

Good recruitment for older workers

Understanding Individuals'
Recruitment Experiences

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Executive summary

This report examines older workers' experiences of the recruitment process, including whether they have faced any age-related barriers and challenges when looking and applying for jobs. The study was conducted by Demos and the National Institute of Economic and Social Research on behalf of the Centre for Ageing Better. The research involved 55 semi-structured video or telephone interviews with older workers (aged 50-73) and a nationally representative poll with a sample of 1,539 UK adults aged 18 and over. This research will inform Ageing Better's broader programme of work on developing, testing and communicating new and improved recruitment approaches directly with employers and recruitment organisations.

The key themes from the report are described below.

The current system of hiring and recruiting does not work for older jobseekers

This research found a widespread perception among older people that employers practise age discrimination. Among those in their 50s and 60s, the survey results showed that:

- More than a third (36%) felt they would be at a disadvantage in applying for jobs because of their age.
- Almost half (48%) thought the way employers recruited new staff these days worked to disadvantage people of their age.
- 15% thought they had been turned down for a role due to their age; and 17% said they had experienced age discrimination in the past few years when applying for a job or a promotion.

The interview research showed that perceived age discrimination within the recruitment process largely operates covertly and out of direct sight of job applicants. As such, the report contains relatively few outright examples of overt age discrimination, such as employers telling older jobseekers directly that their application was unsuccessful due to their age. Older jobseekers pointed out that very few employers and recruiters would be likely to mention age directly, due to fear of complaints, legal action and negative impacts on their reputation.

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Nevertheless, older jobseekers were often certain that their age worked to their disadvantage when applying for jobs. This perception was based on experiences of age bias and discrimination in the workplace and during internal recruitment and promotion rounds. It was reinforced when recruitment agents provided advice about how to avoid or mitigate age bias by employers. Some also observed age bias among colleagues, and sometimes regrettably from themselves, when they were part of employers' selection panels and interviewed external candidates.

In the absence of much direct evidence of overt age discrimination, older jobseekers reported how they interpreted certain behaviours and decisions by employers to conclude that age-based stereotypes and discrimination affected the recruitment process. This ranged from the wording of job adverts, to rejection before the interview stage, to questions and reactions of interviewers relating to their status as an older worker.

While some older jobseekers took these signs as definitive proof of age discrimination, others recognised that their view was based only on 'feelings' and 'suspicions'. However, existing employer-facing evidence supports their concerns that older jobseekers are significantly disadvantaged in the recruitment process, for instance by showing that otherwise identical candidates are more likely to be selected for interviews when they are younger (see Riach, 2015; Tinsley, 2012; Riach & Rich, 2010 for studies based in the UK). Other evidence shows that negative age-related stereotypes are pervasive and widespread, including among employers, and that these can affect people's attitudes and behaviours (see Swift & Steeden (2020) for a recent review).

This report plugs a gap in the literature by showing that, regardless to what extent age bias affects behaviours and decisions by employers, it is felt acutely among older jobseekers. Older individuals felt age put them at a disadvantage throughout the recruitment process, including in the behaviours and decisions by employers and by applicants themselves. This study also demonstrates the likely significant challenges in tackling age discrimination in recruitment. The fact that age bias and age discrimination is concealed and difficult to pinpoint is likely to make it more difficult to eradicate. Much like unconscious bias and stereotypes, it requires a concerted effort among employers and recruiters to tackle the issue.

The study found that efforts to tackle age discrimination need to concentrate on all parts of the recruitment process. Older jobseekers often felt disadvantaged during every step of the process towards potentially securing a new job, from the early stages of searching and applying for jobs, to being interviewed and receiving the final outcome. The research does not provide conclusive evidence on whether this disadvantage was felt more prominently in earlier or later stages of recruitment; rather, it found that disadvantage is felt differently during different stages of recruitment, and that this varied among different individuals.

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Older jobseekers who were repeatedly unsuccessful at the early stages of recruitment often saw the recruitment process as impersonal, frustrating and time consuming. They felt they were ‘hitting their head against a brick wall’. Their main interaction with employers consisted of receiving template-made rejection emails, and some feared their applications were never seen by a human being but rejected by algorithms filtering out older workers. They were especially frustrated that they rarely got the chance to attend interviews and disprove the age-based stereotypes that they felt worked against them. Given their limited interaction with employers, these participants were often left wondering why their success rate in being invited for interviews had dropped as they grew older. They often concluded that their older age must be a factor, but sometimes admitted it could also be due to other factors, such as a tightening labour market.

Older jobseekers who occasionally or frequently proceeded to interviews experienced the recruitment process differently, though not necessarily any more positively. These jobseekers said they sometimes managed to avoid age discrimination during the application stage, for instance by concealing age from their CVs and shortening their employment histories. But often they felt this only delayed age disadvantage, as their older age inevitably became apparent to employers during the interview stage. The efforts to mitigate age discrimination at application stage also involved compromises, such as hiding potentially important professional experiences, which could ultimately weaken their job outcomes. Some were frustrated that they had to ‘dumb down’ their CVs to get a foot in the door.

When attending interviews, some older jobseekers immediately felt on the back foot when they saw young employees and were interviewed by young selection panels. Some said they had sensed an instant disappointment among interviewers when their age was revealed through their appearance. Some had encountered questions related to age-related stereotypes, such as their physical capabilities, plans for retirement and ambition. Ultimately, while they had been given the opportunity to attend an interview, older jobseekers sometimes suspected they were not being seriously considered, and sometimes even felt they were there to ‘make up the numbers’ and give the illusion of a diverse pool of applicants.

Experiences and fears of age discrimination have a profound impact on older people's wellbeing, careers and their decisions in job seeking

Experiences of age discrimination in the recruitment process impact older people considerably. The survey found more than one in six (17%) people in their 50s and 60s felt they had experienced age discrimination, and that this has a substantial impact on the job prospects and financial situations of those affected:

- More than half (52%) had not been able to find a job that met their needs
- A third (33%) felt stuck in insecure work
- Almost two-thirds (64%) were financially less well off
- A third (33%) were put off working or went into early retirement
- Around three-quarters (76%) were put off applying for jobs.

The interview research showed how experiences or perceptions of age disadvantage affected older people's confidence, self-esteem and their own sense of worth to society. Interview participants described their continued lack of success in the job market and the experiences of age discrimination as 'frustrating', 'soul-destroying' and 'a blow to [their] confidence'. Among those in their 50s and 60s who felt they had experienced age discrimination, the survey results found that:

- More than two-thirds (68%) said it had undermined their confidence
- More than two-fifths (43%) said it had affected their health and wellbeing

The fear of age discrimination and the loss of confidence often affected how older people approached the recruitment process, and it shaped decisions about their working lives. A quarter (25%) of survey respondents in their 50s or 60s said they had wanted to move jobs but felt unable to do so because of their age. The interview research showed how the recruitment process sometimes made older jobseekers internalise a diminished sense of self-worth due to age discrimination, and that this changed their decisions about whether to apply for jobs, what jobs they applied for and how they sold themselves to employers. The expectation and fear of age discrimination clearly became a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading to a situation where employers appeared to discriminate against older people and older people chose not to apply for jobs they otherwise would have, on the assumption that they would be discriminated against had they done so.

The vast majority of older people (95% in our survey) always disclose their age on their CV. While some said they did not know that hiding age was allowed, others wanted to be upfront and honest about their profile and their age. It was common among interview participants to disclose age precisely because it reduced their chances of getting invited for an interview. It gave employers who preferred younger candidates a chance to filter them out during the application stage. By being clear about their age, older jobseekers avoided wasting time on interviews for which they felt they were destined to be rejected and avoided painful experiences of age bias during interviews.

Similarly, some older jobseekers had become increasingly selective over time, to avoid opportunities deemed as unrealistic for older applications. They carefully chose which jobs and organisations they applied for, using various indicators of employers' implicit age preferences, such as wordings in job adverts associated with common stereotypes of younger workers. These terms included 'dynamic', 'energetic', 'go-getting', 'working at a fast pace' and 'working long hours'. They also included levels of seniority indicating the job was meant for a younger person such as 'students', 'graduates', 'recent graduates', 'entry roles' and 'apprenticeships'. Workplaces promoted or described as 'fun' and 'lively' were also seen as indicating a preference for younger applicants. While most questioned the validity of these stereotypes, the employers' choice of language indicated to them that their age might be a stumbling block for their application. For some interview participants, the fear of age discrimination within recruitment led them to abandon the recruitment process altogether, preferring to stay put in their current jobs even when they were not necessarily satisfied in their role: 'better the devil you know'.

Older jobseekers have different circumstances, careers and ambitions, but often feel employers treat them according to the same stereotypes

It should come as no surprise that the research shows that older workers aged 50 and over, just like any other group in society, cannot be seen as a homogenous group. Older workers and jobseekers, including in the interview sample of this research, comprise people from all walks of life, with a variety of qualifications, skills and careers, and with different ambitions for their remaining working lives. They can, however, often be treated in the same way by employers, often in accordance with the same stereotypes of older workers. These stereotypes have been covered extensively in previous work (see Swift and Steeden (2020) for a recent review).

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This study shows that older jobseekers, based on their experiences in the workplace and in recruitment, feel it is exactly these stereotypes that cause employers to discriminate against them. This includes expectations that older workers have shorter job tenures and less time to grow within companies, are less adaptable and less skilled due to reduced mental and physical capacity, take more sick days and have long-term absences through illness. Older workers are also assumed not to fit into a younger workplace, have less ambition, and to demand higher pay.

Some older jobseekers seemed to have internalised some of these stereotypes and did indeed view themselves unfavourably compared to younger workers, leading to a loss of confidence in their job seeking efforts and sometimes acceptance of their difficulties in securing a job. More often, however, older jobseekers said these age-based stereotypes did not apply to them and they were frustrated that they potentially harmed their employment prospects. It was common for interview participants to express frustration that employers had not adjusted to the modern labour market where people are now working for longer due to factors such as improved health and raising of the pension age.

Facing the same stereotypes about their skills and goals, different groups of older workers experienced the recruitment process in alternative ways. There were some interview participants who didn't want to progress and just 'wind down' in the labour market or want to take a step down in pay and responsibility to achieve a better work-life balance. But they often felt their previous higher-level experience stood in their way: they were anticipated to be too independent, unhappy to be managed by and take orders from younger managers, and sometimes seen as a threat to managers. They sometimes struggled to persuade employers they would be motivated in the job, including where they had to accept a lower salary compared to younger people. They were sometimes told directly by employers they were 'too experienced' or 'too qualified'. Interview participants struggled to interpret whether this was the actual reason, or whether it was code for being too old.

In contrast, those interview participants who still wanted to maintain their position or progress in the labour market faced challenges in overcoming other stereotypes associated with older workers. They did not see themselves as older workers or nearing retirement, at least until the recruitment process reminded them of this fact. These interview participants frequently voiced the suspicion that employers wanted to hire someone they could 'make in their own image' and who would be able to stay longer and 'grow within the company'. Participants also felt employers expected younger workers to be better at picking up new skills, more likely to comply with and adapt to company practices, and less likely to stand up to managers if demands were unreasonable.

Ageism is a general problem in hiring and recruitment, affecting workers and jobseekers of all ages

The research focused primarily on older workers aged 50 and over, finding strong evidence that ageism is practised and experienced in the recruitment process and inhibits older people's job prospects. However, the survey results show that workers and jobseekers in all age groups face a wide range of age-based challenges when looking for jobs.

While ageism was experienced by all age groups, the survey findings suggested some significant differences in how it was experienced and interpreted across age groups. While older people were more likely to perceive a 'disadvantage' in recruitment based on their age, they were less likely than younger people to report experiences of direct age 'discrimination'. The survey also showed that many younger people, including those in their 20s, reported feeling disadvantaged due to their relatively older age. This may be a consequence of legislation requiring employers to pay the National Living Wage from age 25. Another explanation is that people in their late 20s may be seen as too old for some entry roles, and employers may be more open and explicit about age preferences among younger candidates.

Overall, this research suggests further attention needs to be given to the hiring and recruiting process for workers of all ages, including qualitative studies providing in-depth and rich insights into people's experiences of the recruitment process.

Introduction

Existing evidence suggests that the behaviours and decisions by employers in the recruitment process are sometimes affected by age-related stereotypes. Most clearly, research across all developed countries strongly shows that older people face age discrimination when employers screen job applications and shortlist for interviews. These studies show that otherwise identical applications and CVs are more likely to be selected for interview when the applicant is younger (see Riach, 2015; Tinsley, 2012; Riach & Rich, 2010 for studies based in the UK). Other evidence shows that negative age-related stereotypes are prominent, including among employers, and that they can affect people's attitudes and behaviour (see Swift and Steeden for recent review). However, there is little research on how older workers themselves experience the recruitment process. This is important as recent UK survey evidence shows that perceived age bias and age discrimination is relatively common in the recruitment process, with nearly a third (32%) of people aged over 50 feeling they have been turned down for a job because of their age (Ageing Better 2018).

In this context, Ageing Better commissioned research to build a better understanding of how older workers (aged 50 and over) experience the recruitment process, including any age-related barriers and challenges they face when looking and applying for jobs. The research for this report explored the extent to which older workers feel their age influences the recruitment process, and how this manifests itself in any behaviour and decisions made by themselves and employers.

Older workers who recently moved jobs, or failed to move jobs, and those who were in employment but seeking to move jobs were the focus of this study. As such, this project did not explore the recruitment experiences among those who were long-term unemployed, which is likely to include additional challenges and barriers.

Methodology

Fifty five semi-structured interviews were carried out between June and August 2020. The interviews were conducted by phone or video link and lasted around 45 minutes each. The participants were recruited by a market research company (MRFGR) and paid £30 to participate. All participants were aged 50 and over and currently in work or furloughed. All participants had either changed jobs or looked for jobs in the past 12 months and/or intended to look and apply for jobs in the next 12 months. The participants were sampled to include a mix in terms of characteristics such as age ((within the over 50s age bracket), gender, region within England, ethnicity, employment status, sector, and socioeconomic status. The sampling also involved some targeting of older workers who felt they had experienced age discrimination in recruitment. We reference the key demographic characteristics (gender, age, region and sector) throughout the report; we have chosen to include the sector in which participants work to highlight any themes in specific sectors with different recruitment practices.

A nationally-representative poll of 1,000 UK adults aged 18 and over, with an additional booster sample of 539 people aged 50 and over, was also conducted. In total, 1,539 respondents were interviewed online between 28 August and 1 September 2020. Data is weighted to be representative of the population by gender, age, region, social class, education, ethnicity and past vote. Targets were based on data from the ONS.

The interview and survey methodologies are described in more detail in Appendix 1. This includes tables with information about the characteristics of interview participants.

The report

The report is divided into two chapters. The first chapter explores some broader thematic questions relating to older workers' experiences of the recruitment process: To what extent do older workers feel that employers discriminate against them? How does age discrimination in recruitment impact older workers emotionally and professionally? Why do older workers think employers discriminate based on age? To what extent is age disadvantage felt across other age groups? The second chapter then explores older jobseekers' experiences of each stage of the recruitment process in more depth, from deciding to look for jobs in the first place, to applying for jobs and attending interviews, to getting the final outcome.

A note on interpreting the data

The survey data is weighted to the profile of the national population. Therefore, findings on prevalence and experiences of age discrimination for the wider UK population, including among older people, can be drawn out. For the qualitative findings, this type of research cannot – and does not set out to be – representative of the wider population. Instead, we looked to reflect a diverse range of views and circumstances, with specific focus on people with experiences of age bias and age discrimination in recruitment.

Future work

The findings of this project will inform Ageing Better’s broader programme of work on developing, testing and communicating new and improved recruitment approaches directly with employers and recruitment organisations, in order to overcome age bias and age discrimination in the recruitment process. The conclusion to this report highlights some of the issues that need to be considered going forward, as well as areas that require further research.

Chapter 1:

Experiences and perceptions among older workers

1.1 Do older workers think employers discriminate against them?

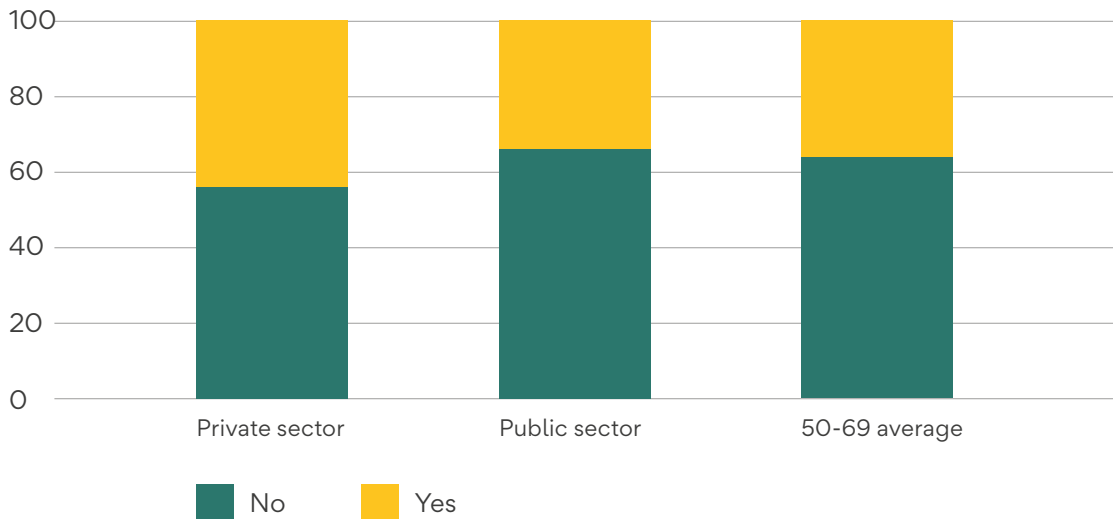
The nationally-representative survey asked four questions aimed at exploring whether people feel employers discriminate against them based on age and whether they feel disadvantaged because of their age. In the age group 50-69:

- 15% thought they had been turned down for a role due to their age.
- 16% said they had experienced age discrimination in the past few years when applying for a job or a promotion; and a further 13% were not sure whether they had.
- 36% felt they would be at a disadvantage in applying for jobs because of their age.
- 48% thought the way employers recruit new staff these days works to the disadvantage of people their age.

Within the age group 50-69, there were few statistically significant variations in these perceptions, by demographic characteristics such as gender, disability, social grade, employment status and income. Those who were employed full-time (21%) were slightly more likely than average (16%) to say they had experienced age discrimination in the past few years when applying for a job or promotion. With regards to the last two bullet points above, the only variation that was found to be statistically significant was that people who worked in the public sector were more likely to feel disadvantaged in the recruitment process. Figure 1 shows that those in the private sector (44%) were more likely than those in the public sector (34%) to perceive to be at a disadvantage in applying for jobs because of their age.

Figure 1 - Perceived disadvantage in applying for jobs of those aged 50-69 by private and public sector

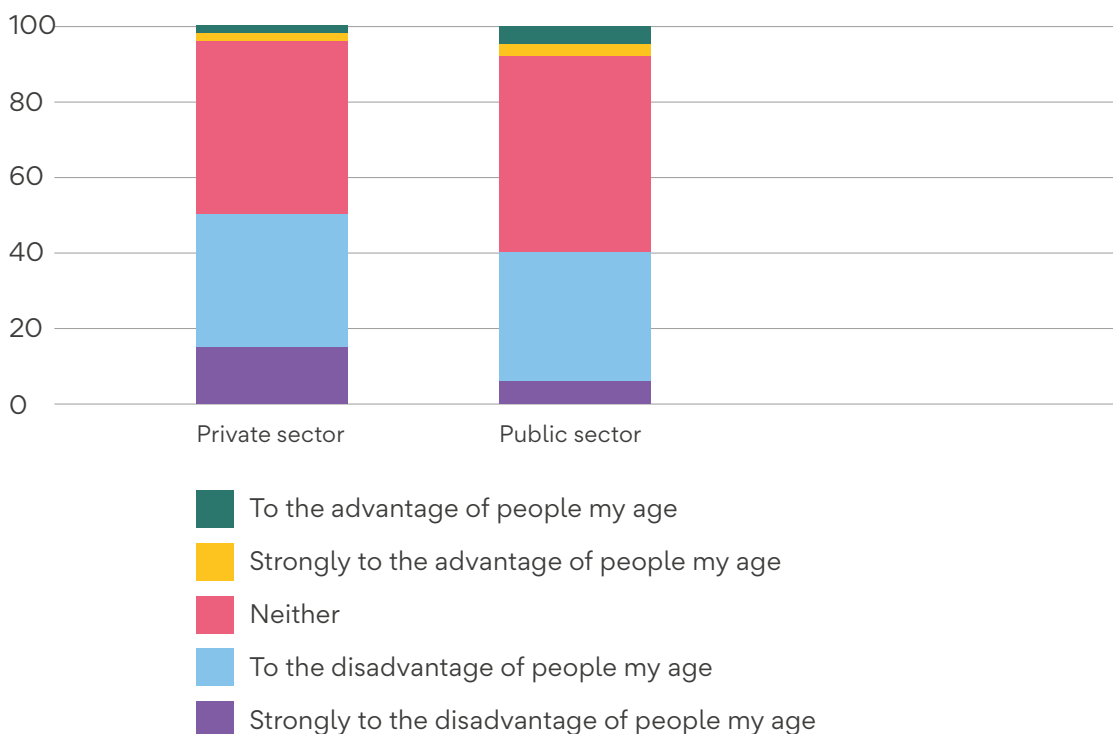
"I feel I would be at a disadvantage in applying for jobs because of my age"



Similarly, Figure 2 shows that those in the private sector (44%) were more likely than those in the public sector (34%) – and the average within the age group (36%) – to think the way employers recruit new staff these days works to the disadvantage of people their age.

Figure 2 - Perception of disadvantage in recruitment in the age group 50-69 by sector

In general, do you think the way employers recruit new staff these days works to the advantage/disadvantage of people your age?



The interview research showed that participants had a wide variety of views and experiences, from those who felt their age had sometimes helped them in the recruitment process, to those who had direct and indirect experiences of their age being the reason they were unsuccessful. The main finding, however, was that participants usually described their view on age discrimination as a strong ‘suspicion’ and general ‘feeling’. Older jobseekers often suspected that employers discriminated against them, but they could not necessarily give any concrete evidence, as employers tended to be careful not to mention age. Generally, the interview research showed that caution should be used when interpreting the survey findings above. People will have different interpretations of what constitutes ‘being disadvantaged due to age’, and they will have different thresholds for how much direct evidence is required to say they have ‘experienced age discrimination’. In fact, the qualitative research showed that, even when people themselves said they had definitely experienced age discrimination in the recruitment process, it was rarely bullet-proof evidence of overt age discrimination by employers.

As such, this study suggests that age bias and discrimination tend to operate covertly and out of direct sight of job applicants. But older jobseekers were nevertheless sure that age played a factor and affected the behaviours and decisions by employers, whether this was consciously or subconsciously. The interviews explored in depth how participants had come to this view that age discrimination had taken place. Their views were based on three factors:

- Direct and mostly indirect experiences during the recruitment process, including during the application and selection phase; the interview phase; and when interacting with recruitment agents.
- Direct and indirect experiences in the workplace, including in internal recruitment and as employers and interviewers themselves.
- A general assumption that age discrimination in recruitment existed, based on anecdotes from friends and family as well as stories in the media, and reinforced by direct and indirect experiences.

1.1.1 Direct and indirect experiences during the recruitment process

For many of the interview participants, the perception of age discrimination in recruitment was rooted in the early stages of the recruitment phase, including their experiences of applying for jobs and being selected for interviews. Participants felt they were increasingly and noticeably invited to fewer interviews as they got older. This was observed even for applications where they were highly suitable for the role and met all the requirements for

relevant skills and experiences. Since they rarely received meaningful feedback from employers, if any feedback at all, this left a void for them to wonder whether their older age was a factor in their lack of success in securing interviews.

‘There are jobs that I’ve applied for and I’ve thought, “Oh, I definitely should get this one, or at least get an interview because I’ve ticked all the boxes.” But then I haven’t even had an interview. I have thought, “Hmm, that could be my age”.’

Woman, 52, Public Sector, Midlands

Many participants acknowledged that it was difficult to jump to this conclusion. After all, it could be due to a tightening labour market or the large volume of applications from equally suitable applicants. Still, participants often said they struggled to find any other reasons for their lack of success in job hunting and suspected it was, at least partly, their age that held them back in the labour market. A few participants felt they could point to more direct evidence to their view that age had played a factor in the selection process. For instance, a care worker had been rejected for a job at a nursing home, with the explanation that they did not need more carers. However, she continued to see the job re-advertised which led her to believe that the real reason must be her age:

‘When it continues to be re-advertised, you think, “Ooh there you are, I’m too old”. But I consider myself as fit as a 45-50-year-old. I consider myself very fit. I cycle miles every day. Well, there you are, I just laugh.’

Woman, 66, Health and Social Care, South West

The view that age discrimination affected the selection process was often tightly connected to the frustration about the lack of feedback from employers, or the fairly meaningless feedback which was invariably described as ‘bland’ and ‘vague’. There was sometimes a suspicion that employers avoided giving the real feedback:

‘You apply for the job and there's just no reply, there's not even an acknowledgment. So, I think they're avoiding telling you what the issue is. By doing that, I suppose you can't point the finger at them saying they are being ageist. From the people I talk to, I think we're all pretty much used to it. You just apply for a load of things and you just don't hear a word.’

Woman, 53, Retail and Wholesale, London

‘They don't always give you a reason why, and then you've got to think in your own head, you know, I knew I could do that job right, quite successfully. And then you've got to think of the reasons why they didn't accept you, and that's the only reason I could think of.’

Man, 69, Retail and Wholesale, Yorkshire and the Humber

The suspicion was sometimes reinforced when participants received their rejection email within hours of submitting an application, leading them to question whether the process had been automated. Some wondered whether, and to what extent, their CVs were read by humans, or whether some recruitment websites, recruitment agencies and large employers used algorithms to exclude applications and CVs, based on demographic information such as age and keywords associated with older age. This view was expressed most frequently in relation to online job portals, including by participants who said they had heard this from friends who worked in the recruitment industry.

‘It depends how thoroughly people even read your CV. I’m quite cynical, especially if you go through a job portal, I sometimes wonder if it’s read at all by a human being. I think keywords are probably just pulled out of the portal, to see if you fit or you don’t fit.’

Woman, 63, Business Services, London

‘My information got plugged in, and a red light started flashing, kicked it out, and send me that email, and put me on the reject pile.’

Man, 55, Health and Social Care, London

Participants also cited experiences during job interviews as the basis for their view that employers discriminated against them based on age. Sometimes, participants recalled how interviewers had made remarks or asked questions that seemed to suggest a degree of age bias. This included questions about how participants felt about working with younger people, including being managed by someone younger or whether they were ‘too experienced’ for the job. In one instance, as a 52-year-old participant had mentioned previous work experiences from 1985, one interviewer had remarked to the other interviewer: ‘1985, I wasn’t even born then!’. At the time, the participant had laughed along with the interview panel, but in hindsight had felt embarrassed and saw it as proof that the interviewer, at the very least, had an unconscious bias which was likely to have affected their decision.

In another example, a 50-year-old woman working in education had had an initial telephone interview, followed by one in-person interview where she had been told that they were actually looking for someone younger:

'I went to the interview and there were two people at the interview and one of them said to me: "We're actually looking for someone younger because we actually feel that they would fit more to the job"... They implied that they'd be more energetic and everything else. You know, like dynamic and willing to take on changes. But I don't feel that's correct.'

Female, 50, Education, South East

She went on to explain how she had already felt on the 'back foot' because they had let her know at the beginning of the interview that she was their oldest candidate:

'And then when she said that, I thought "No, I'm ... really I'm not ... I can't compete with that". There's nothing I can do, I can't take some of my age away.'

Female, 50, Education, South East

For this participant, the experience had been traumatic and deeply unfair, as she felt the interviewers already had made up their minds up about her age and energy as a result. In comparison, one 51-year-old female participant working in property and construction had also been told that she was 'too old' but had felt that the employer had the right to do so:

'I did have an interview once and they did take age into their factor because they told me they offered the job to somebody actually younger... It's their right to do what they want to do.'

Woman, 57, Business Services, Midlands

However, like other stages of the recruitment process, age discrimination largely operated covertly during interviews as employers were cautious about mentioning age directly. As such, participants expressed their 'feelings' and 'suspicions' based on their interpretations of what they had seen and experienced when attending interviews. This included the perception that their interview outcomes had become markedly worse as they had got older. In particular, participants often felt they could predict a negative outcome based on the age composition of the existing workforce and the interview panel. Many participants recalled being led through the

office to the interview room and feeling anxious about seeing a very young workforce, making them predict that they would not be a preferred candidate:

‘I've always got in the back of my mind about my age, and then, as I say, I looked round at the sales people on the shop floor, and they all looked more of the younger end.’

Man, 69, retail and wholesale, Yorkshire and the Humber

‘[I was] all booted and suited, as per normal, and as I walked in, I looked around the office, and I don't think there was anyone there over 35. And as I walked up to the receptionist, the way she looked at me, I could tell, as I said I'm here for an interview, and I could tell by the way she just looked at me, it was sort of going through the motions bit.’

Man, 65, Tech and Digital, London

The story of a 63-year-old woman provided a good demonstration that age bias and age discrimination among employers is not always be detected by jobseekers during the recruitment process. She had successfully gone through the application and recruitment stage and was accepted for the job. During her first day at the new job, however, her new manager who had led the recruitment process found out her age and admitted that she would not have hired her if she had known that. If she had not been accepted for the job, she would never have found out that she had been rejected due to age bias. Her case could be relatively common, but due to the sensitivities involved for employers, they are incredibly rare to be openly articulated by managers or discovered by jobseekers.

Finally, some participants cited their interactions with recruiters and recruitment agencies as evidence that age discrimination existed. In their role as middlemen, recruitment agents often gave advice on how participants should adapt their applications and CVs, and how best to portray themselves during interviews. This often included warnings about potential age discrimination among employers, and subsequent advice to hide their age and shorten their employment history on their applications. Since recruitment agents were seen as experts in the field, this advice was often taken as definite proof or confirmation that age discrimination existed.

1.1.2 Direct and indirect experiences in the workplace

For many interview participants, the perception that age discrimination affected recruitment was also rooted in the view that age discrimination was rife in the workplace beyond recruitment, including among their current and

previous employers. Participants cited experiences related to internal recruitment or in the workplace more generally. This also included first-hand experiences, such as how they had viewed older workers themselves when they were younger, or by reflecting on their practices and experiences on interview panels and their own evaluations of candidates. These participants had seen how discussions on interview panels about candidates had included considerations of age-related factors, including bias against older age and other factors such as women of child-bearing age. Some participants said their experiences on interview panels had shown them how subjective decisions sometimes are, how scoring systems can be manipulated towards the preferred candidate, and how senior managers sometimes single-handedly drove decisions. A few participants wondered whether Human Resource professionals should be more involved in the interviewing process as they would be ‘more finely attuned to potential discrimination and unfairness’.

There were also a couple of participants who admitted that they sometimes themselves had made decisions based on age. For instance, a 52-year-old employee in a digital marketing agency admitted he had been involved in age discrimination during his career as an advertiser in the media industry:

‘When there's a lot of applicants for a job, it's easy for people to start to filter applicants [they don't like]. I used to do it, I've got to be honest, I didn't employ a bloke once because he had a beard and I thought he looked a bit old. We've all got some prejudice... We were a funky department in a funky industry. You wanted good-looking young people around the place, that's what everyone else was and he would have stuck out like a bit of a sore thumb quite frankly. So I'm as guilty of it, and people are now doing it to me.’

Man, 52, Tech and Digital, East England

Another participant – a 55-year-old who had worked in banking for 37 years – also admitted that the perception that older recruits were likely to leave sooner had played a role in the past when he had been on selection panels himself, especially if two candidates had been fairly similar. The irony was not lost on him that he was now the victim of age discrimination himself. He said he had never considered this while he was younger:

‘It makes me guilty. You think you will go on forever, and when retirement comes, it will be of your own choosing, but life is not always like that.’

Man, 55, Health and Social Care, London

In one instance, this also included a utility worker, aged 59, who had discriminated in favour of someone her own age, in place of a younger applicant:

‘She was my age, and I just thought, “She’d fit in perfect”. So, I really put my views forward in the scoring, because I wanted her to get it. I was kind of guilty of it then. There were other people who had exactly the same skills, but [her age] kind of swung it a little bit.’

Woman, 59, Retail and Wholesale, Yorkshire and the Humber

These examples demonstrate that the perceptions of many older workers are not only based on their personal experiences as older applicants in the recruitment process itself. It is also based on a wider range of experiences, such as once having been young in the workplace themselves and having been on the other side of the interviewing table assessing and evaluating younger and older candidates. In some instances, participants had also worked directly with related issues, and had observed employer attitudes to older jobseekers first hand. A 52-year-old woman, who used to work securing apprenticeship roles for students, remembered clearly from her conversations with employers how they would assume that younger workers would be easier to mould and less resistant to authority. As she has become older, and looking for work herself, this played on her mind, and had affected her confidence. Her experiences are described in more detail later in the report (see [Section 1.3.2, p30](#)).

1.1.3 General assumption of age discrimination

Finally, participants also cited broader experiences and anecdotes as evidence of the existence of age discrimination in recruitment. Participants often spoke about the dangers of age discrimination once they hit 50 or 60 years of age. This was sometimes seen as an important threshold:

‘I do know that I have now entered a sort of danger area as far as age is concerned. I am now over 50. So I might expect to possibly face certain age discrimination in future applications.’

Woman, 53, Hospitality, North West

In addition to their personal experiences, stories from friends and family could reinforce feelings that age was a barrier to them being selected for an interview. A 53-year-old man described how he had always succeeded in almost every interview throughout his career, and kept his skills up to date,

but had seen a few applications in a quick succession being rejected. This was the cause of some concern that age was a barrier for him getting another job, especially as he had heard this had happened to friends and colleagues:

‘I have a lot of friends who have found that once they've hit 50, being the magic number, they are finding it more and more difficult... I have the skills that they're looking for, I have the experience that they're looking for. I think I can articulate myself well. So that is the only thing and I may be jumping to the wrong conclusion, I don't know.’

Man, 53, Tech and Digital, North West

1.2 How does perceived age discrimination impact older workers?

The survey showed how perceived age discrimination had impacted older people significantly, including on their job prospects and mental wellbeing. The following impacts were reported as a result of the perceived age discrimination:

- Roughly half of those who experienced age discrimination (52%) reported that they had not been able to find a job that met their needs
- A third (33%) reported that they were stuck in insecure work
- Nearly two-thirds (64%) reported that they were financially less well off
- Over two-thirds (68%) said it undermined their confidence
- Four in ten (43%) said it affected their health and well-being

These impacts were also experienced in our qualitative research. Participants reported a notable reduction in the number of job offers and invitations for interviews as a result of perceived age discrimination. Some said this had undermined their confidence and self-esteem. The experience of rejections and perceived age discrimination was described by various participants as ‘a blow to my confidence’, ‘soul-destroying’, and ‘frustrating’ because they felt they could still make a significant contribution in the labour market and to society.

The interview research also showed that experiences and perceptions of age discrimination also affected some interview participants’ behaviours and decisions during the recruitment process. This included deciding against applying for jobs and staying in their current job, despite not being happy with their role and employer. It also affected how many jobs participants chose to apply for and what types of jobs. These sorts of considerations will

be covered in detail in the next chapter, but it included decisions to retire early, semi-retire, or do casual or part-time work despite wanting to work full-time, and it led to decisions to broaden job searches to sectors and roles that participants were not as interested in. For people in their 50s and 60s who reported experiences of age discrimination, the survey results showed:

- A third (33%) were put off working or went into early retirement
- Three-quarters (76%) were put off applying for more jobs
- A quarter (25%) said they had wanted to move jobs but felt unable to do so because of their age

More broadly, the interview research showed how the recruitment process sometimes made older jobseekers internalise doubts about their own sense of worth, and that this changed their decisions about whether to apply for jobs, what jobs they applied for and how they sold themselves to employers. The expectation and fear of age discrimination clearly became a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading to a situation where employers appeared to discriminate against older people and older people discriminated against themselves. This will be explained in more detail in subsequent chapters, for instance on how older people interpreted job adverts and person specifications, and how they portrayed themselves and their age during the recruitment process.

1.3 Why do older workers think employers discriminate against them?

In the survey, respondents were asked whether they had ever been told (for instance by employers, recruitment agents, or word-of-mouth) that they were unlikely to be successful, or had been unsuccessful, in recruitment for a variety of reasons. In the age group 50-69:

- 18% had been told that they were ‘too old’
- 29% had been told that they were ‘too experienced’; this figure rose to 37% when looking exclusively at those who were in full-time work
- 26% had been told they ‘did not have enough experience’
- 16% had been told they were ‘looking for a younger candidate’

During interviews, participants brought up a variety of reasons why they thought employers would discriminate against them. Sometimes, these reasons were based on what employers and interviewers had said directly to them during the recruitment process or what they had experienced in the workplace. At other times, it was based on speculation or anecdotal evidence. In any case, older workers’ assumptions about what stereotypes are held by employers closely match those described in the wider employer-facing literature (see Swift and Steeden (2020) for a recent review). As this

Chapter 1: Experiences and perceptions among older workers

chapter shows, participants frequently expressed frustration about these stereotypes because they did not think the reasons and perceptions were true or fair, and it did not apply to themselves, but they found it hard to disprove during the recruitment process.

While many spoke of negative experiences, some interviewees saw benefits to being an older worker which they felt had sometimes helped them in the recruitment process. Sometimes, the same stereotype could cut both ways. For instance, a high level of experience could be an advantage as older workers could 'hit the ground running', but often it was seen as a disadvantage as 'too much experience' could point to potential lack of motivation for the job or be seen as a threat to the manager. It should also be noted that some of the stereotypes described in the following sections are, by virtue of being stereotypes about older age, equally an indirect and opposite stereotype about younger workers as well. For example, the stereotypes that older workers are less adaptable and harder to manage implicitly contain the opposite stereotypes that younger workers are mouldable and easier to manage. This section will focus on the stereotypes for older workers and primarily explore why older workers think employers discriminate against them, including the following perceptions which were all raised by interview participants:

- Expectation of shorter job tenure due to less time until retirement
- Less adaptability and too much independence
- Inability or lack of time to mould applicant or grow within the company
- Seen as overqualified or 'too experienced' and sometimes as a threat to managers
- Anticipation older workers will demand higher pay
- Less ambition and effort
- Taking time off sick
- Less skilled due to reduced mental capacity, including less creative and forward-thinking and lower IT/technology skill;
- Less skilled due to reduced physical capacity, including due to health issues and long-term illness
- Less appreciation of loyalty and longer employment spells
- Focus on qualifications such as university degrees rather than work experience
- Not fitting into younger team and workplace
- Positive traits associated with older workers, such as experience, maturity, patience, reliability and loyalty, though often these were not seen to be valued enough by employers

1.3.1 Longevity and time until retirement

Participants suspected that employers anticipate that older workers will stay in new jobs for shorter periods, especially due to expected future retirement. Many participants felt this perception worked against them in the recruitment process, and sometimes felt employers were ‘apprehensive’ and ‘reluctant’ about employing older people due to the fear of imminent retirement. They assumed this was related to concerns that they would not be able to stay and ‘grow within the company’. This was seen to present a number of problems: having to repeat an expensive and time-consuming recruitment exercise; not getting a high enough return on investment in induction and training; and having to replace important staff on individual projects before they ended.

These concerns were evident for participants across all ages in our sample, especially among participants closer to or above retirement age. For instance, a 69-year-old man said employers had asked him how long he intended to stay for:

‘They said “How long would you want the job for?” Now, that’s an indication, isn’t it? I said, I’m not thinking about giving it up in the next year or two. But their mind’s already thinking, well he may only want it for six months or a year, then we’re going to have to start all over again, interviewing.’

Man, 69, Retail and Wholesale, Yorkshire and the Humber

But this perception was also expressed by people in their 50s who were frustrated that their age was used to make assumptions about when they would retire, given they had a long time left in the labour market. For instance, an officer manager in an accountancy firm, aged 55, said:

‘I have got another ten years in me, I’d like to think. I don’t understand why they would even discriminate against somebody my age... If you work for somebody for another ten years, that’s still a long time to work for them.’

Woman, 55, Financial Services, London

Some participants had direct evidence of this, through conversations with recruitment agents and employers as well as their own experiences as employers when recruiting new staff. For instance, one participant – a 63-year-old female admin worker – recalled how she had successfully been offered a job at 59. During the first day in the office, her new manager found out her exact age. To her disappointment the manager remarked that she would be retiring next year, assuming that she would want to retire once she was eligible for a state pension – and without realising that the state pension

age had been increased. Since then, they worked together and built up a good relationship:

‘I got that job, and I was... 58-59, something like that, and my boss in the office, when she found out my age, she said “Ooh, you’ll be retiring next year”. And I said I won’t be retiring... and more to the point neither will you when you get to 60... She obviously had no idea that women didn’t still retire at 60. So if she’d have known, she wouldn’t have given me the job... She did actually say if I’d have known that, I wouldn’t have given you the job... She was very happy with me, we’re still friends now, but she wouldn’t have given me the job if she’d have known.’

Woman, 63, Business Services, South East

Her manager had subsequently explained that age had been a factor in her recruitment; she had personally favoured the younger candidates but had been persuaded by colleagues to choose the older candidate due to previous negative experiences with younger colleagues’ sick records.

Another participant – a senior investment banker aged 57 – explained that the timescales of projects, for example hedge-fund building, can affect the recruitment chances of applicants who are seen as likely to leave before completion. As he explained:

‘Maybe they’re thinking, oh maybe this guy might only stick around three years, and then he’s going to be hitting that 60 mark, and I might want to give all this up. I might not be the long-term solution.’

Man, 57, Financial Services, London

Participants were often frustrated that employers did not take into account that people are generally working longer, due to improved health and increases in the pension age. Furthermore, some participants highlighted that they simply couldn’t afford to retire due to financial reasons and unpaid mortgages. Some participants had not considered or planned for retirement, and felt they were still healthy and able to contribute in the labour market. They felt employers and managers needed to follow this cultural change, and accept that ‘the old days when people just retired automatically at 65 had gone’.

‘They’re going to think, “Oh she’s not going to be with us long”. But how do they know? You don’t have to retire at retirement age, and I don’t know whether I will or not.’

Woman, 63, Business Services, South East

Another frustration expressed by participants was that older workers would actually often be in jobs for a long time – and in many cases longer than younger employees, in their view. Many participants in their 50s said they would still be able and likely to work for another ten to 15 years. In fact, they were probably more likely to stay those years within one company, due to concerns about age discrimination when moving jobs and their lower propensity to move frequently between companies compared to younger workers. For instance, a 51-year-old safety manager in the rail industry felt it was ‘bizarre’ if employers assumed that a graduate would work longer at their company than he would be able to, given that very few younger graduates stayed within the same company for longer than ten years any more.

Another reason participants felt that employers were considering older workers’ longevity was the tendency for employers to offer temporary contracts. This was seen as making an assumption that an older worker would not stay long in any case. For instance, a 60-year-old management consultant struggled to secure permanent employment, and felt employers preferred temporary contracts to mitigate risks associated with his age:

‘When you’re this age, they veer much more towards fixed-term contracts rather than full time employment because they’re always worried about the risks in terms of age, health and everything else. As an individual, you have to be quite pragmatic about that and accept that situation and take each day as it comes. That’s all you can do.’

Man, 60, Business Services, London

Similar to older workers’ perception that they were becoming increasingly unsuccessful in securing job interviews, some participants acknowledged this could be due to wider labour market developments, such as the casualisation of the workforce, in which case this would also be experienced by younger workers.

1.3.2 Adaptability and ability to grow within the company

Participants frequently expressed the suspicion that employers would want to hire someone that they could ‘make in their own image’ who would be able to ‘grow with the company’. In particular, they felt employers expected younger workers to be more likely to adapt to or comply with company practices. In this respect, many participants felt that their age and level of expertise or experience were stacked against them and put them at a disadvantage.

‘They don’t look at the experience, they just want someone that maybe they can mould or maybe they don’t want someone that kind of knows what he's doing.’

Man, 50, Tech and Digital, London

‘They think if they get a younger person, they’ve got that person there and they're going to train them and they’ll be a bit more adaptable.’

Woman, 58, Financial Services, Yorkshire and the Humber

‘I presume they're thinking an older person is more set in their ways. A younger person they can, not manipulate, but coerce into doing their way. Whereas I am quite set in my ways in how I do things.’

Woman, 55, Financial Services, London

‘They might look at me, or older people, as being a potential problem in terms of getting them to sing the company song and doing it the company way.’

Man, 52, Tech and Digital, East England

‘People tend to think that older people are more set in their ways, less likely to change, less willing to change, to learn new things, they just want to do what they know and carry on like that.’

Man, 65, Tech and Digital, London

Some participants said they found this particular stereotype hard to shift, and felt that no matter how they tried to present themselves, employers would still assume, maybe unconsciously, that they would be unable to adapt to a new environment at their age:

‘You can say, well I can show you how adaptable I am. I've worked around different organisations and different sectors. But there is always, I suspect, it may be unconscious, it may be something just below the surface, where they think, well what can we really do with them. He's in his late 50s now, he's not going to change.’

Man, 57, Health and Social Care, South East

A few participants felt they had been directly told as much and experienced what felt like direct discrimination. A 53-year-old man, who was looking to return to work in the business development side of the automotive industry after taking time out to care for his 11-year-old son, had been told he was unsuccessful because he was ‘too experienced’ and they wanted someone to ‘train’. In this particular case, he had got through to the final interview of a long application process, and was told – in his words – near the end of the interview that:

‘Well, the thing is, you’re a little too experienced, really, to be coming into the role and I think on this occasion we’re going to find somebody that we can train into the position.’

Man, 53, Retail and Wholesale, North West

He went on to explain what he felt it meant, reading between the lines:

‘That just said to me, “You’re too old”, basically, and “We’re going to find a younger guy”. That’s exactly what it felt. It was like the subtext was, “You’re over 50, you know what you’re doing, but we’d rather have a guy coming in who’s 25-30”. That’s how it felt, whether or not that’s the truth or not, I’ll never know. I don’t think anyone’s ever going to be prepared to say that.’

Man, 53, Retail and Wholesale, North West

Ever since, he has said he was ‘hypersensitive’ and aware of potential discrimination he might face in recruitment. He has been particularly anxious to prove that he is not ‘an old person’ and is happy to rise to the challenge.

Others remembered employer attitudes from their previous work experience, and consequently felt more anxious going into job applications as a result, feeling that they needed to disprove the theory that they were unable to ‘grow with the company’ or ‘adapt’ to new working conditions. A 52-year-old woman, who used to work securing apprenticeship roles for students, could remember employer attitudes towards younger workers; in particular how employers would assume that younger workers would be easier to mould and less resistant to authority. As she has become older, and looking for work herself, this played on her mind, and had affected her confidence:

'I feel it is probably not great for me because I know that, so I have that at the front of my mind. Whereas probably if I didn't, it would have been easier for me...I probably wouldn't have thought, "Okay, these are the sorts of things they're thinking and this is why she's asking me that question".'

Woman, 52, Public Sector, Midlands

As she went on to explain, these perceptions were affecting her performance at interviews:

'If I was completely oblivious to that, I would just go into an interview and just be my complete self and just answer the question and not second guess or think anything of it. But because I know, I'm thinking, "Oh, this is the reason why she's asking that question or he's asking this question". Rather than just forget about all of that and just get going with it.'

Woman, 52, Public Sector, Midlands

1.3.3 Independence and potential threat to managers

In a similar vein to expecting employers to want adaptable and mouldable employees, participants believed employers perceive older workers as 'too independent' or even a 'threat to younger managers' or employees.

'I feel like sometimes companies don't want to hire you because they feel like this guy maybe knows too much, or they can't mould that person into the company. Whereas all I'm looking to do really is just join the company and hopefully improve it.'

Man, 50, tech and digital, London

'If I was the person who was giving the interview, and I'm thinking to myself, oh, this guy knows more than I do, you know, already alarm bells will start to ring. And thinking blimey, he could be taking my job in six months or a year's time.'

Man, 69, Retail and Wholesale, Yorkshire and the Humber

Many felt that younger managers might feel uncomfortable giving orders to someone older than them. This was a deep frustration and disputed by many participants, who were happy to be managed by someone younger than them. However, for one participant, the idea that they would want to do things their way was something that rang true with them, but was still an unfair reason to discriminate against someone. As this 52-year-old man explained:

‘She was suspicious of me from the start I think. It was one of these ones where she was looking at me thinking, “Well hang on this guy's been a marketing director in big firms”. And you're kind of thinking, “Is she thinking that I'm going to be a problem for her, because I'm going to want to do it my way.” Actually she was probably right I probably would. And you can sense that they want people to be younger than them, that they can mould into the way that they want them to do it.’

Man, 52, Tech and Digital, East England

For other participants, the perception that employers wanted someone to take commands was closer to the truth, but with a slightly more sinister edge. Some thought that employers were inclined to hire people they could take advantage of and would not stand up to them if they were being unreasonable. In that sense, a number of participants suspected that employers want to hire someone that they could ‘boss around’ which older, more mature, workers might find unacceptable, as they were often more aware of their rights. A few participants had direct experience of this situation, including a 53-year-old lorry driver who found employers had objected when he questioned poor treatment at work:

‘I think it is when you get old you don't get walked across quite as easy.’

Man, 53, Manufacturing and Transportation, North West

He felt that this was mainly because younger people were more fearful of being sacked and less confident of their prospects in the labour market:

‘If I got sacked tomorrow, it wouldn't break me in two. I would go and find something and do something. But there are other people out there, the fear would make them do anything. And they tend to be a lot younger. We've got younger guys at our place here who will bend over backwards to help anybody in management.’

Man, 53, Manufacturing and Transportation, North West

Similarly, he had noticed that ex-services employees were also slightly favoured by employers for the same reason – that they would take orders, even when they were unfair:

‘They really get shafted because they've had it inbuilt into them the "yes sir, no sir" mentality, and even when they get to 55-60, they've still got it... I see that a lot in our industry, that's why they like them.’

Man, 53, Manufacturing and Transportation, North West

1.3.4 Expecting higher salaries

In addition to being less likely to take on unfair work, participants also cited that their salary expectations were a key reason for barriers they faced in the labour market. In the same breath, the 53-year-old lorry driver in the section above (Section 1.3.3, p31) explained that he was far less likely to take on work that did not pay fairly:

‘I think some of it was I am not going to go and work for peanuts, I know what my worth is.’

Man, 53, Manufacturing and Transportation, North West

There was a widespread suspicion that older workers who had accrued higher salaries over time were therefore at a disadvantage to younger ones, who were more likely to accept low pay. While for some this was a hunch, for others this came from a direct experience. A 60-year-old man working in construction recounted how he had been made redundant and then replaced by someone much younger than him:

‘They could get maybe a junior to do what I'm doing, or think that they can get what I'm doing for half of my salary or maybe three-quarters of my salary... I've heard it on the grapevine. At a previous place I was working and I got made redundant, I found out that a senior manager, he hired someone junior to my role and half the salary.’

Man, 60, Property and Construction, Midlands

Another participant had suspected that salary expectations were filtering out older workers through the selection process:

‘I think the filtering would only be present in terms of the potential salary one is looking at. At this stage of life one is looking for a decent salary, and perhaps if you are applying for jobs which would be more suitable for a debutant or someone much younger, then perhaps the salary isn’t sufficient.’

Man, 51, Education, London

For some, the question of salary had very real implications and was reducing the pool of jobs available to them. A 52-year-old single mother, who was currently furloughed from her job in the hospitality sector and had therefore started to look for work, explained how she was beginning to feel undercut by younger workers who would accept lower salaries:

‘I’ve given up... There are a lot of people doing the same job and who are a lot younger, and they can pay them a lot lower salary.’

Woman, 52, Hospitality, Midlands

She went on to explain how she has been looking to change jobs in order to get a shorter commute, and has been considering jobs that were £20,000 per year rather than £25,000, but would then be struggling to make ends meet.

However, salary expectations were also seen as a problem for those older jobseekers who were, in fact, willing to accept lower salaries. For a variety of reasons, some participants had decided to apply for jobs with reduced responsibilities and closer to home, mainly to achieve a better work-life balance. They sometimes felt, however, that it was difficult to convince employers that they would accept lower pay than previously, and employers seemed to fear that they would ultimately enter negotiations on the salary after they had been offered the job. Some felt this was sometimes exacerbated by the requirement to put down previous salary level on application forms, as it was not always possible to explain that they would be happy to accept a lower pay.

1.3.5 Experience

The amount of experience a candidate has is one of the most important areas a candidate is assessed on during the recruitment process and is often what makes or breaks a successful application. In theory, it should be an objective measure of a candidate's suitability for a job. For many interview participants, however, this could often be a two-sided coin. On the one hand, many felt that their experience and the skills they had obtained

through that experience, both the technical skills or soft skills, was something that gave them a competitive advantage. On the other hand, however, this research also shows that many older jobseekers felt that their experience could count against them. Sometimes, having ‘too much experience’ or being ‘too qualified’ seemed to work in tandem with other stereotypes, such as being ‘less adaptable’ or ‘too independent’ or when they were seen as a ‘threat to younger managers’. Furthermore, when employers told older job applicants directly that they were ‘too experienced’ for the job, many felt this was often code for age discrimination, but of course had no way to prove this.

Some also recognised that their higher level of experience in itself could make recruitment difficult and put them at a disadvantage, as there were progressively fewer available jobs the more senior they got. These participants recognised these difficulties, of course, had nothing to do with age discrimination, but found it hard to separate which factor was at play, as they had got increasingly older at the same time as they had got increasingly experienced.

1.3.5.1 Experience for the job role

Many candidates said that their technical experience for a job, partly by virtue of how long they had been doing it, was one of their most attractive qualities as a prospective employee. For instance, a 57-year-old man working in financial services explained that his breadth and depth of experience meant he would stand out against other candidates:

‘When you’re looking at paying experience, and there’s someone who said okay, put two CVs side by side, I mean mine would stand up with anybody’s in terms of some of the companies I’ve worked for, which are the big tier one investment banks, which anybody would be quite proud to have worked for.’

Man, 57, Financial Services, London

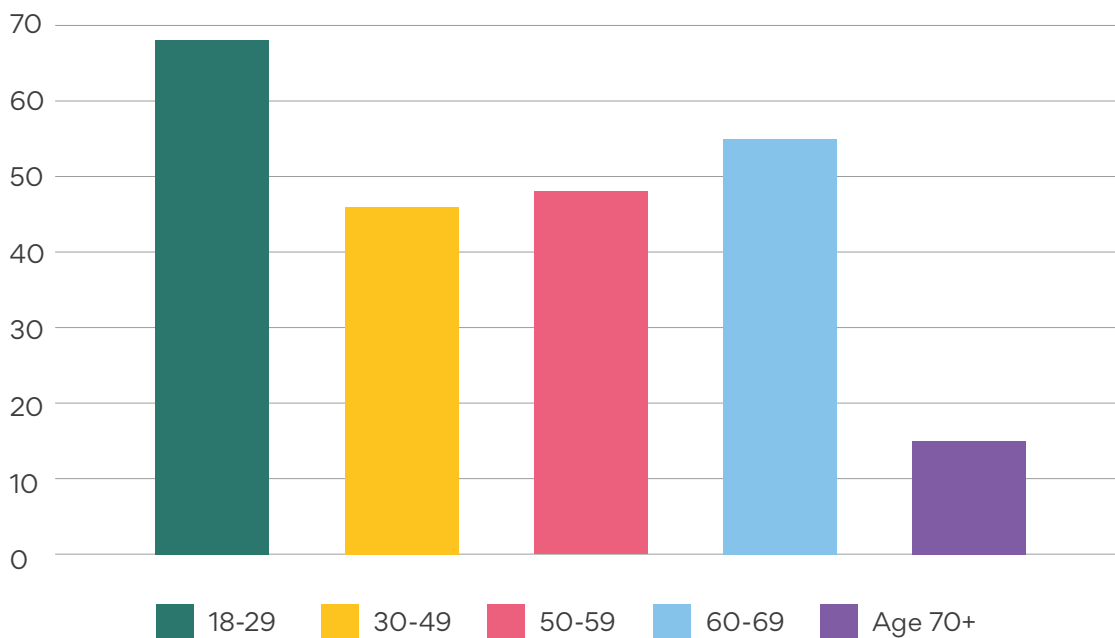
Despite it being an asset for some, this study found that many older people have been told that they were likely to be unsuccessful for a job role because they are ‘too experienced’. Nearly a third (29%) of those aged 50-69 said that this was the case, although this was not above the population average.¹ They were, however, much less likely to have been told that they were likely to be unsuccessful because they did not have enough experience, in comparison to the population average and other age groups, suggesting that having ‘too much experience’ is something that challenges older people more acutely than other groups.

¹ It is worth noting that there were no differences within the group 50-69.

Within the 50-69 age group who had been told that they were ‘too experienced’, the survey results showed an even breakdown between men and women, suggesting that women and men are both equally prone to experience this barrier in recruitment.² However, the survey showed that disabled people (36%) were slightly more likely than non-disabled people (27%) to have been told they are ‘too experienced’. Similarly, those employed full-time were particularly likely to have been told that they were ‘too experienced’, with 39% responding that they had, compared with 23% who are employed part-time and 21% who are inactive (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 - People aged 50-69 who have been told that they unlikely to be successful because they did not have enough experience, by employment status

Have you ever been told that you are unlikely to be successful, or have been unsuccessful, in a job application for the following reason? You have do not have enough experience



Many interview participants felt it was unfair when they had been told that they had ‘too much experience’. Many also saw it as an excuse to turn them down because of their age. Some accepted that there was no way of knowing whether being ‘too experienced’ was simply age-related or not, but many suspected that there might be a relationship between the two, as one 65-year-old male working in retail explained:

² 27% of women vs 30% of men had been told that they were too experienced within the 50-69 age group.

‘The only other thing really, but whether it comes to age, or whether they were using it as an excuse, is you've too much experience, you know, that comes across quite often.’

Male, 65, Retail and Wholesale, Yorkshire and the Humber

Others felt more sure that being told that they had ‘too much experience’ was almost a euphemism for being too old. As a 57-year-old male explained that when he had turned down by employers in the past:

‘They wanted someone less experienced than you, which is a nice way of saying someone younger I think.’

Male, 57, Health and Social Care, South East

However, many others felt that in reality, they did have too much experience, but wanted that type of job nonetheless. A number of participants had direct experience of being asked questions about having ‘too much experience’ or being ‘overqualified’ for the role. As one 59-year-old woman who had been job hunting in retail recounted an interview she had had when she had been asked whether she would be too bored:

‘I’ve had people look at my CV and say, “Won’t you be bored?” No, not really because I’m only working part-time and I can do interesting things when I get home.’

Woman, 59, Retail and Wholesale, South East

As a result, she often left out her qualifications and some of her experience when applying for jobs to avoid prospective employees turning her down for being too experienced. Indeed, some participants said they had actively sought roles for which they were overqualified. While many participants had expressed a desire for progression, others had felt that they were after a lesser role either because it ‘paid the bills’ or kept the ‘mind busy’. These respondents often felt it left them in a catch-22, where they felt unable to say that they just simply were not motivated enough to take on work that they were technically capable of. As one interviewee explained, he had often been asked during interviews to validate why he was applying for jobs that required less experience than he had and found it difficult to answer honestly:

‘If I told the truth that, yeah I've been at the top level, did it for ten years, stress and aggravation, it's not worth the extra money, that's the truth of it for me. But no, you don't say that, I'd say something more palatable.’

Man, 52, Tech and Digital, East England

As a result, we see that for many in our sample, especially those from older cohorts, having ‘too much experience’ could be a real barrier to them taking on work that they found appealing. Others, though, were a lot more sceptical and saw it as something that employers would use as an excuse to turn them down.

1.3.5.2 Experience and soft skills

Closely related to being more experienced for the technical side of the job, was the idea that an employee would have developed soft skills over time. Many participants felt that one of their best qualities to draw out was the fact that they could be more mature and responsible as a result of their life experience and their expertise. As a 58-year-old teacher support worker explained, he felt his age had nearly always only ever been a force of good behind him in the labour market, as it had meant that he could persuade interviewers that he was very competent in his role. He recounted how his current manager had told him that in his last job a mixture of maturity and expertise had given him a competitive edge:

‘Getting this job that I’ve got now, [it] definitely helped being a more mature, experienced person because I had the teaching background... the guy interviewing me recognised that and gave me the job because of that... when I got this job he said it was because I am an experienced, qualified teacher.... he recognised the life skills that I have that I could sit and talk to students and read situations.’

Man, 58, Education, North East

Similarly, some participants felt that there were things relating to soft-skills and building relationships with colleagues that you can only learn over time and that this was one of the strengths older workers could bring to the table. As one software engineer explained, he has considerable breadth and depth of experience as a result of the amount of time he has spent working in IT that cannot be achieved without time spent in the industry. Some participants had direct experience of being told that they were successful because of their experience. A 56-year-old man working a senior role in the NHS felt that the reason he was in his current job was because of the level of experience he had which requires some years in the job, and therefore age, to accumulate:

‘In my current role, I have to talk to quite a lot of senior members of the NHS and CCGs [Clinical Commissioning Groups], and I think the level of experience is invaluable. You have to have that

experience to have those conversations. So, if I hadn't had the experience, I wouldn't have got the job.'

Man, 56, Health and Social Care, South East

1.3.6 Less ambitious and less committed

Another reason many participants cited as to why they may be at a disadvantage was that employers might think that because of their age, they are less likely to be ambitious or committed to the role. One of the main fears was that employers would assume that, because they were near the end of their career, they would be less hungry for progression or to go above and beyond in terms of work performance:

'I do sometimes wonder whether they think that perhaps when you become a certain age, you're thinking about retiring and perhaps slowing down and maybe taking things a bit easier. So, maybe some of the words that they use around sort of energetic, go-getting..., maybe that's a way of saying we want someone that we think is going to put in 12-hour days.'

Man, 57, Health and Social Care, South East

Some participants said that, in many ways, this was the case: they simply wanted a job to keep them going until retirement. Crucially, though, this did not mean that they would not be committed to doing a good job; they just did not want to push themselves to progress in the role. As a 65-year-old man in the IT sector explained:

'At 65, I'm not looking for promotions, I'm not looking to work my way up the industry or anything. So it's just winding down until my pension and deciding what I want to do then.'

Man, 65, Tech and Digital, London

He added that it would be unrealistic, at his age – being so close to retirement – to expect to get a more senior role, so his options were limited:

'I'm not going to get a job as an IT manager, for example, because of my age. They would assume, how long is he going to stay at 65? And if he's managing a department of people in their 30s, how much authority is he going to have over that group? So I know I'm not going to get those sorts of positions, so there's no point in me applying for them.'

Man, 65, Tech and Digital, London

For many, however, the perception that being close to retirement meant that they were less committed was both untrue and unfair. A 60-year-old woman working in the public sector described how she was deeply frustrated by how difficult she had found it to progress:

‘I just feel that some people are of the opinion that you’re not fired up, you’re not ambitious. I think it’s hard for someone to understand that. I’m nearly 60, but I’m still ambitious. I still want to be successful at what I do, but do a little bit more.’

Woman, 59, Retail and Wholesale, Yorkshire and the Humber

In comparison, many participants suspected that employers thought older workers could be more committed and reliable. A 69-year-old male participant reflected on a role he had been hired for ten years ago at a DIY outlet, in part because of his age. The main reason he had been told he was given the job was that older people were less likely to be going out late in the evenings and therefore more likely to show up on time, compared to young people:

‘One: you would actually turn up when you were supposed to, and two: people would probably feel more comfortable talking to someone with experience of the things you were trying to buy and deal with...’

Man, 69, Business Services, North West

In a similar vein, some participants felt employers thought that they would be more loyal and trustworthy in their roles. As one woman explained, she had recently been hired to count votes, and had felt that her age had been considered an indication of her reliability:

‘That’s the impression I got. They wanted responsible people. They didn’t want young ones counting those votes. So that’s one job that could work in your favour.’

Woman, 73, Property and Construction, North West

1.3.7 Taking time off sick

Many participants worried that employers would think that because they are older, they would likely take time off sick. Participants wondered whether their age made their health and wellbeing a ‘gamble’ to employers who could not rely on their attendance at work.

‘Maybe they think that we’re older so we might take more time off because we’re ill.’

Woman, 58, Financial Services, Yorkshire and the Humber

A small number of participants thought that this was the reason that they were more likely to successfully find temporary work, where sickness would not be something employers would worry about:

‘I’m a temp, so they’re not thinking in terms of they’ll have to pay sickness or any of that stuff, you know.’

Woman, 63, Business Services, South East

For a small number of participants, this view had come from direct experiences in interviews. Some participants had been asked to bring their sickness records into interviews:

‘They do ask you for your sickness record. The interviews I’ve gone for have asked for sickness records. In the 21 years I’ve been at this place I’ve had two weeks off... My sickness record is nothing. But I think, they think, do they want to gamble on an older person?’

Female, 55, Financial Services, London

Others had been asked indirect questions about their health or ‘living status’, which was sometimes seen as an opportunity for interviewers to get more information about the candidate’s age, dependents or how healthy their life choices were, in order to second-guess how much time off they might need to take off work:

‘I often think to myself: Why do people want to know who you live with? Why do they want to know how many children you’ve got?’

Man, 53, Retail and Wholesale, North West

‘I don’t think [health] was brought up directly in the conversation, but you could say it was indirect... There was a line of questions about durability if you like, illness, level of fitness, nutrition, that kind of stuff which when you put it altogether, you could see it was about, well you are 60, so how are you handling yourself in life and can we rely on you when we need you.’

Man, 60, Business Services, London

Participants often felt this was deeply unfair, as they were still very healthy and had generally had good attendance at work. Some feared that COVID-19, and older people's relative susceptibility to the virus, would enhance this perception. Others had felt that the stereotype actually worked the other way round, and that employers thought that older workers were generally more likely to have less absence and turn up to work on time. This, however, was a position more likely to be taken among older groups in our sample. As a 59-year-old woman who worked in the utility sector explained:

‘I think they find older people are more reliable. They’re more committed, dependable. They always know that people like my age will be at work, they’re very rarely going to be off sick.’

Woman, 59, Retail and Wholesale, Yorkshire and the Humber

In her case, she had become more flexible as she had become older and her children had grown up:

‘...if anything needs doing or somebody needs to stay behind or whatever, I don’t mind – that’s another thing from older people, they’re not stuck to four o’clock on the dot, need to go. It doesn’t matter if a job’s going on at four o’clock, five o’clock, it doesn’t matter. So they know that they get that from them.’

Woman, 59, Retail and Wholesale, Yorkshire and the Humber

1.3.8 Physical and mental capability

For many participants in our sample, the main age-based barrier revolved around the perceptions that employers saw them as simply less capable than younger applicants. This stereotype took many guises and included both ‘mental’ and ‘physical’ capabilities, from being able to carry heavy boxes to having enough new ideas to bring to the role. Much like many of the other perceptions, participants had sourced them from a mixture of experiences during interviews, conversations with friends or simply ‘feelings’ they had got from others. Either way, many suspected prospective employers looked at their age – either on their CV or during an interview – and immediately questioned their capabilities.

‘I feel like when you hit a certain age it's like you're past your best, or that’s something people think, and that's far from the truth obviously.’

Man, 50, Tech and Digital, London

‘Do they just think, you know, this guy is too old, he's not going to be able to hack it?’

Man, 52, Public Sector, South East

For some participants, their capacity to do the job revolved around the employer's perception of having the ‘energy’ to complete a full day's work.

‘Because I feel like they think you’ve got more energy, but they don’t take into consideration the experience and everything else.’

Woman, 50, Education, South East

As with many other perceptions of age discrimination in recruitment, participants pointed out this assumption was difficult to pin down, and it was a ‘feeling’ as much as something that they had direct or tangible experience of that made them question employers’ perception of their capabilities:

‘It’s very hard to pin down, whether it was down to age, but the responses were very dismissive of any relevant experience that I had, and I think there’s a misconception when you’re recruiting older people that they lack energy, or they lack medical competency or even mental competency, at some stage, and without meeting that person face to face it’s really hard to reach those judgements. The impression I got was, [I was] just dismissed out of hand to be honest, because I knew a couple of roles, I was absolutely perfect for, but I obviously wasn’t the type of person they were looking at.’

Man, 56, Health and Social Care, South East

While for others, their capabilities were seen to be limited by their mindset, and in particular their ability to be forward thinking or ‘think outside the box’. A 57-year-old man who had been working as an investment banker explained that, for some roles, experience was not what they were looking for, but rather:

‘Sometimes you need someone with a lot more forward thinking, a bit more loose about it, and a bit more energy, a bit more ideas, thinking outside of the box, and maybe that doesn’t come naturally as you move along if you know what I mean. These are characteristics of the modern graduate.’

Man, 57, Financial Services, London

For some, this perception was particularly difficult to shift. A 60-year-old man had been applying for a role at a charitable trust that had directly advertised for someone that could think ‘outside the box’ and could be ‘innovative’. During the interview he had tried to demonstrate that these were characteristics he personally held, but had felt that they had already made their mind up that they were not because of his age:

‘My sense was that even though I’d said these things which were innovative, thought-provoking, out-of-the-box... Even though I was intellectually displaying all the things that they wanted, the person in front of them was, at the time a 58/59-year-old man. They just couldn’t get their head around it.’

Man, 60, Business Services, London

For many participants, it simply came down to the idea that ‘you can’t teach an old dog new tricks’. This either meant that they had very specialist skills that had pigeon-holed them into very niche roles that they would be too old to transfer. Within this, IT skills and the ability or desire to learn new programmes within companies was something many candidates felt that they were up against. One 53-year-old man working in IT, explained how older workers were often perceived as less enthusiastic and less up-to-date with new skills:

‘The older people within IT are known as grey beards. A grey beard is probably anybody over the age of 50 and people of that [age] are normally viewed ... one of the stereotypes is grey beards are de-skilled sort of thing. All they're interested in is doing the bare minimum, using the skills that they've got under their belts from the last ten years.’

Man, 53, Tech and Digital, North West

When it came to physical capabilities, many participants had experienced direct questioning about whether they would be up to the job that felt directly age-related. This included whether they would be able to stand up all day and be comfortable carrying heavy equipment. For some participants, this was underpinned by other characteristics, in particular size and gender. A 57-year-old woman who applied for a job with a small wine company was offered the job over the phone. However, the employers’ enthusiasm dissipated when she visited the depot and the offer was shelved. She recounted how one of the hiring managers had asked her whether carrying heavy boxes of wine would be a problem, and would not accept her reassurances:

‘So I said to him, I practised karate for 30 years, I do weight training, I jog every day, I’m very fit and healthy, I’m very happy to help customers and I’m quite confident at picking up boxes and taking them to their car. And he just wouldn’t let me up.’

Woman, 57, Business Services, Midlands

In another case, a 56-year-old woman had applied for an internal position as a service manager in the care sector. She explained that she had fitted perfectly for the role but had not been invited for an interview. Later, she had found out that this was due to her age and gender, and the organisation's assumptions that the role needed someone with physical strength:

‘One of my former colleagues said, no she’s looking for young guys, she wants young blokes, so if anything kicks off in the middle of the night, then a young guy can deal with it.’

Woman, 56, Health and Social Care, South East

Participants also often thought that their age made them more capable and that this would sometimes be acknowledged by employers. This was explained with reference to their experience (see section 1.3.4), their commitment and reliability (see section 1.3.6), and the fact that in certain contexts they fitted in better with workplace style and culture (see section 1.3.10).

1.3.9 Longer job spells and fewer university qualifications

Some participants felt their CV and employment histories were sometimes seen as less attractive in the modern labour market. Participants felt older workers often had longer employment spells in individual or current companies. These participants said it had been more normal in the past to do this, and that employers had valued the loyalty. In contrast, in the modern labour market, participants felt employers valued when workers had a larger number of employers on their CV, signalling the ability to adapt to a new role and develop new skills. In contrast, loyalty and longer spells were not valued as much by employers, to the detriment of older workers. For participants, this manifested itself in various ways. They felt it exacerbated the stereotype of older workers as set in their ways and not willing or capable to adapt. For instance, an admin worker aged 60 who had been with her previous employer for a long time had been asked during interviews how she would adapt to new systems. Some participants also felt prospective employers questioned whether they really wanted to leave their company:

‘The problem is that I’ve been in one place for so long that they don’t think I’ll move... The prospective employer will look and say, “Will she actually hand her notice in after 21 years? Will that firm persuade her to stay? And then will she just stay, because it’s easy?”’

Woman, 55, Financial Services, London

This was frustrating to some participants who felt loyalty should be valued, and that workers with long employment histories in one company would likely work for longer in their next company.

Furthermore, some participants felt there was too much focus on qualifications, especially university degrees, compared to life and work experience. This was seen as a huge advantage for younger generations who grew up during a time where attending university was much more common. The preference for younger workers was particularly obvious when job specifications asked for people with ‘recent degrees’, indicating employers want people fresh out of university. The frustration was particularly pertinent for participants who felt university qualifications did not necessarily make you better at the advertised job, such as this social care worker who felt skills in her sector were developed through experience rather than through books:

‘Some roles just want ridiculous qualifications. To me, that takes me back to them wanting a younger individual. But just because you’ve got qualifications, it doesn’t mean to say that you are going to be good and more suited to that role.’

Woman, 52, Public Sector, Yorkshire and the Humber

1.3.10 Not fitting in with workplace culture

Several participants cited workplace culture as reasons for their discrimination. That employers and, in particular management, would want to create an aesthetic or a style of a workplace that was rooted in a younger generation. One participant said this had been his own view in the past:

‘I would admit I wanted to build a young, funky, good-looking team, so a bloke with a bald head and a beard didn't fit. So he was out, no matter how good he was going to be. And I admit that's probably illegal now, probably illegal back then if I'm honest. But we are humans at the end of the day and people surround themselves by people like them and that's it.’

Man, 52, Tech and Digital, East England

Others felt that this went beyond the look of a place and was more closely related to the culture of a workplace and the team being able to build connections. Many participants worried that organisations with a young workforce and young senior management team would want to hire people that they could get on with and have good ‘office banter’ – although some questioned whether this could become less of an issue, with more people working from home due to COVID-19.

These assumptions regularly came from people’s experience of when they had been younger, or from experiences they had seen in current or recent workplaces.

‘I know myself when I was in my 30s and the office was full of 30 year-olds, the whole atmosphere is different, because the old guy in the corner, he was sort of dragged in at the Christmas party. He was sort of very much left on his own. But he did his job, he came in every day, he did his job, went home.’

Man, 65, Tech and Digital, London

The drive to have a younger workplace was sometimes attributed to leadership. A 56-year-old man working in health and social care recounted how he had been hired four years ago by a manager who was slightly younger than he was and had seen his experience as an asset. This manager had left a few months later and been replaced by someone 20 years younger. He noticed that the younger manager didn’t value experience and that new recruits were young, leading to around 80% of staff being under 30.

On the other hand, some participants felt that their age could be considered something that added value to the workplace. A few felt that a mix of age groups encouraged diversity of thought and creativity in workplaces and an all-round better work environment. Some had noticed that some industries were keen to hire older people to reflect the brands or customer base, and as a result could occasionally have an advantage over younger candidates. A 63-year-old woman explained that when applying for a job in a fashion department store, her age had been a bonus:

‘I think they think that fashion is for you know, people of all ages, and are very interested in me talking to older ladies.’

Woman, 63, Business Services, South East

Similarly, a 66-year-old woman working in the care sector felt that her age was an advantage, as it meant she was better equipped to relate to some of the clients:

‘I’ve got a different mindset to the younger carers. I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with them. I’ve got an understanding of an older person.’

Woman, 66, Health and Social Care, South West

1.4 Ageism in the broader labour market

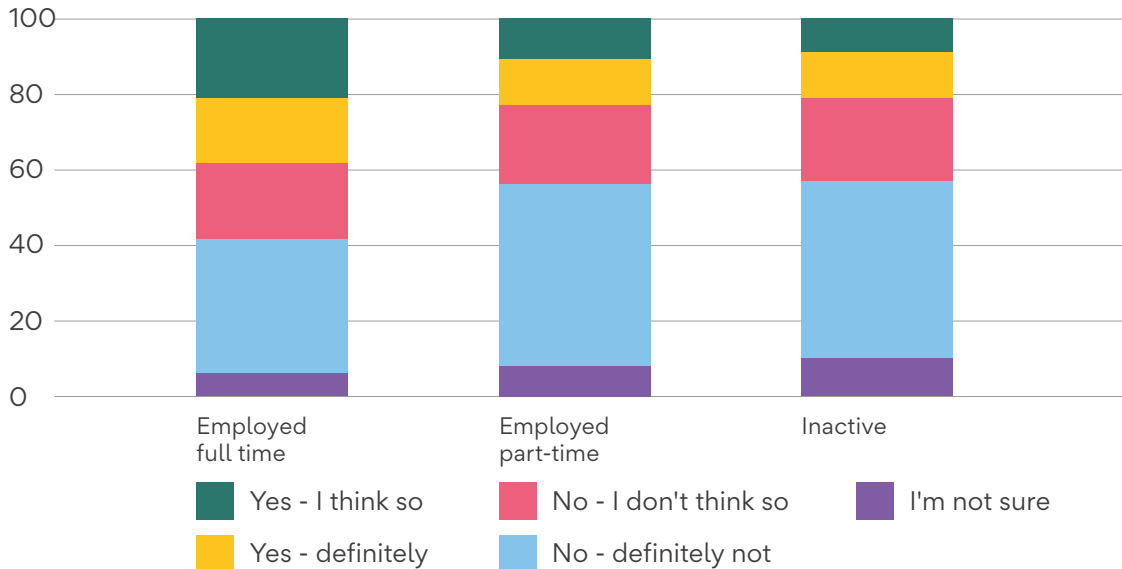
While the interview research focused on those aged 50 and over in the labour market, the survey asked people of all ages questions about how their age might impact their experiences in recruitment, making it possible to compare the experiences of older and younger people. The survey results show that perceptions of ageism are not exclusive to older workers:

- Perceived age discrimination starts young and is seen to impact labour market prospects among all age groups.
- Perceived age discrimination appears more prevalent for younger workers, who are significantly more likely to be told they are ‘too young’ than older workers are to be told that they are ‘too old’.
- Perceived age disadvantage is more likely to feel insurmountable for older workers, who are significantly more likely to feel at a disadvantage as a result of their age and stop applying for jobs after experiencing age discrimination.

The survey results show that older workers were more likely to perceive themselves at a disadvantage because of their age than younger workers. Those aged between 50-69 (36%) were significantly more likely than those aged between 18-29 (15%) to report they felt at a disadvantage in applying for jobs because of their age. As Figure 5 shows, within the older workers age group, those aged 60-69 were slightly more likely (39%) to perceive themselves at a disadvantage than those aged 50-59 (30%). This suggests that perceptions of disadvantage in applying for jobs increase as people get older.

Figure 4 - Perception of age disadvantage in applying for jobs across different age groups

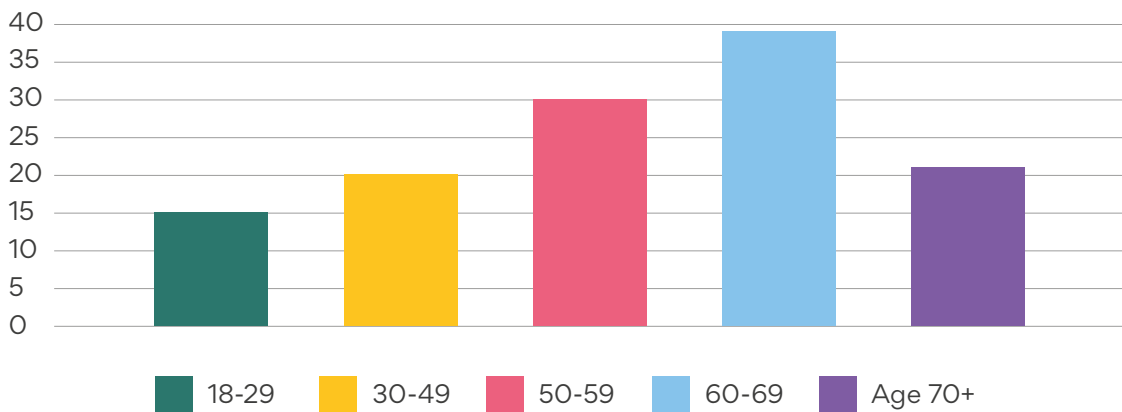
Have you ever been told that you are unlikely to be successful, or have been unsuccessful, in a job application for the following reason? You have do not have enough experience



This difference across age groups is reinforced in respondents' attitudes towards the recruitment process specifically. Figure 6 shows that older workers were far more likely to think that the way employers recruit new staff these days works to the disadvantage of people their age; 45% of those aged 50-59 and 51% of those aged 60-69 said that the way employers recruit different age groups is a disadvantage for their age group, far higher than for those aged 18-29 (15%) and 30-49 (22%).

Figure 5 - Perception of age disadvantage in recruitment process across different age groups

"I feel I would be at a disadvantage in applying for jobs because of my age"



Meanwhile, there were minimal differences between age groups when exploring whether they had been turned down for a role due to their age. Of those aged 50-69, 15% thought they had been turned down for a role due to their age – compared with 16% of those aged between 18-29 and 11% of those aged between 30-49.^{3,4}

Younger people aged 18-29 (34%) and 30-49 (21%) were significantly more likely to report that they had experienced discrimination in the past few years when applying for a job or a promotion – a higher proportion than among older people aged 50-69 (16%). This presents an interesting contradiction. While older people are more than twice as likely to perceive a ‘disadvantage’ in applying for jobs, they were least likely to identify that they had experienced direct age ‘discrimination’ when applying for a job or a promotion. As it is likely that age discrimination also operates covertly and out of direct sight of younger applicants, this contradiction may be explained by generational differences in how the terms ‘disadvantage’ and ‘discrimination’ is interpreted.

In addition, survey respondents were asked whether they had ever been told (for instance by employers, recruitment agents, or word-of-mouth) that they were unlikely to be successful, or had been unsuccessful, in recruitment for a variety of reasons. The survey results show that younger people aged 18-29 were more likely to have been told they were ‘too young’ (36%) than older people aged 50-69 to have been told they were ‘too old’ (18%). Other findings included:

- 29% of those aged 50-69 had been told that they were ‘too experienced’ – compared with 32% of those aged 30-49 and 22% of those aged 18-29;
- 26% of those aged 50-69 had been told they ‘did not have enough experience’ – compared with 46% of those aged 30-49 and 68% of those aged 18-24. . Within the older age group, those aged 50-59 were more likely (30%) than those aged 60-69 (22%) to be told that they ‘did not have enough experience’.

Maybe more surprisingly, even relatively younger people felt they had been disadvantaged in the recruitment process due to their relatively older age. For instance, 24% of those aged 18-29 and 21% of those aged 30-49 have been told by employers they were ‘looking for a younger candidate’, compared to 16% of those aged 50-69.⁵ Similarly, 14% of both 18-29 and 30-49 year-olds had been told they were ‘too old’. Taken together, these slightly unexpected findings suggest that discrimination based on (relative) older age starts young: it may be relevant that eligibility for the National

³ Note that these numbers are for the entire population aged 50-69, not those who have recently applied for a job.

⁴ There was no difference within the age group 50-69, with people in their 50s and 60s being equally likely to report being turned down for a role (15%).

⁵ There were no statistically significant differences within the age group 50-69.

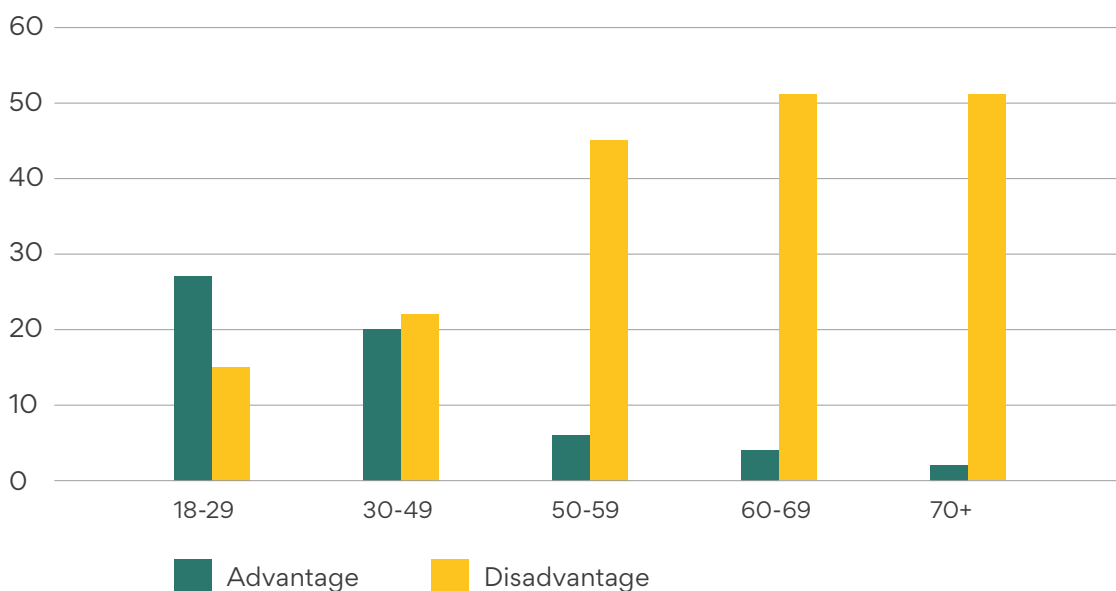
Living Wage starts at 25, that people in their late 20s may be seen as ‘too old’ for some entry roles, and employers may be more open and explicit about their age preferences among relatively younger candidates compared to age discrimination of older workers. The factors underlying these findings require further research.

The survey also explored how age bias among employers might be perceived at different stages along the recruitment process among different age groups. In our survey, older people aged 50-69 felt that disadvantages associated with their age were slightly more prevalent during the application and selection process than younger workers, but the differences are fairly small (see Figure 9 for more). This was the part of the recruitment process that both older and younger groups were most likely to feel that they face discrimination.

One main difference was that younger workers were more likely to feel at a disadvantage during the interview process than older workers. This could be for a range of reasons that require further research to explore in more depth.

Figure 6 - Perception of age disadvantage in recruitment process across different age groups

In general, do you think the way employers recruit new staff these days works to the advantage or disadvantage of people your age?



The research also explored how participants approached applications involving CVs and cover letters. The survey found that, despite younger workers being less likely to perceive themselves at a disadvantage, younger workers were more likely to act on their fears and adapt their job applications to avoid potential age discrimination. The survey results show that:⁶

- 14% of those aged 50-69 said they had changed or reworded part of their job application (e.g. CV) to try to avoid age discrimination in selection process, compared with 25% of those aged 18-29.
- 7% of those aged 50-69 said they would consider hiding their age when applying for a job (e.g. not putting in on their CV or the application form etc.), compared with 11% of those aged 18-29 or 30-49.
- 5% of those aged 50-69 said they had avoided giving their age when applying for a job (e.g. not putting it on their CV or the application form etc.), compared with 8% of those aged 18-29 and 11% of those aged 30-49.

The relatively low numbers suggest that the anticipation of age discrimination has not encouraged many people in the entire population to hide age during the recruitment process. When we explored this in more detail with research participants, all of whom were over 50, many explained that they would not try to bend the truth because it is morally wrong. Some, though, expressed that they would include their age on their CV on purpose to ensure that employers would know how old they were before they invited them for an interview; their thinking being that this way they would avoid unnecessary disappointment of being excluded during the interview stage because of their age (see Section 2.4). The difference in numbers between older and younger workers might also suggest that older and younger workers are genuinely approaching the recruitment process differently, with younger workers feeling slightly more willing to bend the truth to sell themselves to prospective employees.

Finally, the survey found the impacts of age discrimination were felt relatively similarly across different age groups. However, there were some differences that were statistically significant. Those who are in the middle age group (between 30-49) were particularly more likely to feel stuck in insecure work; those aged 18-29 were more likely to report losing confidence; and those aged 50-69 were more likely to say that it had impacted their finances and mental wellbeing. Overall, the findings showed (see Figure 7):

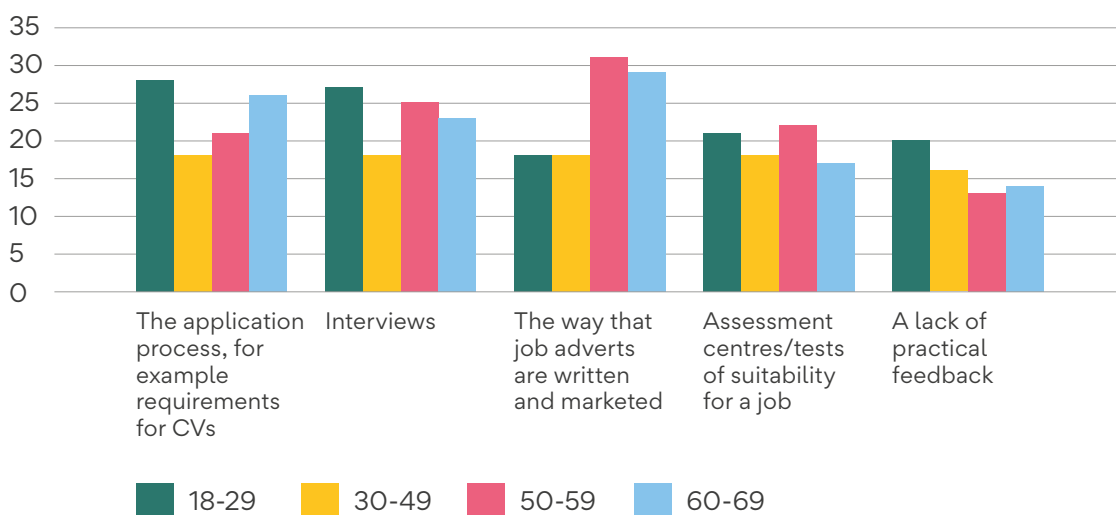
⁶ Note that there were no significant differences with those aged 50-59 and 60-69.

Chapter 1: Experiences and perceptions among older workers

- Across most age groups, roughly half of those who had experienced discrimination reported that they had not been able to find a job that met their needs, including 52% of those aged between 50-69 and 53% of those aged 18-24.
- A third (33%) of those aged 50-69 reported they were stuck in insecure work – compared with half (51%) of those aged 30-49 and 33% of those aged 18-24.
- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of those aged 50-69 were made financially less well off – compared with 52% of those aged 18-29.
- The majority of all age groups said it undermined their confidence, including 71% of those aged 50-59, 65% of those aged 60-69 and 73% of those aged 18-29.
- 43% of those aged 50-69 said it affected their health and well-being – compared with 36% of those aged 18-29.
- 76% of those aged 50-69 said that it put them off applying for more jobs – compared with 60% of those aged 18-29.
- 40% of those aged 60-69 were put off working or into an early retirement – compared with 26% of those aged 50-59 and 29% of those aged 18-29.

Figure 7 - Perceptions of disadvantage in different parts of recruitment process across age groups

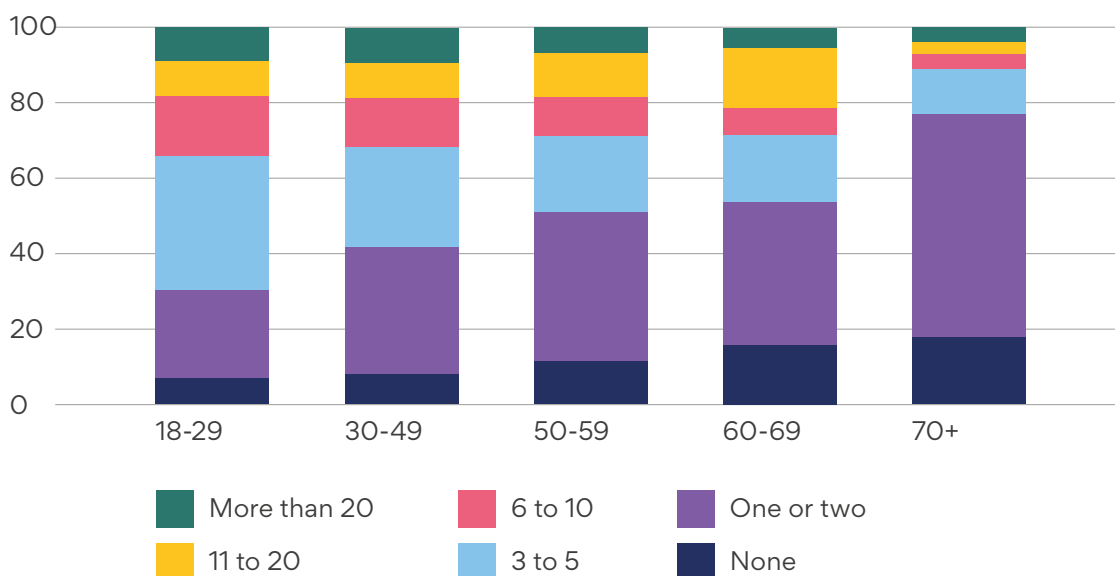
Which part of the job recruitment process, if any, do you think disadvantages you most because of your age? You may chose more than one.



The fact that older people were more likely to be put off applying for jobs suggests that they were more likely to see age discrimination as insurmountable. This might go some way to explain why older workers are much more likely to apply for fewer jobs during their job search while younger workers are more likely to apply for more, as older workers might be more pessimistic of their job prospects due to experiencing or anticipating discrimination (see Figure 8).

Figure 8 - The number of job applications made after last job search across different age groups

"When you last searched for a job, how many applications did you make?"



In addition to describing the findings between age groups, the larger sample sizes for the UK population as a whole makes it possible to analyse variations across demographic characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, age groups, income, social grade, and employment status. The survey results for the entire nationally-representative sample of people aged 18 and over show that:

- People from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background are more likely to report recent age-based discrimination than those from White backgrounds (34% vs 18%).
- Women were more likely to be told that they were likely to be unsuccessful for a job because of their age (43% vs 35%).
- People in the private sector were more likely to perceive age as a disadvantage than those in the public sector (27% vs 20%).

In addition, BAME groups (24%) were more likely than White people (15%) to report that they 'have felt the need to act in a way that makes me seem younger than I am when applying for a job', suggesting that they might be experiencing more anxiety around age discrimination. This is perhaps because they are more likely to face discrimination, including discrimination based on their ethnicity, and possibly the combined impact of different types of discrimination.

Figure 9 - Experience of age discrimination across ethnicity

Have you experienced age discrimination in the past few years when applying for a job or a promotion?

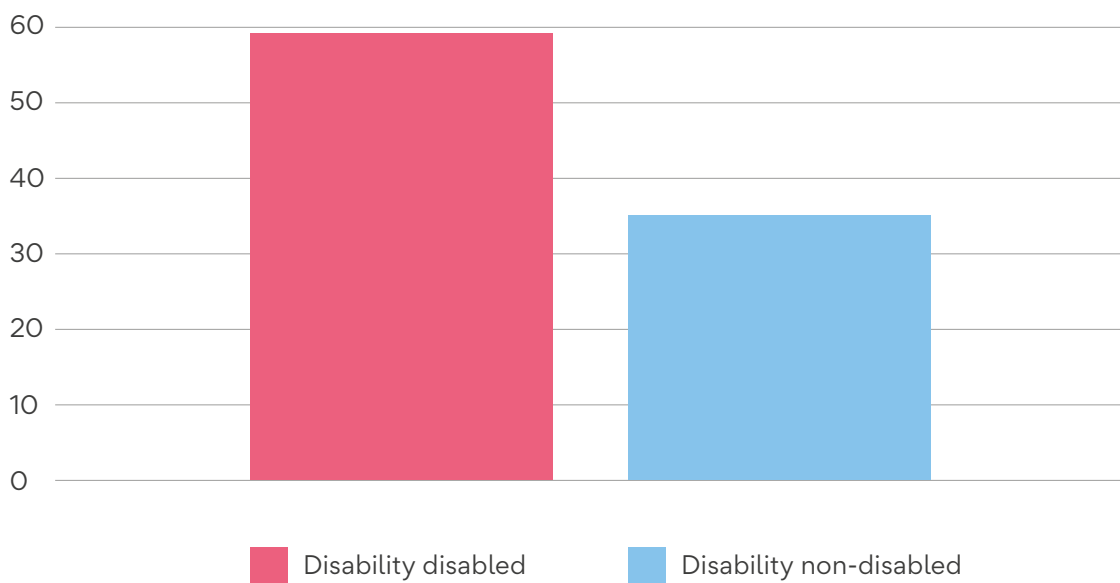


Among the entire population, the survey results also showed that some demographic groups were more likely to be turned down for some reasons than others. For example, it found that women (43%) were significantly more likely than men (35%) to be turned down for a job because they 'did not have enough experience'. Conversely, men (22%) were slightly more likely than women (17%) to have been told by employers they were 'looking for a younger candidate'.

Finally, there were some demographic variations in how groups reported certain impacts of age discrimination. Women (59%) were more likely than men (45%) to not be able to find a job that met their needs; disabled people (59%) were more likely than non-disabled people (35%) to report it impacted their health and wellbeing (see Figure 10); and those earning under £20,000 per year (49%) were more likely to feel stuck in insecure work compared to those earning over £50,000 (23%).

Figure 10 - Impact of age discrimination on health and wellbeing by disability

When you were discriminated against, would say the following did or did not happen as a result? - "It affected my health and well-being"



Chapter 2:

Older workers' experiences of the recruitment process

Interview participants were first asked in open-ended terms about their broader recruitment experiences. As the recruitment process can be divided into several stages, the interviews subsequently explored each stage of the recruitment process in more depth, including whether participants felt age had played a part in the decision making by themselves or employers, or in the subsequent outcomes. For the job applicant, the recruitment process can be divided into the following phases. Each of these will be explored in this chapter.

- Pre-interview phase
 - Deciding to look for another job
 - Job search
 - Deciding to apply
 - Application and CV
 - Selection and shortlisting
- Interview phase
 - Interviewing and assessments
- Post-interview phase
 - Outcome and feedback
 - Actions

Generally, age bias can potentially influence employers' decisions and behaviours during any stage of the recruitment process and, similarly, the fear or anticipation of age discrimination can affect how older job applicants approach each stage of the recruitment process. In the survey, older people aged 50-69 felt that disadvantages associated with their age were slightly more prevalent during the application and selection process (see Figure 7).

These differences are fairly small, however, and could simply reflect the fact that jobseekers are likely to have more experiences with the earlier stages of recruitment.

- 23% thought the way job adverts were written and marketed disadvantaged them due to age.
- 30% thought the application process, for instance requirements for CVs, disadvantaged them due to age.
- 22% thought the interview process disadvantaged them due to age.
- 15% thought assessment centres and tests disadvantaged them due to age.
- 13% thought the lack of practical feedback disadvantaged them due to age.

2.1 Deciding to look for another job

For any worker, the first step of the recruitment process is the decision to actually start looking for another job. The survey shows that issues related to age, including fears of age discrimination, have prevented some older people from moving and applying for jobs. Among those aged 50-69, 25% said they had wanted to move jobs, but felt unable to do so because of their age.

For some interview participants, age was not seen as a factor in their decision to look for, and move, jobs. They described how regular job applications were part of their normal routine. They always kept an eye on potential opportunities, usually through email alerts and through talking to contacts in their industry:

'I'm always looking to move jobs.'

Man, 65, Tech and Digital, London

For others, however, especially as they got older, the decision to search and apply for jobs was increasingly surrounded by worries and concerns, especially whether it would be sensible to leave the security associated with their current position:

'You want to apply, but then you just think: "Am I doing the right thing? You're getting paid at the moment. Why do you want to risk everything right now?" When you are younger, you can just say goodbye to the job and live life faster.'

Man, 50, Tech and Digital, London

One of the main considerations was that the grass would not always be greener following a job move. As a result of a decreasing success rate in selection, participants felt that one bad move could lead them to be stuck in a worse job. As a result, some preferred to stay in their current job for the foreseeable future and potentially until retirement, even if they were not completely satisfied with it. The expression 'better the devil you know' was used by many participants:

'I get worried about change. Better the devil you know. Because I've got commitments, I can't just jump at something. Because I feel that if it goes wrong, my age is just getting higher and higher, and [I will be] less and less attractive. My ability to keep jumping is now going down by the week. So yes, I am fearful that jumping and finding the grass isn't greener. And then either being stuck somewhere unable to come back, or nothing to go onto.'

Man, 53, Manufacturing and Transportation, North West

'You might as well try and hang out there until you're closer to retirement. Because looking for another job at my age is going to be a lot of effort, and it might not happen because many, many young people – much younger than me – would love to have work, and I feel I'm in the way.'

Woman, 63, Public Sector, London

'Friends of mine have said – when I was going to leave my last job – they were like: "Oh my God, are you sure? It's not easy to get a job at our age. You've been in this job a long time, you're probably better off staying where you know that you're going to be okay".'

Woman, 52, Public Sector, Midlands

These sentiments were also expressed by people who had actually moved jobs. For instance, a housing officer said it had been a big consideration for him but, eventually, he decided to take the plunge before he got even older and the risks would be even larger:

'I left my job at 50. I had concerns. I could have stayed in [my current] job forever. I knew the job inside out, it's comfortable, I had a good pension there. There was a worry it was a mistake. But I also think I needed to do it. If I didn't do it now, say I'd got to 55, it wouldn't have happened.'

Man, 52, Public Sector, South East

A 55-year-old officer manager at an accountancy firm had the same considerations. She had been in her current company for 21 years, but an upcoming restructuring due to a new ownership made her unsure whether the organisation would be suitable for her in the future. Her dilemma was whether to stay put and find out whether she still enjoyed working there – but that would mean she would be getting older in the process and possibly more unattractive in the labour market. Alternatively, she could move immediately. At the time of the interview, COVID-19 and the lockdown meant she had put her applications on hold, but she was painfully aware she was getting closer to her late 50s, and that every year that passed made it more difficult to secure another job.

For some participants, especially those who had been in their current jobs for a long time, the decision to start looking for jobs felt overwhelming. Sometimes, these workers had not applied for jobs for a very long time and they felt unfamiliar with modern job searching and application systems. They felt it would be time consuming and they feared they would look unattractive to employers. These perceptions exacerbated the risks associated with moving jobs at their older age, and they felt they needed a much bigger 'push' to start job searching:

'I get frightened of the process, and I think it's a lot of time for me to invest. Perhaps I'm giving up on myself, I don't know.'

Woman, 59, Retail and Wholesale, Yorkshire and the Humber

'I'm nervous about doing it. It's just taking that step... I have been where I am for such a long time, I'm thinking I don't want to be that new person. It's that kind of fear, linked to my age. I keep thinking about it, and then I do look around at the jobs, and then think "no".'

Woman, 60, Public Sector, North West

In contrast, a few participants, typically those closer to retirement, felt their older age had given them more freedom to move around in the labour market. Sometimes they pointed out that their children had moved away

from home, their mortgage was paid off, and they could afford to take risks and did not have to fear a temporary or sustained period of unemployment, or in fact could afford to go on early retirement.

2.2 Job search

Participants were asked about the type of job search methods they used and to reflect on why they had chosen these methods. They described a wide variety of methods: recruitment agencies, job websites, company websites to apply directly with employers, social media including LinkedIn, local newspapers, specialist publications, using networks and informal word-of-mouth, and being headhunted directly. Often, participants explained that they deployed a mixture of these methods to suit their personal needs and the industry of interest. For many participants, job searching had become a regular activity, with a few explaining that they were always looking for jobs or at least keeping an eye out for future opportunities. This section will outline the key search methods participants used and any pros and cons they felt existed around each method, including:

- newspapers
- informal searches or word-of-mouth
- going direct to employers
- searching online
- using recruitment companies.

2.1.1 Newspapers

A small number of participants said that they used newspapers to look for work, especially local newspapers for jobs in their area. However, most of those who did reflected that this was no longer the primary way to find work, and that they used online search engines as the main tool in their searches:

'We used to just look in the newspaper or word-of-mouth or whatever. That's how I've got other jobs before. Or just dropping your CV into places whereas now, it's all on the internet. You have to keep up with the times. I don't feel I am up-to-date with everything like [my children] are. But I still can do the job that I'd be going for.'

Woman, 50, Education, South East

The very few who continued to use newspapers as their primary search tool readily admitted that this was out-of-date. A 69-year-old who was relatively happy in work, but keen to look out for new jobs for the fun of it, explained he saw himself as a bit 'old school':

'I'm from the old school, I tend to look at newspapers, because you get pages and pages and pages of vacancies for jobs.'

Man, 69, Retail and Wholesale, Yorkshire and the Humber

2.1.2 Informal or word-of-mouth

Another search method participants talked about was 'word-of-mouth'. This included using their friends and old colleagues' networks who they might ask for any tips or recommendations. Participants cited two main reasons for using this method: either because the industry they were in relied mostly on word-of-mouth or because their friends or ex-colleagues had been able to help them out in finding a job in the past.

A 65-year-old man, living in Yorkshire and the Humber, reported that for his trade word-of-mouth was the best, if not the only, way to find work. He explained that in the furniture trade you relied primarily on 'who you know', and as a result, he had had much more luck using contacts or applying informally, rather than trying to find work online and applying there.

Quite a few participants explained that they had simply been more successful in getting jobs if they had been recommended by a friend or neighbour. A 51-year-old fisherman who takes on extra work locally explained he has used a multitude of methods, from online sites like Monster, to local papers, but most of his successes have come through word-of-mouth and through people he knows in his local village:

'I've taken a number from a shop, ring it up, someone can tell me if there's a job going.'

Man, 51, Agriculture, North West

This was often the case for more senior roles, which participants explained may not be advertised at all and therefore they would have to rely on their networks recommending them. Again, this tended to be considered a more successful search method, by virtue of starting with a recommendation and therefore a head start. As a 65-year-old man looking for work in the tech and digital sector had noted:

'...occasionally I'll hear from friends or ex colleagues at places that I still keep in touch with, that there may be a vacancy going which, to be fair, has been more fruitful than not, because the vacancies tend not to be advertised. So someone's working somewhere in that area, that someone's looking for a particular vacancy, if they save the company the cost of advertising it as well. So that's been successful in the past.'

Man, 60, Property and Construction, Midlands.

2.1.3 Directly online or offline

For many participants, searching for jobs directly or going direct to employers was their primary method. This included going directly to the websites of organisations that they were interested in working for, as well as turning up in person to enquire about vacancies. This was considered one of the more appealing methods for searching for jobs, and those who were unable to apply directly to employers were often frustrated that they did not have the option. A number of participants explained that they had tried to enquire about vacancies with employers but had been told that they must go through the recruiter. This was often considered a less appealing method, as they feared that the 'middle man' meant that there could be fees and less transparency.

For a number of participants, searching for jobs directly was often seen as the only option, especially for those who had specific jobs or organisations in mind. These participants tended to be very clear and specific about the types of places they wanted to apply for. For example, a teacher of English as a second language who taught Chinese postgraduates English, explained that this was quite a 'niche' job. The 51-year-old male was also keen to ensure that he was applying for 'established and well-reputed English language schools', and that most of these did not use recruitment companies, in part because of the fees, and so searched for them directly.

Other participants were keen to search for companies and organisations directly because this was the way they were most likely to have success. For some, this revolved around being personally able to counter age-based stereotypes. A 59-year-old woman, who worked in retail and was often on the looking for part-time work, felt that she was most likely to get the job if she turned up in person and could prove that she was not 'too old':

'If you put down that you are, say, 59 or 60-something, people immediately think of somebody with grey hair and a walking stick. Whereas if you're walking into a place, they can see you there. You're able-bodied. You don't look like a crotchety

60-year-old, whereas it's different when it's on an application form. Even though you might not have put your age there, they can ascertain from the other information that you're not a young applicant or a young-minded applicant. I think people have a set image of what a 60-year-old is like.'

Woman, 59, Retail and Wholesale, South East

This is not to say that all participants felt that there were more opportunities through going to employers directly, many would supplement searching directly on employers' websites with other types of search engines to make sure that they did not miss out.

2.1.4 Online searches

Many participants used online search engines. This included simply googling types of organisations and then applying to them directly, in addition to the more widely known search sites or social media sites such as Indeed, Guardian Jobs or LinkedIn. These search methods were regularly used as supplementary to other search methods, such as word-of-mouth or applying directly. For example, a 52-year-old man working for a local authority had five or six companies he kept his eye out for, using a mixture of methods including the jobs site Indeed.

Opinions of these sites tended to differ, with many participants feeling that they could spend hours trawling through job adverts with no luck, while others had felt that these methods were a valuable way of extending their job search. In particular those who might be looking for a part-time job on the side to raise their income felt that online sites were helpful ways of searching. For example, a 56-year-old woman who works part-time as a carer had been regularly using Facebook pages to find extra job opportunities. Similarly, a 59-year-old woman, working in retail, explained that these search methods were particularly suited to the type of work she wanted:

'A lot of the jobs are part-time and local, and they're not necessarily career-orientated. I mean when you're older I don't think you're looking for a career so much. You've got your experience and you want to use it. You're not looking to climb up a ladder. You've had lots of responsibility. You don't necessarily want to take on additional responsibility. You're looking more at levelling off.'

Woman, 59, Retail and Wholesale, South East

LinkedIn was also popular amongst participants, many of whom had been headhunted or found jobs on the site. Some of the functions, such as showing that you were looking for work, were seen as especially useful and an efficient way to find work. One 53-year-old man explained he had 7,800 connections to draw on from the site to help extend his job search. Others found the fact that LinkedIn could flag job opportunities that matched their skillset could be a big time saver.

However, a number of participants felt that LinkedIn, and its increasing importance in the labour market, was a threat for those who did not want to use them. In particular, older generations who have not grown up with social media are less confident presenting themselves online. As a result, there was an anxiety among participants that younger candidates would do a lot better using these tools and get a comparative advantage in finding and applying for jobs. A 51-year-old man explained that he found himself worrying that he was losing out on work opportunities without being comfortable to use LinkedIn:

'I'd much rather go and see someone and pick up the phone to them, or I'd much rather make a phone call, than send a text message, it's just the way I am.[...] Networking would be better for older people, as they know people in the industry already. Younger people, I think, they're just so much more savvy on social media, promoting themselves, so they're used to it, there is definitely an advantage there.'

Man, 51, Manufacturing and Transport, North West

Similarly, a 61-year-old woman had similarly felt uncomfortable with the social media element of LinkedIn and therefore been put off using it for job hunting:

'It's the feeling of, I don't know who's looking at my things. You have to let your CV be open, so people can see whether they want to pick you. I'm just nervous about it, I don't know, it's just the whole procedure, it's just not for me.'

Woman, 60, Public Sector, North West

2.1.5 Recruitment agencies

Many participants discussed using recruitment agencies, such as Reed, Michael Page, Office Angels, and Alain Laine as well as bespoke recruiters. Those who used them felt that they could be good ways to extend their job

search and make it more efficient. A handful of participants were happy that they could upload their CV to a website and wait for people to get back to them. However, many others felt that this resulted in a lot of spam in their inbox. Others felt that, despite disliking using recruitment agencies, they had no other option than to use them because it was the done thing in their sector.

Many participants had simply been continuously unsuccessful despite working with recruiters. Consequently, they began to assume that the recruiters were either not able to find them relevant job opportunities or not bothering to do so. A number of participants felt that the business incentives or the 'on commission model', reinforced age discrimination in the labour market, with younger workers being more cost-effective 'commodities'. This strengthened their suspicion that the agents were not necessarily on their side. Participants had not necessarily had direct interactions with the recruiters that felt discriminatory but had felt at times that they had implicit bias in the way they approached working with them. For example, one 60-year-old male told how recruiters he was working with had asked questions related to his experience and age:

'They would say something along the lines of I'm a bit older and I've only had experience at one workplace. How do you know what's evolved in the past couple of years because I've only been at one company. So they would question my ability to adapt to a new role based on the fact that I'd been at a company for five years.'

Man, 60, Property and Construction, Midlands

Others discussed the idea of using bespoke recruitment agencies for older workers. For some, the existence of recruitment agencies bespoke for older people had been a source of anxiety, while others had thought it might be their only hope.

Many felt that recruitment agencies, by design, magnified age-based challenges in the labour market. For many, the market incentives for recruitment companies meant that younger workers would be favoured by the recruiters – as well as the employers themselves – and therefore reinforced age bias across the labour market. Many imagined that older workers, with less time to spend in the labour market, would be less profitable to recruiters in the long term and therefore lower down the agencies' lists. Additionally, many had the perception that the recruitment agencies, particularly those without upfront costs, would naturally cherry pick younger workers because they were more likely to go for lower-level jobs that would be easier to find:

'Because they are on commission, they want to get you in and sold, and as many times as possible preferably. This biases the process towards younger people with longer careers [ahead of them] and to lower-level jobs which they can turn around more quickly.'

Man, 52, Tech and Digital, East England

Similarly, a 57-year-old male, working as an accountant within the health and care sector, said his recent lack of success with recruitment agencies had led him to the conclusion that recruiters were not working in his favour. He had come to conclude that they were looking for younger workers who have less experience that they can have on their books throughout their careers:

'They know they're going to be earning commission from that person for years to come, each time they move jobs they're going to earn commission from them. As someone who is, dare I say, entering the sort of twilight years of their career, they know that they may get a big commission the first time that they move you, because chances are, you're going to be on a big salary. But you're not going to be moving much after that, and in fact, your next job might even be the one you end up retiring from.'

Man, 57, Health and Social Care, South East

For others, their challenges were more a result of agencies' own biases, rather than the business model alone. One 50-year-old male had felt the recruitment company he was working with was not putting him forward for roles because they had doubts that employers would hire someone of his age. However, when he raised this with them, their reaction only intensified his suspicions. He recounted that the recruitment advisor had said in response to his challenge: 'If you feel like that, go to [a bespoke recruitment agency for older people]; it's called Fifty Something and they help people in your age group'. As a result, he had felt validated that the recruitment agency he was working with was indeed assuming he would be unsuccessful in job applications primarily on the basis of his age and as a result not putting him forward for job opportunities.

Some felt that recruitment agencies were not set up for older workers. A 57-year-old man who was currently working as an IT director in healthcare had found it harder to relate to the younger recruiters he had been working with to find a new job. He had similarly felt that the age gap had put him on the back foot:

‘Some of the consultants you're dealing with are straight out of university and I've got sons of that age, so when you're talking to someone you find it quite hard to relate to them [professionally], I think. Whereas maybe if the agencies themselves were staffed by more mature people, shall we say, maybe it would be easier to relate to them.’

Man, 57, Health and Social Care, South East

As a result, he thought that the recruitment companies were not set up to help older workers and were unable to match his experience with job opportunities. He felt he might need a bespoke agency directly for older workers but had seen a couple of agencies that charged and felt nervous about companies that asked for upfront costs before they could guarantee work. The idea of a recruitment agency that dealt with older people specifically was something that a number of participants mentioned. It was seen as something that could prevent them wasting their time looking at jobs that younger people are more likely to get.

‘Then you're more likely to go to these sites rather than waste your time visiting other sites that everyone is going for.’

Man, 50, Tech and Digital, London

While many participants liked the idea of bespoke recruiters for older people, others had felt from their research that these companies offered less attractive employment opportunities. In this way they saw them as simply a reflection of an unfair labour market. A 63-year-old woman who was looking for work in the financial services sector explained that she had looked into the alternative age-based portals, finding they only offered ‘lower quality’ jobs:

‘When I did look, it really had very few jobs and not only that, it had what I would call almost casual jobs. I mean you had to be self-employed, some of them would be commission only. I mean to me, they were not treating older people well, because it was assumed that older people were desperate and would do jobs that young people didn’t want to do.’

Woman, 63, Business Services, London

2.3 Deciding which job to apply for

Once potential job applicants have identified different job opportunities, a number of factors are likely to affect their decision about which vacancies to apply for. The survey showed that among those aged 50-69, 23% had

avoided applying to a certain organisation or job role because it seemed biased towards a certain age group.

During the research interviews, we also explored what factors affected older workers' decisions about which jobs to apply for. Many of the views expressed by the participants would likely be found across all age groups, such as considerations around salary, whether people were interested in the role, and whether they felt their skills and capabilities matched the role. However, a few age-related themes also emerged. As we describe later, these findings show that older workers aged 50 and over, like any other group, are a highly diverse group: some have ambition and motivation to further pursue their careers, while others look to settle down closer to home in jobs with less responsibility, potentially lower pay, and less stress. Both those groups want to contribute to society and the labour market through working, but they may find themselves facing different challenges in the recruitment process.

A number of participants said they had already or were currently looking to change to a job with less responsibility, fewer hours and less stress. Those participants said that, as they were getting older, their priorities had changed when applying for jobs. Sometimes, salary had become less important, especially if they had paid off their mortgage and had fewer financial commitments. Instead, they focused on improving their work-life balance and mental wellbeing through reducing their responsibilities, hours, commuting distance and stress. This often meant applying for jobs at a lower level than their current or previous jobs:

'I don't want too much hassle, not much stress... I want very easy tasks, I just want to keep myself occupied and keep going.'

Woman, 65, Health and Social Care, London.

'I'm 65. I'm looking to retire fairly soon, I'm not looking for the hassle and the aggravation that comes with that sort of level any more.'

Man, 65, Tech and Digital, London

'I just don't know if I can bear that sort of environment any more. And the corporate speak. If I hear the word strategy one more time, my head will explode.'

Man, 52, Tech and Digital, East England

In particular, some participants said they increasingly considered location as one of their main criteria and they looked forward to less travel time to work, especially those who said they had travelled into London or other big cities

during most of their career. However, some participants recognised this had significant impact on their ability to get their desired job as it limited their pool of vacancies, especially among people in specialist roles. But some participants had accepted this and changed their job application strategies accordingly:

'I started applying for jobs which I know will bore me to tears, but I think I might have more chance of getting them.'

Man, 52, Tech and Digital, East England

'I'm getting fed up with bloody travelling, so [I look at] location. I'm sorry I'm at the age now, if you offered me the best job in the world but it was 50 miles away, I wouldn't do it.'

Man, 53, Tech and Digital, North West

Participants varied in the extent to which they were willing to relocate for work. Some saw relocation at their age as out of the question. Others said their mobility had been reduced when their children had been younger, but in contrast now they felt 'free as a bird' without any commitments or ties to any specific places.

Finally, another theme emerging from the interviews was how selective participants were when deciding what jobs to apply for. Again, participants used mixed approaches. Some saw the job market as a 'numbers game' and therefore applied for as many jobs as possible, both realistic and seemingly unrealistic ones. Those participants sometimes said modern online job search and application techniques made this easier, especially when you were only required to submit a CV. In contrast, some described how they carefully selected which jobs to apply for, making sure their skillset and CV was a good fit for the job description. They felt this strategy gave them the most chance:

'Can I comfortably, wholeheartedly, go in and demonstrate that skillset?'

Man, 53, Tech and Digital, North West

'I always apply for jobs where my CV meets the criteria and then often a bit extra on top, so I am more valuable for the company.'

Woman, 51, Property and Construction, London

The survey results provide some evidence that this selective approach to job searching may be more prominent among older people. Respondents in all age groups were asked how many applications they had made for their last

job search or, if they were still searching for a job, how many applications they had made up until now. Younger people, both those aged 18-29 and 30-49 had typically made more applications than those aged 50-69:

- 41% of those aged 50-69 said they had only made one to two job applications during their last job search; compared to lower figures for those aged 30-49 (33%) and 18-29 (23%).
- In contrast, a higher proportion of younger people had made more job applications: 51% of those aged 18-29 and 39% of those aged 30-49 had applied for 3-10 jobs during their last job search; compared to 30% for those aged 50-69.

During interviews, some participants said they had developed this selective approach over time, as they experienced an increasing number of rejections for their applications. As a result, these participants started prioritising applications more carefully. They wanted to reduce wasted time, and therefore avoided applying for jobs with perceived lower chances of success and to concentrate on realistic applications. Sometimes, the persistent failed applications also led people to reluctantly broaden their job search and the type of vacancies they applied for, including becoming more flexible in terms of sectors and roles. For instance, a 60-year-old participant said she had first looked primarily for office jobs that matched her previous admin experience and skills. After experiencing multiple rejections, she now looked for 'anything', including supermarket cashier work and opportunities in companies which were known to target older people.

Sometimes, the recruitment process itself also affected the decision to apply assessment of whether the time spent would be worthwhile. Some participants were quite strategic, describing how they would consider the time necessary to complete application forms, perform various online tests, or travel time to an assessment centre. They would weigh these considerations up against the perceived chance of getting the job:

'If I look at one that says this is a three-stage process, you have to complete psychometric tests, you have to have a panel interview, you have to do this, that and the other, presentation, I've done all that in the past. I think you have to be really convinced that that role is for you to want to put yourself through all that, because it's so stressful and it's so time consuming.'

Man, 57, Health and Social Care, South East

'The trouble is you spend so much time filling in application forms, supplying references and you feel like you're hitting your head against a brick wall sometimes.'

Woman, 66, Health and Social Care, South West

2.3.1 Person specifications and job descriptions

Interview participants were asked whether anything in job descriptions or person specifications, such as wordings or specific requirements, encouraged or discouraged them to apply, and whether any of this was related to age. Only a few recalled age being mentioned specifically in job adverts. These included care workers who used websites, such as PA Pool, a service connecting disabled people with personal care assistants, allowing them to interactively manage their own recruitment or employment. Participants said the website allowed service users to input preferences for their carer, including regarding age and gender. One of the interview participants who worked as a carer thought this was fair:

'A young 25-year-old guy, who is into wheelchair racing or something, he's not going to want an old dear like me popping up... I perfectly understand that. He'd probably want a younger guy, his own age, that he could do blokey stuff with.'

Woman, 56, Health and Social Care, South East

She also said that younger carers could potentially be with them for a longer time and build up a strong relationship, without being interrupted by retirement.

Apart from these examples, most participants said that job adverts and person specifications would never mention age specifically. Participants recognised that this would be illegal, and that employers have to be careful. However, participants brought up a number of examples which indicated to them that employers wanted a younger person for the job. This often deterred interview participants from applying and was also reflected in the findings of our nationally-representative survey. Among those aged 50-69:

- 15% said they had been put off applying for jobs because they sounded like they were aimed at younger candidates.
- Those employed part-time were particularly likely to have been put off applying, 24% said they had been put off applying for jobs because they sounded like they were aimed at younger candidates.

When job adverts described the ideal candidate as 'dynamic', 'energetic', 'go-getting', 'fresh' and 'outward looking', these were seen to be more associated with younger workers. Similarly, words and references that were future-looking were felt to be associated with younger workers. These included phrases involving potential long-term development opportunities, progression within the company or the opportunity to fulfil career ambitions, including by receiving on-job training and qualifications. Terms relating to 'working hard', at a 'fast pace' and 'working long hours' to achieve these goals were also seen to contain age bias:

'They're probably going to want somebody younger who's willing to take up professional exams, and push themselves and stay with the company for years, which is fair enough.'

Woman, 56, Health and Social Care, South East

A couple of participants also said they were put off when job specifications sounded overly complicated and demanding, even for fairly simple jobs that they knew they were capable of doing. One respondent remarked that, when employers made a receptionist job sound like rocket science, it made them 'anxious and nervous'. It made them wonder whether the employer was looking for a young, ambitious person:

'Sometimes they bamboozle you with words. They sound like you got to be a really brainy person. You read it, and think I can't do that. But I used to be an important export manager. I'm not stupid, but maybe I've lost a bit of confidence over time.'

Woman, 60, Health and Social Care, London

Some participants emphasised they still felt 'dynamic' and 'energetic' themselves. At the same time, the fact that the employer chose those words suggested to them a revealed preference for younger workers. It deterred them from applying as it did not conform to the typical stereotypes associated with older workers:

'I have seen wordings like that and immediately think... whoever has written that has already got a bias, and therefore you're not really interested in getting involved in that.'

Man, 53, Retail and Wholesale, North West

Another participant felt those references carried with them subtle indications about what type of worker the employer was looking for, whether this was consciously or subconsciously:

'It's the wording of it, it is very subtle, but you can feel that, ah okay, I think they're looking for younger people.'

Woman, 52, Public Sector, Midlands

In contrast, one participant mentioned that words that would perhaps be more associated with older workers, such as 'reliable' and 'honest', rarely featured in job adverts.

Some participants also felt that the level of seniority and salary sometimes indicated to them whether it was meant for a younger or older person. For

instance, a very low wage and junior role was meant for younger people with opportunities to progress. Another example was job adverts looking for 'students', 'graduates' and 'recent graduates', or when positions were advertised as 'entry roles' or 'apprenticeships'. Certain skills were also generally associated more with younger workers, such as social media, digital skills and so on, while others were seen to indicate a preference for older workers, such as shorthand minute taking.

2.3.2 Types of organisations

For some interview participants, the type of organisation they applied for did not make a difference. Either they had not previously considered or they did not believe that age bias was more prominent in certain types of organisations. Typically, the main consideration was their interest and suitability for the role and responsibilities. Some participants also noted that at this stage of recruitment, the advertisements that were run through agencies did not name the employer; they referred to them as their client, only describing them in vague terms. Others simply did not consider themselves as an older person or that it should affect their decisions around job applications or types of organisations to apply for.

However, others said they did tend to go for specific types of organisations, and often partly for age-related reasons. Most prominently, older workers shied away from start-ups and digital companies. It was assumed that these companies were looking for a different type of candidate who was younger, more recently qualified, more 'dynamic', more comfortable with a degree of chaos and 'out-of-box' thinking as well as being able to fit into a younger, hipster team and ready to engage in a wide range of social activities:

'Young digital start-ups, I probably wouldn't bother. Because they are looking for a different type of employee.'

Man, 58, Business Services, Midlands

'I don't think they would be very open to the mature applicant.'

Woman, 59, Retail and Wholesale, South East

'Start-ups would put me off. Because start-ups to me suggests a degree of chaos, there's no process in place. You have to go in and set everything up yourself, and it strikes me that it could be really difficult, really stressful, and they probably want someone with experience in that scenario.'

Man, 57, Health and Social Care, South East

Start-ups were often also seen to come with expectations of long working hours, which was seen to be more fitting for a younger workforce without family commitments:

'They have a young workforce who are willing to work night and day and weekends, to get the job done. And maybe people my age, they are looking for a steady job. They've got family commitments, they've got a bit of work-life balance. Whereas the younger folks, they don't have that responsibility, and they can devote a lot more time and energy towards the company.'

Man, 57, Financial Services, London

Participants also noted that start-ups and digital companies were often set up and managed by younger people, which could be a barrier to successful applications:

'Don't forget these new companies tend to be started up by young people themselves, in the 20s or 30s. Does a 30-year-old CEO want to employ a 56-year-old?'

Man, 53, Tech and Digital, North West

As an example, a highly skilled IT professional aged 53 had recently applied for two vacancies in start-ups, but – unusually for his job application track record – he had been unsuccessful on both occasions. He wondered whether the failure of these recent applications was, at least partly, due to these companies being newly-established start-ups. He felt the general mindset in these organisations were that younger minds were brighter and more suitable than older workers for these companies, a view which he rejected:

'They associate being hip and cool and being bright with being just out of graduation, or five to ten years out of graduation. I think the mindset at the moment is young minds are better than old minds for this start-up mentality.'

Man, 53, Tech and Digital, North West

Similarly, a number of interview participants avoided companies which signalled they had a young workforce or culture. This was sometimes in the job advert, but more often it was through seeing the company image conveyed on their website, including the recruitment pages. Participants recalled that some company websites were full of images of younger people in their office, with most recruitment information centred on graduate and apprenticeship schemes. Participants explained how this

visual was very strong and showed them the company was youth-oriented:

'I kind of shy away from applying for companies like that. Because it felt like it's just going to be young people there, and I probably would be the dinosaur in the room.'

Woman, 52, Public Sector, Midlands

Sometimes, websites or job adverts also included descriptions of the office as 'lively' and 'fun', and included reviews from current and previous (and mostly younger) employees telling how they had enjoyed the social aspects of the workplace, and that it was a great company for young people:

'I thought they are probably not going to want an older person. It wasn't specified, but the whole culture seemed very young.'

Woman, 65, Public Sector, East England

Another method used to gauge whether an organisation was youth-oriented was by looking at the benefits they offered, as older and younger workers tend to value different things. Benefits offered were seen as an indication of whether employers are targeting certain age groups.

Among those interview participants who made these considerations, the extent it affected their subsequent decision-making varied. Some said they didn't consciously look for indicators of age preferences among employers, but took it into consideration when it stood out in the advert or on their websites. Others – usually with previous direct experiences of age discrimination – consciously avoided certain jobs due to the lower perceived chances of being successful:

'I think it made me realise that, actually, I need to be looking for certain types of things, if I want to stop wasting my time and be a bit more successful in my job searching.'

Woman, 52, Public Sector, Midlands

One interview participant said that she still applied for all job opportunities despite feeling that age discrimination had worked against her in past recruitment. However, during the research interview she started to reflect on whether she had subconsciously started avoiding certain jobs or organisations:

'If you read an advert, and if you feel you'll be the oldest one there, then sometimes you don't apply for the job. And sometimes you don't realise you are making that decision.'

Woman, 50, Education, South East

She was not alone in revising her standpoint during the interview. Often, while participants felt that age bias and discrimination in recruitment definitely existed, they had not always considered to what extent this perception subconsciously changed their own decision making. Another participant, a 52-year-old woman, was trying to change jobs having worked in criminal justice within the public sector for about 25 years. In the course of the research interview it occurred to her that her interest in working on safeguarding issues for children with special needs may have been influenced by expectations that age bias would be less of an issue than in the private sector.

In contrast to the negative perceptions around start-up and digital companies, interview participants felt that the public sector and larger established companies tended to value older workers more, or at least treat applicants on an equal footing. Some interview participants felt they tended to be more successful in their job applications for those organisations. Sometimes, this was also affected by personal preferences, as established companies with a longer track record were more likely to offer job security and structure, including opportunities for job progression. Some participants said they had worked for large established companies throughout their entire career and were comfortable with the environment and work culture. They felt it would be difficult to take the step to a different, and potentially more chaotic and stressful, working environment. Some participants also noted they had been encouraged to apply for jobs in specific sectors and companies, such as specific large retailers who they could see employed older workers.

2.4 Application and CV

Most interview participants reported submitting CVs, cover letters and online application forms as the most common application methods. This could either be directly to employers or increasingly through recruitment agencies, including online websites. When applications were made through recruitment agencies, participants usually described the process as submitting a CV to the agency, then potentially attending a pre-interview with the agency who would then send a tailored CV to the employer. Other application processes were more informal, using networks and personal recommendations to get directly through to the interview stage or secure a job offer straightaway. However, this was often seen as increasingly rare. Participants noted, and sometimes regretted, that informal applications and instances of 'walking in and getting the job on the same day' were a thing of the past.

Experiences among interview participants varied across our sample and across sectors. Concerns revolved around issues discussed earlier: frustration about the role of recruitment agencies, the increasingly formal process compared to the past, and the lack of feedback and response from

employers to job applications. In this light, it was sometimes felt that applying for jobs was time consuming and draining, especially when participants had become increasingly unsuccessful as they became older. Many participants said it was difficult to keep motivated and continue to spend so much time on applications when they almost never heard back from employers:

'The trouble is you spend so much time filling in application forms, supplying references, and you feel like you're hitting your head against a brick wall sometimes.'

Man, 50, Tech and Digital, London

2.4.1 Application forms

Some interview participants felt their older age sometimes made it more time consuming to fill out application forms, as older workers typically had longer and more complicated employment histories than younger workers. As many application forms require applicants to fill in their entire professional history, including all work experiences and qualifications, with dates and justifications for any gaps, this was sometimes seen as an impossibly daunting and time-consuming task:

'The older you are, the longer it's going to take. Because you are going back to 1979 or whenever it was.'

Woman, 52, Public Sector, Midlands

'There's no way I could go back and find the dates of everything I've done for 43 years. I said [to the employer], if you had somebody else come here, younger, they wouldn't have to fill out a 43-year long work history. I felt that was discriminatory to be honest.'

Woman, 59, Retail and Wholesale, South East

For a 59-year-old female worker in retail, this meant frequently avoiding applying for vacancies that involved long application forms. She also felt that the requirement to justify gaps disadvantaged older women who had had career breaks due to pregnancy and childcare. She felt that younger recruiters sometimes saw it as a 'lucky privilege' that she had been able to stay at home for so long for childcare: in reality it was because she was unable to afford to pay for expensive nursery places, given her salary expectations:

'Back in the day the provision of nursery places was very expensive so quite a lot of people didn't work at the same time because they couldn't afford childcare. Now it's a little bit more frowned upon.'

Woman, 59, Retail and Wholesale, South East

Generally, compared to more traditional applications with CVs and cover letters, application forms were considered to be a more time-consuming process that offered less flexibility for older workers to mitigate potential negative age effects, such as concealing their age, year of qualifications, or part of their employment history.

'I feel like if you don't put everything down, then you're not going to get considered. But then on the other flipside of that, it's like, if you put everything down, then you probably won't get considered because of your age.'

Woman, 52, Public Sector, Midlands

A couple of participants said application forms sometimes asked for their current salary. For respondents who were happy, and indeed looking, to take a step down in terms of responsibilities, stress and pay, this was seen as problematic. It was feared that employers would reject such applications from anticipation that they would demand a higher salary. Sometimes application forms would provide a free text box, which enabled these participants to indicate their (lower) expected wage, but often this was not possible. In any case, some participants were unsure whether this box would ever be properly read, especially if it was processed by a computer in the first instance.

Finally, some participants were quite concerned and sceptical about why application forms and online systems required applicants to provide personal details such as age, gender and ethnicity. Some participants assumed recruiters would look at this information, and they expected the personal details would form part of the main application and part of what was being assessed, and they questioned why this was relevant to the employer. Other participants recognised that the personal details, such as age, was part of the Diversity and Inclusion monitoring and that it was only meant to be 'for administrative and HR purposes', but some said they did not trust this. Some participants backed this up, by recalling being on interview panels where this information had been accessible to interviewers and part of the assessment of candidates. Overall, the view of many participants was summarised by this person:

'Really, if you are looking to remove age discrimination, that question should not be asked.'

Man, 55, Health and Social Care, London

2.4.2 CVs and cover letters

The research also explored how participants approached applications involving CVs and cover letters. The survey asked three questions aimed at exploring to what extent older people adapt their job applications to avoid potential age discrimination. Among those aged 50-69:

- 14% said they had changed or reworded part of their job application (e.g. CV) to try to avoid age discrimination in selection process. Those from lower social grades were slightly less likely to say so (7% in social grades C2DE) compared with those from higher grades (18% in social grades ABC1).
- 7% said they would consider hiding their age when applying for a job (e.g. not putting it on their CV or the application form etc.). This remained stable across different demographic groups within the age range (including gender, age, income, employment status and social grade).
- 5% said they had avoided giving their age when applying for a job (e.g. not putting it on their CV or the application form etc.). Again, this remained stable across different demographic groups within the age range (including gender, age, income, employment status and social grade).

The interview also explored to what extent participants took actions to mitigate any potential negative age effects. Most prominently, people were asked whether they included their age or date of birth on their CV, and to what extent they provided indirect indicators of age, such as years of qualifications and employment history. Interview participants provided a mix of responses, ranging from those who put age on their CV by default but had never considered whether to do so or not, to those who had adopted deliberate strategies to conceal their age and counteract stereotypes associated with older workers.

Among those interview participants who put age/date of birth on their CV – by far the largest group in the population according to our survey – some had simply never considered leaving it out, and thought it was standard to provide this type of information to employers, alongside other demographic and contact information such as name, gender, address and phone number. Some of these participants said they had never known anyone to leave their age out, and that they had never been advised to. However, it was common for interview participants to then reflect on whether they had missed a trick with this and thought about experimenting with it in the future. Sometimes, it was noticeable that these respondents had never applied for jobs through

recruitment agencies. As described later, many participants reported that they had been recommended by recruitment agents to take age or date of birth off their CV.

Another common reason to put age on the CV was ethical. Many participants said they wanted to be honest and upfront in their job applications:

'I just put it down as I am. Honesty. I put everything upfront, who I am and my experience.'

Woman, 50, Education, South East

Many interview participants who cited reasons of honesty were certain that it reduced their chances of getting invited for interviews. For some of these participants, their personal circumstances meant they could afford to take this risk. For instance, a retail sales worker aged 69 recognised it was a moral standpoint and admitted he might have taken a different approach if he was desperate to get another job. Likewise, a senior investment banker aged 57 who always disclosed his age already had a well-paid job that he was reasonably happy with:

'By putting it on, you could be the one that ends up in the bin... But I'm one for just being upfront rather than keeping them guessing.'

Man, 57, Financial Services, London

'If you can't tell the truth, when you go for jobs, and you've got to lie your way into getting a job, there's no point in having the job. They've got to accept you as you are. They accept you for your age, for your experience, or they don't accept you at all.'

Man, 69, Retail and Wholesale, Yorkshire and the Humber

In fact, it was a common theme among interview participants to include age precisely because it reduced their chances of getting invited to interview. These participants had typically experienced overt age discrimination during interviews. The application process gave them a chance to highlight their older age to employers, giving employers a chance to filter them out during the application stage rather than during the interview process. This meant that candidates avoided wasting time on interviews for jobs for which they were destined to be rejected. These participants also said that experiencing age discrimination during interviews was painful, and by filtering themselves out they avoided the hurt and loss of confidence as a result. They felt it was less painful to be rejected online or by email or by receiving no response at all, rather than face-to-face during an interview:

'I think I did it purely because, in case I go for the interview and they get that shock of expecting someone younger, much younger, and then I turn up and I'm an older person.'

Woman, 63, Public Sector, London

'I don't know which is worse, to actually physically go in and see somebody, so they can say, "Oh that's an old bird, we don't want her".'

Woman, 57, Business Services, Midlands

One participant aged 60, working as an administrator in construction, reasoned that if you get the job by concealing your age, the employer will inevitably find out about your age and be inclined to terminate the job after the probation period. Therefore, he preferred to include his age to avoid any difficulties further down the line:

'If they feel you don't meet the criteria, even when they've hired you, I'm pretty sure they would find a way to find flaws to try and not get you into the job full-time. So full transparency is better, because you can manage your expectations, and they can manage their expectations as well.'

Man, 60, Property and Construction, Midlands

Some participants said that, while leaving out the age on their CV would potentially secure them more interviews, they did not believe it would affect the final outcome, as the age discrimination would simply appear later in the process. Being honest and upfront about their age and experiences in their CV and cover letter was a way of filtering out pointless interviews and time-consuming interview preparation. This meant they could put maximum efforts into interviews for roles they had a chance for:

'I just think, I'm going to put everything down so that I know, if I do get a call back, then they're aware of how old I am, and all the rest of it, and what my qualifications and experience are, rather than get a call back and they just say, "Oh, actually I didn't realise that you were an old fogey".'

Woman, 52, Public Sector, Midlands

'That's who I am. That's my age, It would be a complete waste of time, if someone actually said, "Oh those credentials sound fantastic, could you come and see us?" You go and see them, and they say, "Well, can I ask your age as well, if you don't mind?" Waste of their time and waste of my time.'

Man, 65, Retail and Wholesale, Yorkshire and the Humber

As we describe in more detail later, some participants had experimented with including and excluding their age on their CV. One of these participants – an IT consultant aged 65 – had noticed that hiding his age improved his chances of being invited for interviews, but not his subsequent job outcomes. Therefore, despite having evidence that excluding his age secured him more interviews, he still put his age on his CV:

'I know full well they are looking at the date of birth, and everyone says to me, "Well, don't put your date of birth on there". But then what's the point?... I'm wasting my time turning up for something that I know I'm not going to get, as soon as I sit down.'

Man, 65, Tech and Digital, London

A few participants had actively sought out information from employers about potential age preferences, before deciding whether it would be worthwhile applying for the job. For instance, one participant aged 57 said she saw an advert for a role in a high street fashion shop that she thought looked interesting. She went into the shop and expressed her interest, but asked whether it was meant for a specific age group and whether the role was suitable for older workers. In this instance, the employer said they actually normally had a fashion student from university in that role because it suited their hours. As a result, she did not apply, and was annoyed the employer did not put this in the job advert in the first place. This view was also expressed by another participant aged 73 who worked part-time in a lettings company. She said it would be much easier and prevent her wasting time if employers were more upfront about age preferences in job adverts.

It was very common for participants to add that employers can work out their age anyway due to their long employment history or their years or types of qualifications. They concluded that they might as well be honest and put their age upfront:

'I think [leaving my age out] would be disingenuous to be honest. I know all the advice these days is don't put you age on, but I think once you start putting on your job experience, they can work it out anyway.'

Man, 56, health and social care, South East

'I just thought, what's the point of not [putting the age down]. Because at some point, it's going to come out.'

Woman, 60, Public Sector, North West

It was also argued that the alternative of hiding your age may raise suspicion, as employers may think there is a reason you have left it out. For participants in their early and mid-50s, it was also felt that hiding their age could potentially work against them, as employers may wrongly believe they were even older than they were. In contrast, for older participants in their 60s, this same reasoning meant they considered leaving their age off since any potential wrong beliefs by recruiters could work in their favour. In contrast, providing their exact age in the 60s would cause employers to start wondering whether and when they would retire:

'They don't need to know exactly how old, and then start working out, "Oh when are they going to retire, how long are they going to be here?"'

Man, 53, Manufacturing and Transportation, North West

Some participants actively decided to put their age down, as it potentially reinforced their key selling point which was their vast experience:

'I think it might make a difference actually, to highlight that, yes I am 52, but look at what I have achieved in those years, and what else I can do. I can achieve more... I'm not giving in yet.'

Woman, 52, Public Sector, Yorkshire and the Humber

There were some other reasons why participants did not put age or date of birth on their CV. Most commonly, participants said their impression was that you are not supposed to put age on your CV nowadays, reinforced by the fact that recruitment agents had told them this and that it was due to risk of age discrimination:

'I was told three or four years ago, when I first really started the job process again, that you no longer have to put your age on there.'

Woman, 57, Business Services, Midlands

'[The agency] impressed upon me that there was no need. Because you didn't want to make the interviewer biased.'

Man, 57, Health and Social Care, South East

For some participants, the decision to exclude age/date of birth from their CV was very deliberate, and they had made the decision due to fear of age bias and age discrimination among employers and recruiters. For instance, a 63-year-old admin worker for a large clinical research company had made this decision around the time she turned 50:

'I guess my age was there up to the age of 50-52. I think after that, I started leaving it off, because I just felt it's going to go against me if I actually state it.'

Woman, 63, Business Services, South East

At the age of 58, she experienced a direct case of age discrimination, in which an employer had admitted to her after successful appointment that her age had been an important factor in their decision-making process and it had almost gone against her. This had reaffirmed her decision to omit age from her CV.

Participants said first impressions were crucial in the recruitment process. They thought that it was hard for employers to get away from those first impressions and any stereotypes that this caused. This meant that some participants consciously aimed to hide their age for as long as possible during the recruitment process. For instance, a 63-year-old manager in a professional services company said:

'I think there are stereotypes about people my age. Generally, I work with younger people. They are thinking about their mother or grandmother or something. If they actually find out your age, they put you into a box. So, I really want to not tell my age, sometimes until the last possible minute.'

Woman, 63, Business Services, London

However, many of the interview participants who left their age out on their CV, and who strongly believed in the merits of doing this, also recognised that employers would usually work it out anyway, due to other indirect indicators such as years of qualifications and their employment history:

'I always leave it out, unless it's requested, but I also think that by indicating your past experience, you've given a very good clue as to your age anyway, especially if you have to include your education. It's obvious within a couple of years how old you must be. But yes, I disguise my age in any way I can, because time is not on my side.'

Woman, 63, Business Services, London

'They can work it out from your job history. My first job was in the late 1970s, 40-odd years ago... It's not rocket science, they can guess within five years of your age.'

Woman, 65, Public Sector, East England

'It doesn't take a rocket scientist to look at the dates that you qualified for example, or to look at your first job, or to look at when you achieved your degree and then work backwards.'

Man, 57, Health and Social Care, South East

A similar pattern emerged in terms of indirect factors on CVs and cover letters. Interview participants were divided between those who were upfront about their years of qualifications and employment history, while others took more deliberate approaches to refine this to hide their older age and counteract potential negative age stereotypes.

Many of those who put most of their employment history and the years of their qualifications on their CV had simply never thought about this or considered it as an option to modify this information. Some participants had considered how to do so, but were not sure how to do it in an honest or lawful manner:

'I don't know how you'd do that without being unlawful, if you know what I mean. I've never manipulated things like that.'

Man, 50, Tech and Digital, London

Other interview participants had developed techniques to adapt their employment histories, especially based on advice from recruitment agents.

In particular, some participants left out the years of their qualifications and shortened their employment history to focus on their recent experiences. Others used a skills-based rather than chronological CV. Sometimes, this was partly in recognition of the fact that old experiences or skills were no longer relevant. However, at other times, the modifications were done primarily to conceal the applicant's age:

'My career history, it's a rich tapestry or a chequered past, depending on how you want to look at it. So it's easier just to simplify. People look at how many jobs you've had and think you must be old because of the jobs you've had. So I just trimmed down some of the stuff that seemed less important. And then just emphasised the modern stuff.'

Man, 52, Tech and Digital, East England

Sometimes participants described this process as 'dumbing down their CV'. This was particularly prevalent among older workers who, for various reasons, applied for jobs at a lower level of responsibility and pay than in the past, and had been given interview feedback that they were 'overqualified' or 'too experienced' for the job. For instance, a 63-year-old female admin worker in financial services said that she was proud of her experiences, including her legal background. However, she had learnt that interviewers and potential future managers could find it 'off putting' and 'intimidating', leading them to be concerned about why she wanted the job, whether she would stick with it, and whether she would be going for the manager's job in the future. Therefore, she modified her CV to make it similar to those of younger applicants:

'I try to streamline my application so that it looks like other people's. I've been a recruiter myself, so I'm thinking, I don't want to see somebody very different from all the other applications, I want to see someone better, but I don't want them to have too much.'

Woman, 63, Business Services, London

Another participant, a 50-year-old woman, had taken her university qualifications and previous managerial experiences off her CV when applying for lower skilled retail jobs, fearing that managers preferred people who were 'going to be after their job'. For the same reason, a 53-year-old worker in hospitality said she always shortened her career history, and sometimes put down that she had been a housewife rather than her previous role as managing director in a company.

However, there were also participants who had considered these types of modifications, but eventually decided against them. For instance, some participants were conscious that their key selling point was their vast experience. Therefore, while shortening or modifying their employment history would help by concealing their age, it would weaken their credentials at the same time. Alternatively, it may raise suspicion among employers:

‘Otherwise it looks like I'm a 65-year-old but I've only worked for the last 15 years. So, it is difficult to balance what you leave in and what you take out. Because otherwise it's, “Oh, what were you doing from the age of 20 to 40, because it's not in your CV?” You know, was he in prison or you know, it could be anything, couldn't it? Is there something he doesn't want people to know about those 20 years.’

Man, 65, Tech and Digital, London

Finally, some participants described how they were conscious, at application stage, of counteracting any negative age stereotypes. This included leaving out hobbies associated with older people, such as reading, watching TV or knitting, and instead inserting hobbies and interests that were considered ‘young and healthy’. Examples included exercising, travelling and aspects related to technology as well as anything showing creativity, progressiveness or willingness and ability to challenge yourself and learn new things.

2.5 Selection

As described earlier, many participants described how their perception and fear of age discrimination partly stemmed from the increasing number of job rejections they experienced, especially the failure to get invited to interviews for jobs for which they were clearly well qualified. While some participants recognised that their lack of success could be reflective of an increasingly difficult labour market, including among younger workers, others wondered whether this was due to age discrimination. The interviews for this research were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, but these experiences pre-dated COVID-19, including in the preceding years where the UK had a relatively strong labour market with low unemployment rates. These fears and perceptions led to several concerns related to the selection process for interviews.

Participants who felt they were discriminated against in the early stages of recruitment were often frustrated that they were rarely invited to interviews. Interviews would offer them a chance to show that they could do the job and to counter any potential negative age stereotypes, but they rarely got the chance to demonstrate this:

'Once you get to the human element, especially once you get a face-to-face conversation, then it's much easier personally for me. But obviously you have to get to that stage.'

Woman, 63, Business Services, London

'You've to get to that interview process, so they can meet you and see that you are fit and able to do this. You're not doddering around on walking sticks or something.'

Woman, 60, Health and Social Care, London

Several participants also felt that they had been invited to interviews to make up numbers and to ensure diversity in candidates. The employer would therefore be seen to be giving older candidates a chance even if they did not subsequently hire them. Participants recognised this was impossible to prove. For some participants, the perception was reinforced by experiences where interviewers had demonstrated little enthusiasm during the interview or when employers had given feedback after interviews that they were looking for someone with different skills and experiences. This led participants to question why they had been invited for interviews in the first place.

It should also be noted that a few participants had actually made their own experiments to confirm their own suspicion of the existence of age discrimination in the selection phase. Similar to existing academic evidence, but without knowledge of this, the participants had experimented by submitting identical or very similar applications to different jobs and in one instance even to the same job. After a succession of rejections, they wanted to prove to themselves that their CV and cover letter were effective despite their limited success. Similar to the academic evidence (see Riach, 2015; Tinsley, 2012; Riach & Rich, 2010 for studies based in the UK), two of these participants had seen clear evidence of age discrimination in the selection phase, as they had suddenly received a call up for the next stage of the recruitment phase. They had subsequently pulled out of the process as they did not want to get into trouble further down the line.

2.6 Interview and assessment

The interview participants had experienced a wide variety of types of

assessment. They had attended face-to-face interviews, and sometimes phone and online interviews, especially following COVID-19 and the lockdown. Participants said they increasingly attended second interviews, and increasingly pre-interviews or first interviews by phone and online – sometimes with the recruitment agency and sometimes with the employer. We also interviewed participants who had experiences of attending assessment centres and doing different types of aptitude tests, both online, or doing assessment centres immediately before or after face-to-face interviews. Finally, some participants had also engaged in less formal methods such as conversations with managers or directors, although most said this was increasingly a thing of the past.

2.6.1 Interviews

Most research participants said age never came up directly during interviews. They remarked that employers knew they had to be careful about any potential age discrimination, and interviewers were described as 'guarded' and 'professional'. One participant also noted that he would likely never notice even blatant age discrimination during interviews, as he was usually nervous and focused on performing:

'You're answering all these questions and you're kind of nervous yourself during the interview. So, you don't really look out for things like, is this person discriminating against me?'

Man, 50, Tech and Digital, London

However, other participants had seen examples of age coming up either directly or indirectly. For instance, a retail worker described how she was 'taken aback' by an interviewer who said they were 'actually looking for someone younger because we actually feel they would fit more to the job.' In another case, a participant was 'put on the back foot straight away' when the interviewer had told her that they were interviewing other younger candidates and that she was the oldest.

Participants often noted that they could sometimes 'sense', 'see' or 'smell' the disappointment among interviewers and recruiters once they entered the interview room and their age was indirectly revealed through their appearance. In these instances, participants felt that interviewers subsequently hurried through the interview and wanted to wrap it up quickly. The interviewers were seen as 'going through the motions' and 'sticking to their script', but they showed no enthusiasm or interest in them as a candidate. As some participants acknowledged, the tendency to follow a corporate script and the lack of enthusiasm may not necessarily reflect age bias but could simply be due to bad interviewing techniques. However, in these cases, participants strongly felt it was related to the perceived disappointment and interviewers' body language when they walked into the

room, which they could only assume was related to their appearance and age. These participants felt interviewers had already made their decision and had no intention to subsequently hire them. Participants felt they were not given a fair chance during these interviews, as it was almost over before it began.

'You get the vibe whether you're clicking with them or not, and you can tell sometimes if they're looking for a younger person or whether they're looking for someone of your age and experience. You can just normally tell.'

Woman, 50, Education, South East

'I do sometimes get the feeling, as soon as they see me, when I've gone for an interview, I've got that feeling that they're looking at me and thinking, "Oh no, she's too old", and they've hurried through the interview. I don't know if it's my age, but I'm thinking it is... Of course, you can't prove that. But there have been a couple of interviews, as soon as I've walked in, I've noticed the look on their face, and I've thought, I'm not going to get this. And they've really wound it up quickly, and I've tried to ask them a couple of questions, and they were just not interested.'

Woman, 63, Business Services, South East

Some participants also reported attending interviews where interviewers not only seemed half-hearted and lacked enthusiasm once they saw them, but they also actively tried to persuade participants that the job was not suitable for them. A 53-year-old truck driver felt his age and small physique had led employers to discount him at first glance:

'Instead of just saying "Sod off you're old", he was just saying everything he could to put me off. The type of work being done, the manual stress. I am not the biggest of guys, so he assumed I am also quite weak. Everything was just, this isn't for you... There was a wall there, pretty much immediately. I'd be a lot happier if he'd turned round and said, "Look mate you're old and skinny, you're not for us, go".'

Man, 53, Manufacturing and Transportation, North West

Similarly, during an interview for a receptionist job in a lettings company, an interviewer had tried to talk a participant out of the job, including asking whether she really wanted the long commute and even whether her dog

could be alone for that long. The interviewer also asked when she planned to retire:

'I could see he wanted me to say, "You know, I don't think this job is really for me", to save him the embarrassment or bother or guilt.'

Woman, 63, Business Services, South East

In another example, a 57-year-old female participant had spoken to the owner of a small wine company on the phone, who had been very enthusiastic about her application and wanted her to start the same week. She was invited to come to the office the same day. However, once she was there, the enthusiasm disappeared and she was repeatedly asked whether she could lift heavy boxes with wine. Despite her reassurances, including pointing out she practised karate, did weight training and jogged every day, she still sensed this was an issue. From wanting her to start the same week, the employer suddenly informed her that they were seeing more potential applicants. She never heard back from them, and felt she had been a victim of a combination of sex and age discrimination.

Some participants noted that they were often interviewed by younger people. Most participants felt there were no noticeable differences in the approach of older and younger interviewers, often recognising that interview panels were following a structured set of questions. However, other participants preferred older interviewers, since they felt better able to build rapport and connect with them during the interview. Some also said they adjusted their answers to the age of interviewers. However, this was not always effective. A 63-year-old woman working in financial services – who described herself as comfortable with all age groups, especially due to her current job and having children in their 20s – still sometimes felt that younger interviewers saw her as an older candidate.

'I tailor my answers to their age group a little bit. So with an older person, yes, I have more instant rapport and we have more things in common and I can speak to them maybe on another level, but I am still very familiar with all age groups. But I see it more on their side, that they feel as if they're talking to their mother sometimes. I really, I can sense that, and it's really difficult to, I can't do anything about that, because clearly I am their mother's age, so it's very difficult to sometimes get round that, but I feel from my point of view, yes I try and adapt, but I'm not sure that they can necessarily.'

Woman, 63, Business Services, London

Some candidates said that younger interviewers sometimes had different styles and types of questions. Two participants who both worked in the IT industry had experienced that younger interviewers tested them to see whether they kept up with the newest technology or whether they fit the stereotype of having outdated skills, or what was commonly referred to in the IT industry as being a 'grey beard':

'I've actually found that the younger interviewers always want to prove themselves to be the smart poppies. You always tend to get more technically challenging interviews with a younger interviewer than an older interviewer, definitely... I probably prefer the tougher style of interview because it allows me to demonstrate, you're not dealing with a 'grey beard' here.'

Man, 53, Tech and Digital, North West

'They'll think of some very small niche thing, something that's just been invented or some digital phrase, what do you think about that? I know what you're trying to say here, do I keep up ... you're saying do I keep up with techies? I do. They're just trying to catch you out a little bit.'

Man, 52, Tech and Digital, East England

A few participants also said it affected their own confidence when they faced young interview panels, making them feel 'old', 'inferior' and 'intimidated', and it made some participants question whether they should be attending interviews at their age:

'When you've got a young panel in front of you, it automatically comes in your head. They are all quite young, and I'm 52, and it makes you feel a little bit old... You think, maybe am I going to be the oldest in the company. You do question why am I sat here, and maybe I should have done a little bit more research into the company.'

Woman, 52, Public Sector, Yorkshire and the Humber

'It made me feel just slightly inferior. It makes you question yourself. Should I be sat here? Should I be applying for jobs? It makes you think, should I just stick at what I've got, now I am this age? It doesn't fill you with loads of confidence.'

52, Woman, Business Services, Yorkshire and the Humber.

It was common for participants to observe that many interviews were conducted using a set of predetermined questions. Some participants recognised that employers had introduced interview scripts partly to counter unconscious biases during the interview process and ensure that all candidates were asked the same questions and evaluated on the same criteria. However, as described earlier, sometimes structured interview formats were seen as 'robotic' and it felt like interviewers were 'going through the motions'. Participants sometimes felt the rigid structure exacerbated their perception that interviewers lacked enthusiasm or interest in them as a candidate.

Furthermore, a few participants felt interview scripts were sometimes designed for younger candidates. Whether consciously or subconsciously, specific questions sometimes revealed employers' preferences for younger candidates. This included questions about future career progression and where candidates saw themselves in five to ten years' time. While other participants in the sample would likely have welcomed such questions as they treat older workers in the same way as younger workers by acknowledging they can also have future career plans and ambitions for progression, these participants felt these questions would be easier to answer for younger applicants who could demonstrate ambition and the desire to grow in the organisation, while older workers such as themselves would not genuinely be able to say this due to their limited time until retirement. When interviewers did not adapt these questions or ask follow-up questions, these participants – especially those closer to retirement – felt it showed that employers were not taking them seriously as older candidates, but that they were merely there to make up the numbers:

'I just felt they weren't really taking my interview that seriously. I almost felt they were just going through the motions, just quite robotic, they didn't seem interested. They didn't do any follow-up questions. And I just felt that I'm here to make up the numbers.'

Woman, 65, Public Sector, East England

'If they're looking to recruit somebody that's going to be with them and grow with the company, I'm 65, I'm not growing with the company, you know. I'm not looking to enhance my CV or my experience in the company, at 65. You know, I'm looking for a job that pays a salary.'

Man, 65, Tech and Digital, London

Some participants, usually those who had worked for the same employer for a long time, said they had limited interviewing experience and in fact, some participants had not attended any interviews since their 20s. They said they needed more practice to get completely comfortable and confident with the process, including modern interviews such as competency questions. Often, participants said they had fairly quickly developed these skills. However, others said they got selected to interviews so rarely, potentially due to age discrimination, that they never had the chance to develop these skills.

More generally, participants discussed the perceived advantages and disadvantages of modern interview techniques, including the move to using phone and online interviews. Participants felt these were increasingly used as first or pre-interviews or as main interviews, especially during COVID-19 and the lockdown. Some participants said they preferred blind interviews by phone, as age and appearance would not be a factor. Others said they preferred the more personable approach of face-to-face interviews. Similar to the findings on participants' attitudes to showing their age on CVs and applications, some participants actively wanted their age to be directly or indirectly revealed. They preferred 'showing my whole person, take it or leave it', in order to avoid wasting time later in the assessment process. A few participants said that, rather than hide their age during interviews, they would rather be actively open and proud about their older age. Again, this attitude reflects the previous discussions about some participants' desire to be honest and upfront about their age on their CVs:

'When they ask for introductions, I always say, I'm 65 years old. I tell them. I feel very proud that I'm still working, you know... I don't think about whether it is an advantage or disadvantage. I just put myself out there as I am, you know. If they accept it, all well and good. Otherwise, I keep on trying.'

Woman, 65, Health and Social Care, London

Finally, some participants felt age discrimination was not an issue during interviews because they did not look their age. Other participants were conscious of their appearance and how their age would come across. Some said they tried to look younger and more presentable for interviews, including by hiding physical injuries or health issues, acting energetic, wearing makeup and dyeing their hair:

'I wear make-up which makes me look a little bit younger. I try to hide my grey hairs and basically look after my appearance... outwardly as well as inwardly, I have to be presentable to get hired... I went through the process of dyeing my hair and all the rest of that nonsense... At the time it was purely an effort to look more attractive to the working market.'

Man, 63, Hospitality, Midlands

The survey showed that this is not unusual across the population. Among those aged 50-69, 13% had felt the need to act in a way that made them seem younger than they were when applying for a job.

2.6.2 Assessment days and tests

Some participants spoke about their experiences of attending assessment centres. The experiences were mixed among participants in the sample. Some said they felt age did not play a factor during assessment days, with one participant noting that the activities were usually structured and outcomes would be based on objective measures. However, compared to traditional interviews, assessment centres often involved interaction with other candidates. Participants said they had been involved in group activities where they were far older than other applicants who were typically in their 20s or 30s. This in itself was not a problem, but it could lead to a number of issues. Some participants highlighted that it could lead to unintentional bias from fellow applicants or mentions of their age, though this was not meant in a discriminatory way:

'The only time you might encounter bias, which I think would not be intentional, it would be more accidental, would be with your fellow applicants during a team work exercise. If you're a 60-year-old and you're there with a load of 35 or 40-year-olds it might be that they could think you're a bit slower than them physically or mentally in doing things. They perhaps don't disguise that prejudice, but that's not coming from the recruiter.'

Man, 60, Business Services, London

'When you have to talk about yourself, I always mentioned, "My name's Jenny, I've got two children and a grandson". So one of the things was like, "Oh my goodness, I can't believe you're that old, you don't look that old".'

Woman, 52, Public Sector, Midlands

The age differences were also reflected in the discussions in the group. While other participants explained that they had just come out of university or done their gap year, the participants felt their stories stood out, for instance when they explained their decision to change sector. Sometimes, younger applicants' mentality felt different:

'I'm kind of coming towards the part of my career where I just want to relax and chill. Whereas they're really, "I'm really energetic, I really want to go, I'm really hungry". And I kind of thought I'm not that person.'

Woman, 52, Public Sector, Midlands

Some participants were conscious of the age differences within the groups and sometimes felt it affected their own confidence. One participant, in particular, described it as 'daunting' and felt that she had become more nervous as a result and it had affected her performance during the assessment day.

Some participants had also experienced having to complete various aptitude tests, either performed online or during the assessment day or before or after face-to-face interviews. Two themes, in particular, emerged from the interviews. Firstly, some participants found it stressful to do timed tests and felt they tended to do better in traditional interviews:

'[The tests] make me cringe and I'm such a perfectionist that I always want to get the highest mark. I'm sitting there, and they're normally timed, and you can see the time ticking down on the screen. It makes the whole experience so awful. So, I'm not convinced that I always do myself justice at that.'

Woman, 56, Health and Social Care, South East

These participants sometimes wondered whether timed tests disadvantaged older workers, and they noted it was not necessarily an appropriate way of assessing their future work performance as they would rarely be timed during tasks in their normal day-to-day work:

'I know, because I've been in the workplace for over 30 years, that your mind worked quicker when you were younger. I think maybe the mind ticks over a bit more slowly and you become more considered in your responses, as you're getting older. You're sort of thinking, well, the interviewer is wanting an answer here, whereas the young go-getter type would just fire the answer back whether it's right or wrong.'

Woman, 56, Health and Social Care, South East

'My son's gone through everything, and he does it so quickly, and when it comes to me, he said, "Come on mum, do it, think", but I can't think that quickly. It's me, you know.'

Woman, 65, Health and Social Care, London

Some participants also felt the tests did not always necessarily assess the skills required for the job. For instance, a couple of participants working as admin staff always struggled with the Maths tests during assessment centres and were frustrated because they did not feel these skills were necessary for the job. They described how it felt like being back in school, with questions about fractions and puzzles, which they assumed younger candidates would have much more recent experiences with.

2.7 Outcome and feedback

Among the participants interviewed, no-one had been told directly in the outcome or feedback from employers and agencies that their age had been a factor in the final outcome. Participants recognised that employers had strong incentives to avoid mentioning age. Participants said that even when age was a factor, very few employers 'would ever be stupid enough to say so'. Instead, employers were reported to give positive feedback, but ultimately say they had found another 'more suitable candidate', 'someone with more experience' or 'someone who ticked more boxes'. Participants described this type of feedback as 'generic', 'vague' and 'meaningless', with employers and agencies falling into 'stock, legal and compliance-approved answers'. When agencies were involved, the feedback often came through recruitment agents: one participant described agents as particularly adept in giving compliance-approved answers and as 'skilled in giving bad news'. Another wondered whether recruiters and agencies provide more feedback to younger people, including on how to avoid mistakes in the future, to give them a better chance in future interviews. As a 60-year-old, he wondered whether recruiters had the same incentives to provide this advice to him:

'I think in the case of the older person, [the recruiter] is not interested in that "development, let's help you" thing. It's like we need to move on to the task at hand and begone with you.'

Man, 60, Business Services, London

Sometimes, the generic type of feedback frustrated participants. For instance, some had been told they didn't have the 'profile we were looking for', but then wondered why they were invited to the interview in the first place. This contributed to the perception that workers thought they were sometimes invited to interviews to fulfil a quota, for instance to provide

evidence that employers gave older workers a fair chance in the recruitment process. In reality, they felt they did not have a chance, and instead wasted their time.

In a few cases, participants felt employers had come close to revealing their age-related reasons. A couple of participants had been told by employers they had offered the job to somebody younger, and thought it was strange to specifically mention the age of the successful candidate unless it had been a factor in their decision. Participants, especially those applying for roles with less responsibility and pay, were often told they were 'too experienced' or 'overqualified' for a vacancy. While these participants recognised this feedback could also be given to younger candidates, they often felt this was code for age discrimination:

'They wanted someone less experienced than me, which is a nice way of saying someone younger, I think.'

Man, 57, Health and Social Care, South East

The most common theme among participants was the frustration about the lack of feedback provided by employers, even after having gone through interviews and assessments. As described earlier, this vacuum opened up a range of thoughts and doubts about why their application was rejected, including whether age discrimination or other discrimination was at play:

'You walk away when you don't get the role, you just think it must be this... It's just demons in my mind, saying you know what, I didn't get the job because it was my age, or they didn't want an Asian person to work here, or they wanted a younger person to work there. These are just all things in my mind, the reasons why I didn't get the job.'

Man, 50, Tech and Digital, London

One participant described how slow feedback had almost cost her another job. While waiting to hear back from an employer after an interview, she received another job offer but delayed her reply as long as possible as it was not her ideal job. Eventually, she contacted the first employer and was finally told about the negative outcome, and she was just in time to accept the other job offer. Other participants explained they were frustrated about the lack of replies and feedback. It made them feel less valued. One participant said it had made her upset at first, but now she had got used to it. A few participants had thought about asking for more detailed feedback, but generally did not bother. At the end of the day, they would not expect any more detailed feedback, and knew they would not be able to persuade the employer to give them the job at that stage anyway.

Participants recognised and understood that employers had strong incentives to keep their feedback generic and vague. Employers wish to protect themselves, and by saying nothing or by saying something generic, they made sure they were complying with rules and regulations and avoided potential lawsuits. In particular, participants said employers would never use age as a specific reason, even if this had been part of their decision making:

'They can't put, "Well sorry, you've been unsuccessful, you old bag".'

Woman, 58, Financial Services, Yorkshire and the Humber

'I was fuming that they didn't get back to me. But then I actually thought, well what are they going to say? Because whatever they say is not going to be the truth. They can't tell me the truth, can they? They can't say, "Well actually, we thought you're too old for the job".'

Woman, 57, Business Services, Midlands

2.8 Considering further legal action

Participants were asked whether they had ever considered taking legal action due to perceived age discrimination during the recruitment process. A few participants had considered it briefly but had decided against it. A social care worker felt it would be difficult to prove, an admin worker feared it would be stressful, and a worker in the motor manufacturing industry feared it would worsen his reputation and his future employment prospects in the industry:

'I have thought about it, but I think for me, taking legal action, I would find that very stressful. Having had friends do something similar, I don't know if I could cope with that. If it is worth it, I guess, if I felt strongly enough about something, I might.'

Woman, 63, Business Services, South East

'The [damage to my reputation] would be worse than my age, because the UK-based motor manufacturing industry is very close-knit, people know each other. There are two big dinner awards at the Grosvenor Hotel in London every year and everybody meets up at both of them. If you complained about something, there would definitely be somebody telling somebody at a table, "You'll never guess what happened".'

Man, 53, Retail and Wholesale, North West

Generally, most participants who felt they had experienced age discrimination had clearly not contemplated taking legal action. They said it would be stressful on a personal level and that it would be hard to prove, especially as employers were very careful about mentioning age explicitly. As a result, participants felt it would not be 'worthwhile' or 'worth the hassle' to invest energy into taking legal action.

Some participants also made the point that taking legal action would not actually lead to getting the job, even if they were proven right. Some went further, saying they would not want to work in a place that practised age discrimination. Participants felt their time could be used more productively, such as actually applying for jobs or working shifts:

'I wouldn't get the job in the end. I mean, I'm not going to spend months on something which, at the very most, would be a very minimal compensation if you won it.'

Woman, 65, Public Sector, East England

'I mean what's the point in taking legal action against somebody for not getting a job? Because you're never going to get that job, even if you're proven right.'

Man, 65, Tech and Digital, London

'You just push it to one side and think, "Oh well, that's another thing". I'm not going to go back there, I have just wasted my time.'

Woman, 50, Education, South East

One participant also mentioned she would be concerned about the two younger nurses who she felt had discriminated against her based on her age, but otherwise seemed 'lovely' and possibly had not realised the potential consequences of their actions:

'I wouldn't take legal action. I wouldn't do that to two young girls. That would ruin their livelihood... She could lose her job, she's a young girl, most probably got family. I'm not going to ruin her livelihood.'

Woman, 66, Health and Social Care, South West

Similarly, very few participants had ever complained directly to an employer about perceived age discrimination during the recruitment process. As with the prospect of legal action, participants felt their energy would be wasted:

'I was going to complain. I really was going to complain. But I just thought the energy that I would put into the complaint, they aren't worthy of my energy.'

Woman, 57, business services, Midlands

'I'd rather put my energy into doing something worthwhile, trying to find a job.'

Woman, 65, Public Sector, East England

One participant had once called up following the interview and asked what the point was of calling him into an interview when they already knew his age. But this had not been particularly useful, as the employer would not engage directly: they seemed cautious about saying something that could 'put them in a bad light or get them into trouble.' Another participant said she had considered asking for more detailed feedback but did not want to bring up the question of age discrimination as that would be uncomfortable and 'you wouldn't want to accuse anyone of that'.

Finally, people had taken less formal 'actions', such as speaking to family, colleagues and friends. Indeed, participants often spoke about friends who had been in the same situation and found it increasingly difficult to get jobs past a certain age. One participant noted that he had not spoken to anyone apart from his family. He saw it as an embarrassment that he had reached an age where you start experiencing age discrimination:

'The only time I've ever talked about it to anybody is to you. I wear it as a badge of shame. It's like anything bad, you don't want to think about it, you shut it out... I've got the same skill set as a younger person, and [in my head] I don't want to admit that I'm being discriminated against for my age.'

Man, 53, Tech and Digital, North West

Conclusion

This report presents findings on the significant barriers and challenges experienced by older workers and jobseekers in the recruitment process. The report shows that age discrimination largely operates covertly and out of direct sight of job applicants. As a result, this report contains relatively few outright examples of overt age discrimination. Despite the absence of water-tight evidence of age discrimination by employers, many older jobseekers nevertheless have a strong ‘suspicion’ and ‘feeling’ that age bias plays a fundamental role in the recruitment process. While older workers could rarely point to cases of ‘age discrimination’, they felt they were at a definite ‘disadvantage’ due to their age. This perception was based on picking up and interpreting signs and indications by employers during the recruitment process itself as well as experiences in the workplace.

Some older jobseekers recognised this could reflect their perceptions rather than the reality, but it is worth noting that existing academic employer-facing evidence backs up their suspicions: for instance, otherwise identical candidates are more likely to be selected when they are younger (see Riach, 2015; Tinsley, 2012; Riach & Rich, 2010 for studies based in the UK). Negative age-related stereotypes are prominent among employers, and these can affect people’s attitudes and behaviours (see Swift & Steeden (2020) for a recent review).

Regardless to what extent age bias affects behaviours and decisions by employers, the report shows that it is felt acutely among older jobseekers during every step of the recruitment process. These experiences in the recruitment process, and the fears of age discrimination, have a profound impact on older people’s careers and job prospects. It affects older people’s confidence, self-esteem and their sense of worth to society. For some, age discrimination during the recruitment process is their first reminder that they are entering older age and that they are getting closer to retirement, and is even seen as a ‘badge of shame’ that they have reached that stage of life.

The research shows that these factors sometimes affect the decisions of older jobseekers in the recruitment process, such as whether to apply for jobs at all or to stay with ‘the devil you know’, what level of jobs to apply for, what type of organisations to apply for, and how candidates portray

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themselves and their age in applications and during interviews. This includes deliberate decisions to reveal older age precisely so employers have a chance to filter them out at an early stage, to avoid wasting time on potentially painful experiences later in the recruitment process. It also includes decisions to leave out potentially important work experiences to conceal their older age.

The job application process often left older jobseekers frustrated regardless of their individual circumstances and ambitions for their remaining working lives. Some older jobseekers, who did not necessarily want to progress in the labour market or even wanted to take a step down in pay and responsibility, felt their previous experience stood in their way. They encountered stereotypes associated with older workers such as being too independent, being unhappy to take orders from younger managers and being unmotivated for the job. In contrast, other older jobseekers, who wanted to maintain their position or progress in the labour market, faced other stereotypes. These included being unlikely to stay in the job for long and therefore not growing within the company, being less able to pick up new skills, and being less likely to adapt and comply with manager demands.

Finally, the survey findings suggest that the challenges and barriers faced by older jobseekers, detailed in depth in this report, are not limited to the older age group. The survey found that many people in all age groups perceive themselves to be subject to age discrimination. This finding suggests that further attention needs to be given to the hiring and recruitment process for workers of all ages. Overall, this study identifies significant challenges in tackling age discrimination in recruitment. The fact that age bias and age discrimination is often concealed and difficult to pinpoint, and that it exists during all phases of the recruitment process, means it will be difficult to eradicate. Much like other unconscious biases and stereotypes, it will require a concerted effort among employers and recruiters to tackle this issue.

This report forms part of Ageing Better's research programme 'Good Recruitment of Older Workers', aimed at developing, testing and communicating new and improved recruitment approaches directly with employers and recruitment organisations. In addition to some of the broader findings outlined above, the interview research – which included an in-depth exploration of older workers' experiences of each phase of the recruitment process – raised a number of specific additional questions that would be useful to consider. For each of the main stages of recruitment, these include, but are not limited to:

Advertising stage:

- **How can requirements and language within job specifications be adapted to be seen as age neutral?** Since older jobseekers have strong assumptions that employers hold age-related stereotypes, they often assume that job specifications that contain requirements or language related to these stereotypes might indicate an implicit preference for younger workers. Sometimes, this discourages older workers, even those who see themselves as, say, ‘dynamic’ or ‘energetic’, to apply for the job due to anticipation of age discrimination. A separate Ageing Better project will explore language in job adverts, but this project suggests that employers need to be more aware of how they use language related to age-related stereotypes, and how similar skills and experiences can potentially be worded differently.

Application stage:

- **Should employers adjust or remove the monitoring and inclusion sections of application forms?** It was common among older jobseekers to suspect that the demographic information collected was used to assess and select candidates, including by algorithms to filter out older candidates. Even among those who recognised that the official purpose was to monitor outcomes for protected groups, there was a suspicion that employers also used it for assessment and selection. Again, this is likely to be a perception shared by other protected groups, such as ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and younger people.
- **Should application forms be made more flexible?** Application forms were sometimes seen as time consuming and unsuitable for older candidates. Requirements to include all work experiences and qualifications, for instance, sometimes made the application process more time consuming for older candidates as they typically had more work experiences. This made it harder to conceal their older age through shortening work experiences. Application forms are often used by employers exactly to counteract potential biases, by standardising the process, excluding personal details and ensuring that candidates are judged on the same merits and by excluding personal details. However, consideration should be given to how this objectivity can be retained while allowing applicants to present their full experience.

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- **How can more jobseekers be made aware that it is not required to include age or date of birth on their CVs?** The vast majority of older workers (more than 90%) have never hidden this information on their job applications, nor had they adapted their employment histories to conceal their age. This report does not explore whether this is an effective approach to mitigate age discrimination. However, the research finds a lack of awareness among older jobseekers that the possibility exists, at least when applicants are only required to submit a CV and cover letter. Age-friendly employers could be more explicit about the information required from applicants on their CV. This could include specifying that they only require name and contact details on applicant CVs, and that demographic information such as gender, age or ethnicity is not needed.

Selection and feedback stage:

- **How can employers and recruiters improve their system of feedback to unsuccessful job applicants?** This study indicates that older workers who are repeatedly unsuccessful during the early stages of recruitment, see the process as impersonal, frustrating and time-consuming. In the absence of meaningful feedback, older jobseekers – rightly or wrongly – interpret their lack of success in getting interviews to be due to their age, and they struggle to come up with ways to improve their applications. This is likely to be a perception shared by other protected groups, such as ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, younger people, and other groups facing labour market disadvantage on.

Interview and assessment stage:

- **The research showed the importance of having diverse selection panels, including by age.** Non-diverse panels can lead candidates from diverse backgrounds to perceive potential disadvantage: loss of confidence in the process can affect interview performance. The findings also show that employers and recruiters should consider how they come across to job applicants during interviews. It is often said that selection panels judge the suitability of an interviewee within the first few minutes, and a number of older workers said they felt this had happened to them. It was typically experienced as a lack of engagement from the very start of the interview. Given that invitation to interview was a positive sign of interest, this was often seen as evidence that the applicant's appearance, such as their age, had made them re-evaluate the application. In some instances, this made older job applicants feel frustrated and had affected their interview performance.

The study also points to gaps in evidence. We have identified potential future research areas to improve the understanding of age discrimination within the recruitment process and how this manifests itself. These include, but are not limited to, research to understand the following:

Conclusion

- **The recruitment experiences of younger and middle-aged candidates.** As an example, the survey showed that a surprisingly large proportion of people in their 20s felt they had been rejected for jobs because they were ‘too old’. This suggests that discrimination based on age can occur in different ways and for different reasons. For example, young people in their late 20s may be rejected in favour of younger applicants who are not eligible for the National Living Wage and seen as more suited for entry level roles.
- **How people internalise their age, and how this affects their behaviours and decisions.** The recruitment process, for some older jobseekers, served as the first reminder that they were considered as an older person, and it is important to explore what other areas make people approaching later life recognise they are considered older, especially if they subsequently internalise this and begin to act differently as a result, including effectively discriminating against themselves. The broader topic of stereotypes of older people and workers is a well-researched area, but potential internalisation of stereotypes is not. Furthermore, like most stereotypes, the ones associated with older people and workers are not necessarily true, especially for particular individuals. As this study shows that stereotypes are still rife in the recruitment process and felt acutely by older jobseekers, it is worth exploring how to effectively myth-bust certain stereotypes about older workers, especially among employers.
- **How recruitment agencies go about securing jobs for older candidates,** including whether they provide any specific advice and support to older jobseekers, such as how to conceal their age or mitigate negative age stereotypes and whether employers/clients tell them about their age preferences, as well as exploring to what extent recruitment agents themselves are affected by age bias and negative stereotypes.
- **How age stereotypes are internalised, and how they can be counteracted.** While stereotypes are a well-researched area, there is limited evidence on what works to overcome stereotypes and give older workers more confidence in the application process.
- **The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the recruitment process,** including its effects on the behaviours, stereotypes and decisions by employers in relation to older job applicants, as well as the behaviours and decisions by older jobseekers. Interviews with older jobseekers for this report were conducted between June and August 2020, in the early phases of the pandemic and no clear impact was apparent. It is possible that older workers are now further disadvantaged through being seen as more vulnerable to illness. However, the switch to home working may lead some employers to place less emphasis on team dynamics and image, and more on experience and proven responsibility.

Appendix 1:

Survey and interview methodology

We conducted a nationally-representative poll of 1,000 UK adults aged 18 and over, with an additional booster sample of 539 people aged 50 and over. In total, 1,539 respondents were interviewed online between 28 August and 1 September 2020. Data is weighted to be representative of the population by gender, age, region, social grade, education and past vote. Targets are based on data from the ONS.

We carried out 55 semi-structured interviews during the period between June and August 2020. The interviews were conducted by phone or video call, and lasted around 45 minutes each. The participants were recruited by a market research company (MRFGR) and paid £30 to participate. All participants were aged 50 and over and currently in work or furloughed. All participants had either changed jobs or looked for jobs in the past 12 months and/or intended to look and apply for jobs during the next 12 months. The participants were sampled to include a mix in terms of characteristics, such as age (within the 50 and over age bracket), gender, region within England, ethnicity, employment status, sector, and socioeconomic status. The recruitment was done in two stages in terms of sampling for whether participants had experienced age discrimination. The first 20 participants were recruited without any criteria and the next 35 participants had answered ‘yes’ to the following question: ‘Do you feel your age has ever hindered you in finding work, or do you feel you have ever experienced any type of age bias or age discrimination when trying to move jobs?’.

The sample is not representative of the wider population; instead what we aimed to do was sample participants purposively in order to highlight a diverse range of views and circumstances, with a specific focus on people with experiences of age bias and age discrimination. When analysing the data, we were not seeking to understand prevalence – as with the survey – but rather what underpinned people’s experiences. The tables below provide more information about interview participants within the study. Table 1 provides information about the overall sample, and Table 2 lists individual participants.

Table 1. Characteristics of the interview sample

Characteristic / demographic		Number & proportion, % (rounded so may add up to over 100%)
Gender	Female	29 (53%)
	Male	26 (47%)
Age	50-54	19 (35%)
	55-59	18 (33%)
	60-64	10 (18%)
	65+	8 (15%)
Region in England	London	17 (31%)
	South East	10 (18%)
	North West	9 (16%)
	Yorkshire and the Humber	8 (15%)
	Midlands	7 (13%)
	East England	2 (4%)
	South West	1 (2%)
	North East	1 (2%)
Employment status	Full-time	26 (47%)
	Part-time	11 (20%)
	Furloughed	17 (31%)
	Unemployed	1 (2%)
Sector	Business and professional services	9 (16%)
	Health and social care	8 (15%)
	Education	7 (13%)
	Retail and wholesale	6 (11%)
	Public sector	6 (11%)
	Hospitality	5 (9%)
	Tech and digital	4 (7%)
	Property and construction	4 (7%)
	Financial services	3 (5%)
	Manufacturing and transport	2 (4%)
	Agriculture	1 (2%)
Ethnicity	White	41 (75%)
	Asian/Asian British	9 (16%)
	Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	4 (7%)
	Mixed	1 (2%)
Total		55 (100%)

Table 2. Individual participants in the interview sample

Age	Gender	Region	Employment status	Sector	Ethnicity
51	Male	North West	Furloughed	Agriculture	White
57	Female	Midlands	Part-time	Business Services	White
60	Male	London	Full-time	Business Services	White
63	Female	South East	Part-time	Business Services	White
63	Female	London	Furloughed	Business Services	White
61	Female	London	Full-time	Business Services	Asian
58	Male	Midlands	Full-time	Business Services	White
52	Female	Yorkshire and the Humber	Full-time	Business Services	White
69	Male	North West	Part-time	Business Services	White
55	Male	London	Full-time	Business Services	White
64	Female	South East	Furloughed	Education	Mixed
50	Female	South East	Part-time	Education	White
51	Male	London	Furloughed	Education	White
59	Female	Yorkshire and the Humber	Part-time	Education	White
55	Female	Yorkshire and the Humber	Part-time	Education	Black
57	Male	Midlands	Full-time	Education	Asian
58	Male	North East	Full-time	Education	White
55	Female	London	Full-time	Financial Services	Asian
57	Male	London	Full-time	Financial Services	Asian
58	Female	Yorkshire and the Humber	Part-time	Financial Services	White
56	Male	South East	Full-time	Health & Social Care	White
66	Female	South West	Unemployed	Health & Social Care	White
57	Male	South East	Full-time	Health & Social Care	White
56	Female	South East	Part-time	Health & Social Care	White
65	Female	London	Part-time	Health & Social Care	White
55	Male	South East	Full-time	Health & Social Care	White
55	Male	London	Part-time	Health & Social Care	White
60	Female	London	Full-time	Health & Social Care	White
52	Female	Midlands	Furloughed	Hospitality	White
53	Female	North West	Full-time	Hospitality	Asian
63	Male	Midlands	Furloughed	Hospitality	White
54	Female	London	Full-time	Hospitality	Asian
55	Female	South East	Part-time	Hospitality	Asian
51	Male	North West	Full-time	Manufacturing & Transportation	White
53	Male	North West	Full-time	Manufacturing & Transportation	White
51	Female	London	Full-time	Property & Construction	Black
60	Male	Midlands	Full-time	Property & Construction	Asian
73	Female	North West	Part-time	Property & Construction	White
52	Male	London	Full-time	Property & Construction	White
60	Female	North West	Full-time	Public Sector	White
63	Female	London	Furloughed	Public Sector	Black
52	Male	South East	Full-time	Public Sector	White

Appendix 1

65	Female	East	Full-time	Public Sector	White
52	Female	Yorkshire and the Humber	Full-time	Public Sector	White
52	Female	Midlands	Part-time	Public Sector	Black
69	Male	Yorkshire and the Humber	Furloughed	Retail & Wholesale	White
53	Female	London	Part-time	Retail & Wholesale	White
59	Female	South East	Furloughed	Retail & Wholesale	White
53	Male	North West	Part-time	Retail & Wholesale	White
65	Male	Yorkshire and the Humber	Part-time	Retail & Wholesale	White
59	Female	Yorkshire and the Humber	Full-time	Retail & Wholesale	White
50	Male	London	Furloughed	Tech & Digital	Asian
53	Male	North West	Full-time	Tech & Digital	White
52	Male	East	Furloughed	Tech & Digital	White
65	Male	London	Part-time	Tech & Digital	White

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