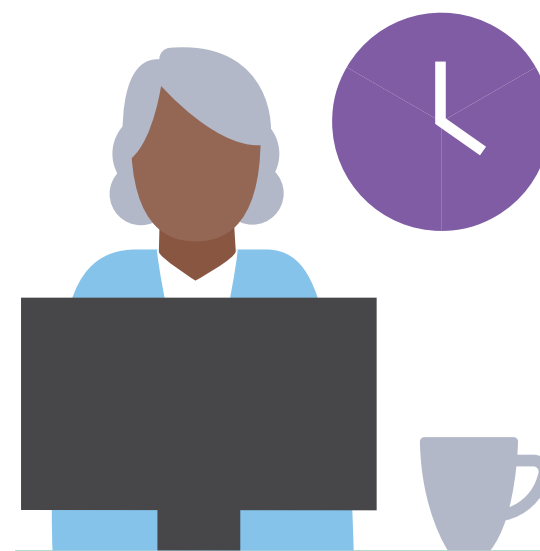
### 4. Avoiding potentially age-biased words and phrases may be more important for particular groups of older candidates.

For example, participants who were 45-54 years old were more attracted to flexible working opportunities than the wider group of all over 45s. Undertaking this research with a larger group of people could allow us to say more about subgroups of older workers. Looking at age alongside ethnicity or gender could tell us that avoiding age-biased words is particularly important for certain subgroups of the population.



# 5.5%

The phrase 'flexible working' appears in around 1 in 20 job adverts



# 30%

Offering flexible working arrangements increases job applications by up to 30% (Londakova et al, 2021)

# Methodology



## **While we know that older workers feel disadvantaged in recruitment, there has been little robust research into the impact of language on older jobseekers.**

This research, commissioned by Ageing Better and undertaken by the Behavioural Insights Team, comprised:

1. A review of existing evidence to identify words and phrases that could be perceived as drawing on stereotypes of older or younger people, including how people believe others perceive them (also known as ‘meta-stereotypes’).
2. An online experiment testing younger (18–34) and older participants’ (45+) responses to mock job adverts containing language identified as age-stereotypical (both young and old) in the literature review. After looking at these adverts,

participants were asked a variety of questions about their likelihood of applying and perceptions of fit and potential success in obtaining an interview and the job itself.

3. Text analysis of 11 million real job adverts over the course of a year (March 2019 to March 2020), using Jobfeed provided by TextKernel, to understand how commonly words and phrases identified as problematic for older workers are used. These dates were chosen to avoid data being affected by the first UK lockdown in late March 2020.

The recommendations here are based on the insights from this evidence review, the online experiment and the text analysis.



# Recommendations for employers and recruiters

## Recommendation

Avoid using language in job advertisements that may exclude older applicants.

Consider using language shown to promote age-diversity.

Focus on specific behaviours and skills required for the job, rather than personality traits.

Emphasise employer benefits which might appeal to older workers, such as continuing professional development, flexible working and pension contributions

Include a diversity statement in job advertisements emphasising age-inclusivity.

Proactively recruit older workers.

## Action

Avoid using terms like ‘innovative’, ‘technologically savvy’ and ‘recent graduate’.

Words such as ‘knowledgeable’ and ‘dependable’ are likely to increase how well older applicants think they will fit in, so may increase the number of people who apply.

Replacing age-stereotypical words which describe inherent abilities, such as ‘technologically savvy’, with specific skills, such as ‘programming skills’.

This is likely to appeal to all candidates and this research suggests it substantially improves the likelihood of older jobseekers applying.

This can increase older applicants’ likelihood of applying and how well they think they will fit.

Consider advert placement and reach with the specific intention of increasing the number of older applicants.



## Key finding 1

# Words and phrases have a bigger effect on older candidates' perceptions of their success than on likelihood of applying

**Using the findings from the literature review which identified potentially age-stereotypical words, researchers designed an online lab experiment testing whether including these words, phrases and features in mock job adverts would put people off applying.**

A total of 3,499 people aged over 45 and 1,592 people aged 18 to 34 were asked questions about different job adverts and whether they were likely to apply for each role. Fifteen ageist words, three work benefits and two diversity statements were tested with the older group. Five words, one work benefit and one diversity statement were tested with the younger group.

Most of the words and phrases that tested as potentially problematic for older applicants did not have a significant impact on whether people

were willing to apply for jobs. However, the language used did affect their perception of how employers and recruiters viewed them.

People were also asked how successful they thought their application would be, how they thought employers would perceive them and how well they thought they would 'fit in' to the organisation. They were also asked to identify any specific words they found appealing or off-putting in the adverts.

The words, phrases and features that had statistically significant effects are outlined in the table opposite:

Table 1: Effects of age-stereotypical words and phrases, and CV features, on older applicants

Word, phrase, or feature	Candidate's likelihood of applying	Perceived likelihood of getting an interview	Perceived likelihood of getting an offer	Perceived fit	Judgment of employer's perception of fit
Short diversity statement	+			++	++
Generous pension contributions	++				
Flexible working opportunities	++				
Knowledgeable		+			+
Development opportunities	+				
Adaptable			--		
3-5 years of work experience		-			-
Innovative		--	-		--
Technologically savvy		--	--	--	--
Recent graduate	--	--	--	--	--

Symbols ++ and -- show results that had a statistically significant positive (++) or negative (--) effect on the behaviour or motivation listed.

Symbols - and + denote terms that weren't statistically significant but showed some positive (+) or negative (-) effect.

## Key finding 1

**Most of the age-stereotypical words identified in the literature review did not influence intent to apply in either younger or older people, apart from those that most strongly indicated an age preference.** For example, use of the phrase ‘recent graduate’ meant older applicants were significantly less likely to apply. In fact, when asked to highlight appealing or off-putting words in the advert, more than twice as many older participants highlighted young age-stereotypical words as appealing than as off-putting, on average (see Figure 1 below). This indicates that not everyone perceives these words as biased against older applicants. It might be that they consider the words to be positive indicators of what the job and the company are like. They might also be terms that many older workers ascribe to themselves, despite being objectively ‘age stereotypical’.

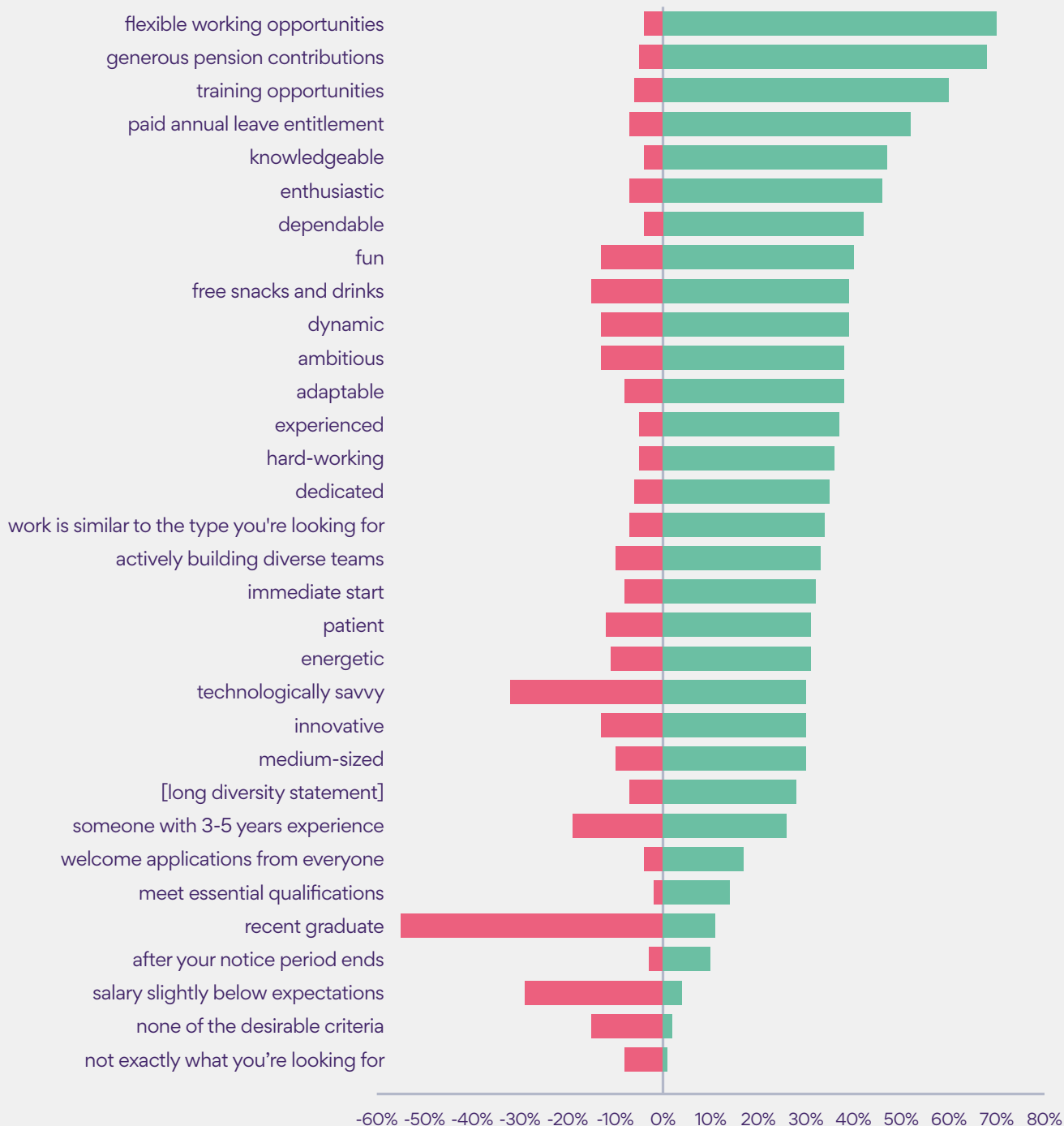
**Younger age-stereotypical words and phrases tended to be more contentious.** A significant minority of both younger and older applicants found the young age-stereotypical words and

phrases off-putting. People in the older age cohort had a wide range of reactions to words related to a younger-age stereotype. For example, ‘enthusiastic’, ‘dynamic’ and ‘ambitious’ were viewed positively by nearly half of 45–74 year olds, but negatively by just under a quarter. So, while not universally problematic, **these words are likely to have an impact on how many older applicants the post will receive.**

As shown by Figure 1 (above), amongst older candidates benefits such as ‘generous pension contributions’ and ‘flexible working opportunities’ were generally more appealing. Other features and phrases which were seen as appealing were the inclusion of a short diversity statement and the phrase ‘training and development opportunities at all career levels’. However, analysis of real-world job adverts shows that inclusive benefits are seldom emphasised in job adverts (see Figure 2) and doing so might increase the number of older applicants.



Figure 1: Percentage of older participants who highlighted each word or phrase in the advert as appealing (in green) or off-putting (in pink).



## Key finding 2

# Younger-age stereotypical words are more commonly used than older-age stereotypical words

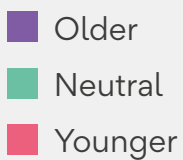
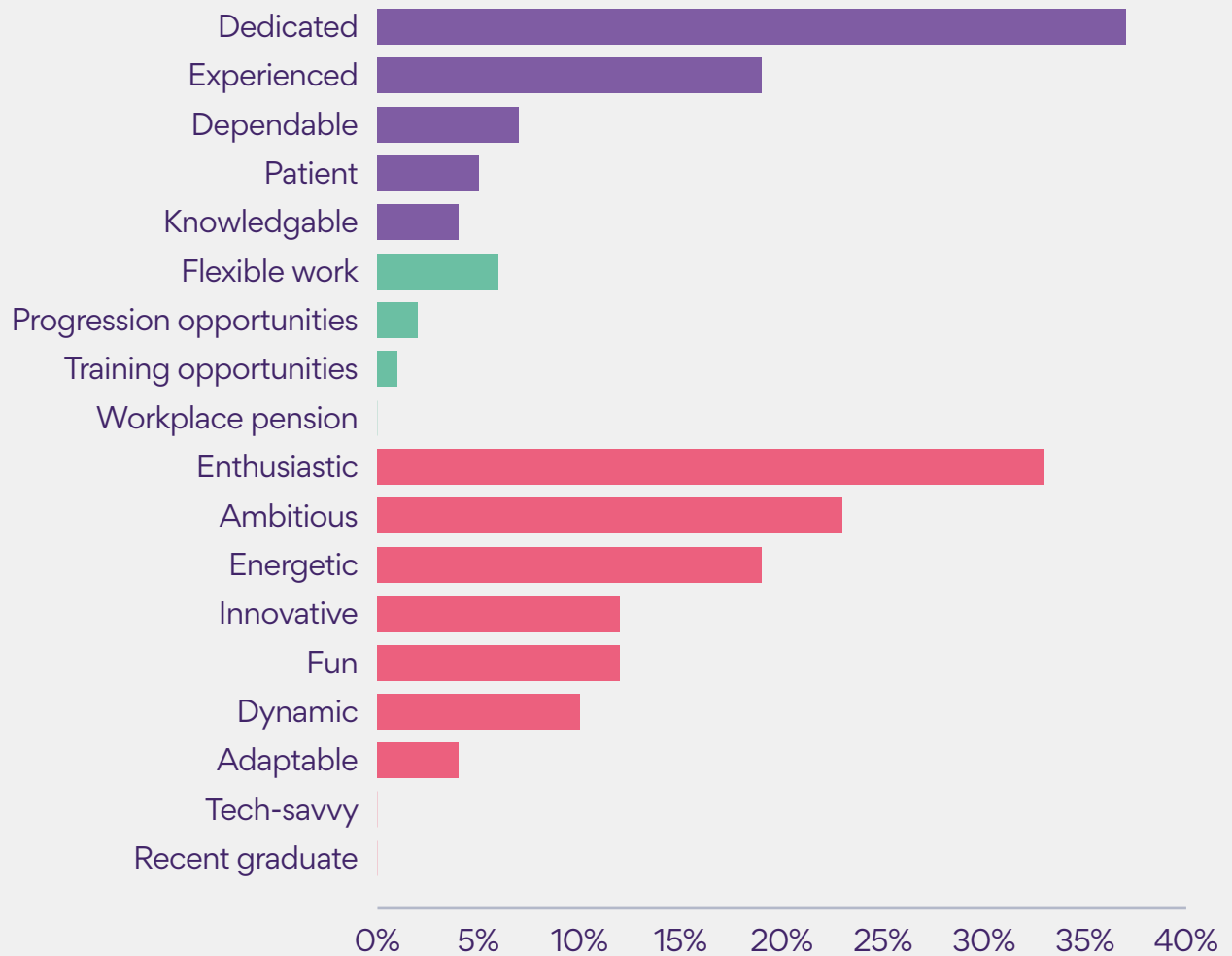
**Both the literature review and online experiments would suggest that there is some evidence about what attracts older applicants to job advertisements.**

However, analysis of more than 11 million real-world job advertisements demonstrated that these features rarely appeared. For example, the phrase 'flexible working' appeared in 5.5% of all adverts. All other benefits were found in less than 2% of adverts, including 'workplace pension scheme', which was only mentioned in 0.3% of adverts.

Whilst these individual words and phrases are unlikely by themselves to put older jobseekers off applying for jobs, they do indicate what kind of organisation they would be applying to and potentially their perception of whether they would fit in with other employees. This can reinforce previously held ideas about what kind of jobs would be suitable for them, as well as how candidates think others will perceive them.



Figure 2: Frequency with which age-stereotypical words were found in real-life job adverts.



## Key finding 3

# Using language which appealed more broadly to older people does not deter younger applicants

**Whilst words which seemed designed to attract younger people affected older applicants' perceptions of their success, the opposite was not true for younger applicants. None of the words and phrases that positively influenced older jobseekers' likelihood to apply had opposing effects on younger jobseekers.**

The phrases we tested with the younger sample largely had no significant effects, i.e., they did not seem to make them any more or less likely to apply for the job than they would have, had the phrase not been there. This included words that were age-stereotypical towards older people. However, the words and phrases did affect young people's perceptions of their success. For example, the use of the word 'dynamic' resulted in the younger sample having a higher perceived likelihood of getting a job offer. Other age-stereotypical words such as 'technologically-savvy' were more mixed - about a quarter of the younger sample flagged the phrase as reducing their likelihood of

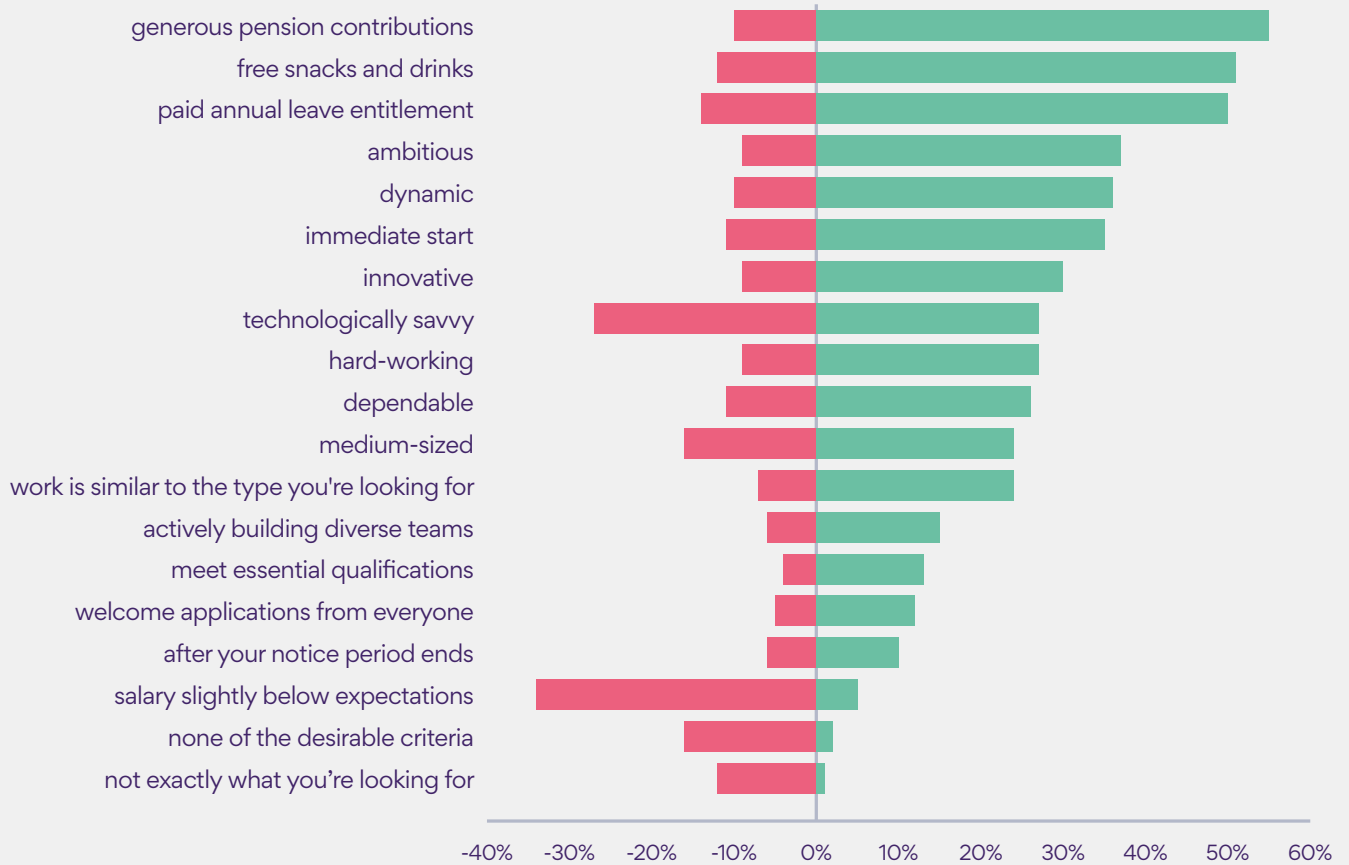
applying for the job. The inclusion of a short diversity statement made the younger sample, in particular younger men, somewhat less confident that they would fit within the organisation.

Most of the words and phrases we tested with the younger group of participants made them more likely to apply for jobs, rather than less likely. As Figure 3 (above) shows, a variety of benefits appealed to younger applicants, mostly along similar lines to the older age group. While some younger age-stereotypical words, such as 'ambitious' and 'dynamic', were highlighted as appealing by the younger group, some seemed to be universally off-putting, e.g., 'technologically savvy'.

The results from the younger age group suggest that employers and recruiters using age-inclusive language to appeal to older workers are unlikely to receive fewer younger applicants. Inclusive language in recruitment is likely to increase the number of applicants rather than reduce them, as well as making sure everyone feels like they have a fair chance at getting the job.



Figure 3: Percentage of younger participants who highlighted each word or phrase in the advert as appealing (in green) or off-putting (in pink).



## Key finding 4

# Avoiding potentially age-biased words and phrases may be more important for particular groups of older people

**This research indicates that certain groups may be more impacted by age-stereotypical words and phrases than others. Further research could tell us more about which groups are most likely to be affected.**

Older men were more likely than older women to apply for jobs which included 'generous pension contributions' and the word 'dependable'. When it came to younger age-stereotypical words, such as 'recent graduate' or '3-5 years' work experience', older men were more strongly put off from applying than older women were. Interestingly, there was also a gender divide among younger participants, with younger men being less likely to apply for a job when a short diversity statement was included in the job advert than younger women.

Looking at age, amongst 45–54 year old participants 'flexible working opportunities' and 'generous pension contributions' had a significant positive effect, as it did with older participants generally. Wider research, including by BIT, has demonstrated that just listing flexible working options in adverts can considerably increase applications (Behavioural Insights Team, 2019).

It is possible that ageist words have a stronger effect on certain minority groups amongst older people, particularly those who face the most barriers in the recruitment process. However, given the small number of participants in the study this was not directly tested. The diversity of people approaching later life means employers and recruiters must see age in conjunction with race, gender and caring status, amongst other things, to make sure they are getting the best candidates for the job.

# Conclusion



**It is clear from this research that deciding whether to apply for a job is a complex process. People have competing priorities based on their individual job requirements and desires.**

Even though the specific age-stereotypical words and phrases analysed in this research had a limited impact on older candidates' likelihood of applying for jobs overall, that is not to say that the language used in job adverts has no effect. In fact, we found that many terms were highly contentious and off-putting for a significant minority of older job seekers.

There is also an important minority of older job seekers who feel that their chances of success in recruitment are lessened by language seemingly aimed at younger people. This may not put them off applying for jobs but may impact on their confidence during the recruitment process – a common impact of experiencing ageism within the recruitment process beyond just the language in job advertisements (Centre for Ageing Better, 2021b). Employers and recruiters

need to ensure that the language they use is inclusive of all ages to give every candidate the best chance of success.

Some of the features that appealed most to older applicants, such as workplace pensions or flexible working, are often not referenced in job advertisements, perhaps as they are considered a standard part of employment terms. Our research suggests that employers who highlight these benefits and choose to go above and beyond their statutory requirements, for example, offering 'generous workplace pensions', may be more likely to attract older applicants if emphasised in job adverts.

Ultimately, the language used to frame job advertisements is likely to have some effect on older candidates' feelings towards a job application process and potentially on whether they will apply for a job at all. However, language in job adverts alone is unlikely to be a 'silver bullet'. Employers need to consider how this part of the process feeds into a broader understanding of how and where ageism operates throughout the whole recruitment process.

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