Centre for Ageing Better

Too much experience

Older workers' perceptions of ageism in the recruitment process

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

February 2021

in partnership with:

DEMOS

National Institute of Economic and Social Research

About us

Centre for Ageing Better

The UK's population is undergoing a massive age shift. In less than 20 years, one in four people will be over 65. The fact that many of us are living longer is a great achievement. But unless radical action is taken by government, business and others in society, millions of us risk missing out on enjoying those extra years.

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

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

Demos

Demos is Britain's leading cross-party think-tank: an independent, educational charity, which produces original and innovative research.

The National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR)

NIESR is Britain's longest established independent research institute, founded in 1938. The vision of our founders was to carry out research to improve understanding of the economic and social forces that affect people's lives, and the ways in which policy can bring about change. Over eighty years later, this remains central to NIESR's ethos. We continue to apply our expertise in both quantitative and qualitative methods and our understanding of economic and social issues to current debates and to influence policy. The Institute is independent of all party political interests.

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Introduction

With more of us wanting or needing to work for longer, it is increasingly important for people to be able to move or change jobs as they age.

Widespread job losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic make it even more critical that older workers are able to access job opportunities on a fair and equal basis. However, previous research shows that negative old age stereotypes are common both in the workplace and across society more broadly (Centre for Ageing Better, 2020a). These negative stereotypes have the potential to affect recruitment decision-making, negatively impacting on the job opportunities of older workers and on some occasions leading employers to miss out on the best candidate for the job.

This report shares findings from a mixed methods research project on ageism in the recruitment process from the perspective of older workers (here defined as those aged 50 to 69). It is part of a wider programme of work including research looking at the recruitment landscape from the perspective of employers (Centre for Ageing Better, 2020b) and the language used in job advertisements. As part of a further phase, we will work directly with employers and recruiters to develop and test new approaches.

This research comprised two phases. The first involved 55 interviews with individuals aged 50 to 69 from a range of different sectors in different regions of England and with a recent experience of the recruitment process.[1] These interviews were conducted either over the phone or using video conferencing software depending upon the participant's preference. The second phase involved a nationally representative survey of 1,539 people, including an additional boost of people aged 50-69.

[1] Further details can be found in the full research report: https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/too-much-experience-older-workers-perceptions-ageism-recruitment-process

Key findings

1 The recruitment process does not work for many older workers, with more than one third (36%) of 50 to 69 year olds saying that their age would disadvantage them in applying for jobs;

2 Older jobseekers have different circumstances, careers, and ambitions. However, many feel that employers pigeonhole them with stereotypes such as having 'too much experience' (29%), exhibiting lower levels of commitment and being less physically or mentally able;

3 Ageism operates at every stage of the recruitment process, from the initial choice of wording for job advertisements right through to the experience of being interviewed;

4 Ageism in the recruitment process, often described as "soul-destroying", has a negative impact on older workers' job prospects, their wellbeing and their financial situation. This can potentially lead to job insecurity, early retirement and/or negatively impact people's confidence and sense of self-identity;

5 Ageist recruitment processes can affect all ages, with younger age groups also saying they are seen as too old in certain circumstances.

36%
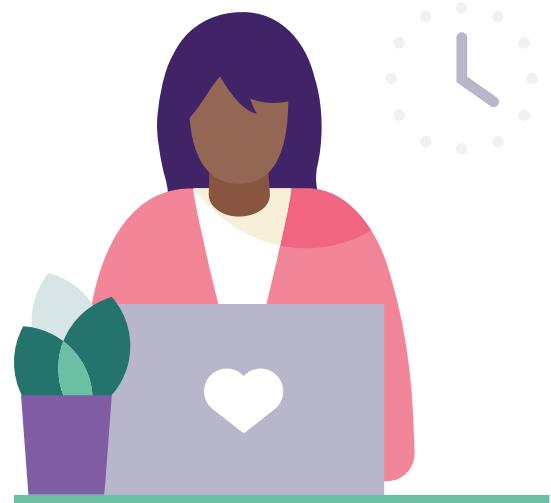
of 50 to 69 year olds say their age is a disadvantage when applying for jobs

Key principles to reduce bias in your recruitment process

This research has uncovered issues at key points in the recruitment process that may disadvantage or discriminate against older workers. Embedding the following principles in your recruitment approach could reduce age bias and improve inclusivity in hiring decisions.

Employers and recruiters should regularly collect and scrutinise age data from the recruitment process:
This valuable intelligence will enable employers to pinpoint where within the recruitment process the biggest problems lie and come up with a plan to address them.

Employers and recruiters must avoid making assumptions about older workers on the basis of stereotypes:
Older workers are a diverse group with a wide range of expectations and desires for jobs and careers. Assumptions should not be made about how long an individual plans to stay in a job, whether they can develop and grow into a role, or if they are less physically or mentally able on the basis of their age.

Employers should carefully consider the way in which they frame and word job advertisements:
The language used within job specifications and advertisements can be perceived as biased by older workers. The language and framing of job advertisements needs to be as age neutral as possible.

Employers should ensure that tools used within the application process do not present additional challenges to older workers:
Standardised application forms that ask for things like full working history can disadvantage older workers. They can be very time consuming to fill in and often will give an indication of someone's age without any age being given. All application tools should therefore aim to be "age-blind".

Employers should ensure that interview panels are as diverse and inclusive as possible:
A lack of age diversity on interview panels can lead to older candidates feeling "out of place" and at a disadvantage as compared to younger candidates. This can lead to a loss of confidence which may in turn negatively affect interview performance. Interview panels must therefore be as diverse as possible to ensure that interviewees feel like there is a level playing field.

Employers should ensure that staff have the necessary skills to reduce bias and avoid discrimination in the interview process:
Interviewers should be mindful of the way in which they conduct interviews, particularly in terms of how an interview begins. A lack of engagement from the very start can make candidates feel as if employer interest – which was indicated by being invited to interview – has been lost due to a candidate's appearance (including indications of their age). This can affect candidate's confidence and therefore interview performance.

The recruitment process doesn't work for many older workers

Figure 1 - Perception of age disadvantage in applying for jobs across different age groups

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

Legend: 18-29, 30-49, 50-69, 70+
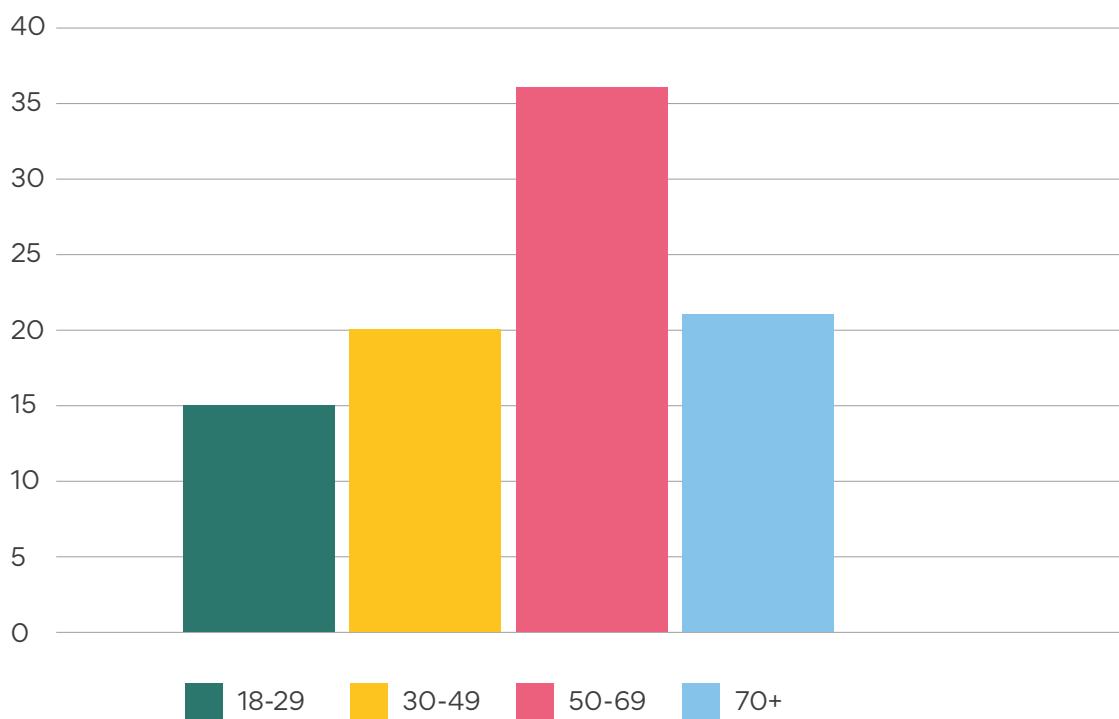
Our nationally representative survey showed that of those aged 50-69, more than one third (36%) felt that they would be at a disadvantage in applying for jobs because of their age.

As our interview research shows, this is often based on a suspicion that employers see them differently because of their age:

"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 [age] is the only thing and I may be jumping to the wrong conclusion, I don't know."

"I do know that I have now entered a sort of danger area as far as age is concerned [as] I am now over 50."

Examples of age discrimination were slightly rarer in this research, but 17% of participants aged 50-69 in the survey stated that they had experienced age discrimination in the recruitment process. One interview participant described a situation in which they were "taken aback" when a potential employer told them that they were "looking for someone younger because we actually feel they would fit more to the job".

The survey also showed that ageism in the recruitment process can be experienced more by different groups. For example, people from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds were more likely to report recent age-based discrimination than those from White backgrounds (34% versus 18%).

17%

of participants aged 50-69 in the survey stated that they had experienced age discrimination in the recruitment process

Older workers are being stereotyped in the recruitment process

Many participants were suspicious about the way in which employers saw them and how this matched with common stereotypes about older workers.

Stereotypes were overwhelmingly negative, but occasionally could also be seen positively by older individuals; for example, being seen as "having too much experience" felt like a barrier to many, but a few felt it helped them illustrate that they would be able to "hit the ground running".

Having 'too much' experience

Nearly one third of those aged 50 to 69 (29%) in the survey were told they were unlikely to be successful going for a job role due to having too much experience.

One participant said they had been told by the prospective employer that they were "a little too experienced, really, to be coming into the role" and that "on this occasion we're going to find somebody that we can train into the position". For him, this was just a way of them saying "you're too old" and that they were going "to find a younger guy… 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'". He, like many others, found this hugely frustrating and it made him hypersensitive to potential future discrimination based on his age.

Length of time in job

There was a feeling amongst some participants that employers were reluctant to hire them because they saw older workers as someone who wouldn't be there for long before they retired. One participant stated that he was asked in a job interview "how long would you want the job for?" which to him was "an indication… [that] their mind's already thinking, 'well he may only want it for six months or a year, then we are going to have to start all over again, interviewing'." This was despite the fact that he wasn't "thinking about giving it up" anytime soon.

Frustration with the assumption that older workers don't want to work longer was a common experience, with another participant suggesting that prospective employers probably thought "oh she's not going to be with us long" and questioning "how do they know [that]? You don't have to retire at retirement age, I don't know whether I will not".

Many participants were annoyed that they had been written off, even though they were keen to continue working for as long as possible. In one case, a participant found out after they had successfully got a job that if their employer had known their age they may well have made a different decision:

"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 'oh, 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… She did actually say 'if I'd have known that, I wouldn't have given you the job'…"

Being less ambitious, having less commitment and being less adaptable

Several participants felt that prospective employers saw them as a potential "problem" because of lower ambition, less commitment and/or poorer adaptability as compared to younger workers. This assumption was seen as unfair, particularly as many felt they could add a lot and that their career was not at its end:

"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."

Being less physically and mentally able

Although health wasn't often "brought up directly" by prospective employers, many participants suspected that they were viewed as less healthy – either physically or mentally – and that this factored into employers' recruitment decisions:

"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."

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

One participant faced "a line of questions about durability" including things like "illness, level of fitness, nutrition" which, "when you put it all together, you could see was about, what you are 60, to how you handle yourself in life and can rely on you when we need you?".

Others were asked directly about physical capability, often in relation to physical tasks that the job required. For example, one woman was offered a job in a wine warehouse over the phone but when she turned up for the first day the hiring manager was sceptical about her ability to carry heavy boxes:

"So I said to him, 'I practiced 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."

Employers and recruiters must avoid making assumptions about older workers on the basis of stereotypes:

Older workers are a diverse group with a wide range of expectations and desires for jobs and careers. Assumptions should not be made about how long an individual plans to stay in a job, whether they can develop and grow into a role, or if they are less physically or mentally able on the basis of their age.

Ageism operates at every stage of the recruitment process

Almost half (48%) of those aged 50 to 69 in the survey thought that the way employers recruited staff these days worked to the disadvantage of people their age. It was unclear exactly which part of the recruitment process was the most problematic, but it would appear that disadvantage and discrimination can be experienced at any stage.

Figure 2 - 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.

Legend: 18-29, 30-49, 50-69, 70+
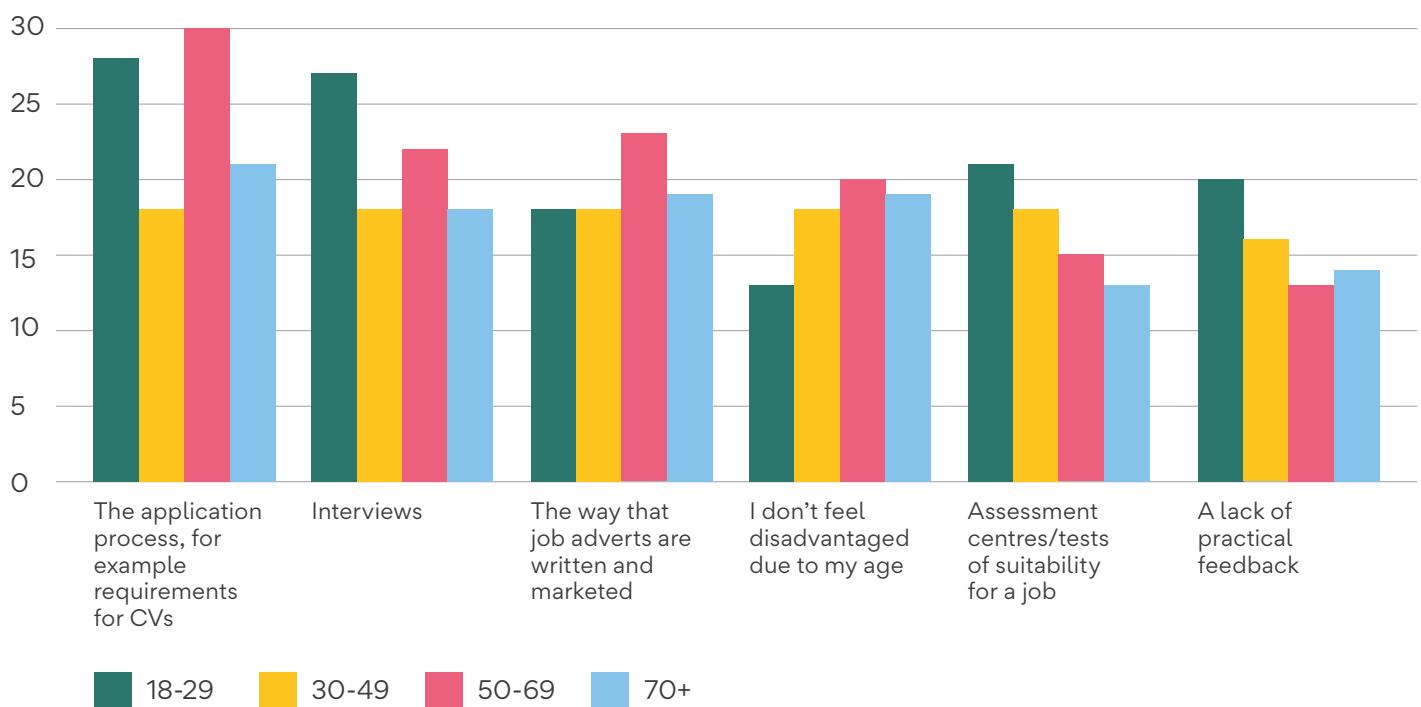
Language in job advertisements[2]

Many participants felt that job advertisements used language that made them feel as though the jobs were aimed at younger applicants, and as a result they were at a disadvantage applying for that job: "it's the wording of it, it is very subtle, you can feel that… Okay, I think they're looking for younger people".

Words such as "dynamic", "energetic", "go-getting", "fresh" and "outward looking" were all cited as examples of this, with one participant reflecting that "they're probably going to want somebody younger" when a job advertisement is framed that way. Many participants pointed out that just because they are older doesn't necessarily mean they aren't "dynamic" or "energetic", but that it still made them worry about whether the employer will perceive them that way and therefore sometimes put participants off applying for certain jobs:

"I have seen wording 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."

Employers should carefully consider the way in which they frame and word job advertisements:

The language used within job specifications and advertisements can be perceived as biased by older workers. The language in framing of job advertisements needs to be as age neutral as possible.

Applying for jobs

A wide variety of methods were used to find and apply for jobs, but online job sites were the most common. Many participants felt that they were getting invited back to fewer and fewer interviews as they got older, despite having the skills and experience for the roles they were applying for:

"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'."

Although 14% of those aged 50 to 69 in the survey said they had changed or reworded part of their job application (for example their CV) to try and avoid age discrimination, only 5% said they had avoided giving their age entirely when applying for a job. Some interview participants argued that they always put their age on application forms or on their CV because doing otherwise felt dishonest or "disingenuous", even though they "know all the advice these days is don't put your age on". Many recognised that this could disadvantage them, however, because "if you put down that you are say 59 or 60-something, people immediately think of somebody with grey hair and a walking stick… I think people have a set image of what a 60-year-old is like".

Others pointed out that even if you leave your age off there's a big chance that prospective employers will be able to work it out from other clues anyway, including for example 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". In fact, many felt that including your age was a good idea because it meant we didn't waste your time on interviews from employers that may view your age as a negative:

"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."

This led others to conclude that leaving your age off in order to get to the interview stage, and then disproving any stereotypes employers had about older people in person, was of the utmost importance for securing a job:

"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."

Sometimes the tools used by employers felt discriminatory in and of themselves. One example of this was a job application form that asked for your entire work history, which for someone with a very long work history would take a very long time to fill out and not all of that experience may be directly relevant:

"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."

Employers should ensure that tools used within the application process do not present additional challenges to older workers:

Standardised application forms that ask for things like full working history can disadvantage older workers. They can be very time consuming to fill in and often will give an indication of someone's age without any age being given. All application tools should therefore aim to be "age-blind".

Using recruitment agencies

A wide range of recruitment agencies – both generalist and those aimed specifically at older people – were used by participants. Participants had a mixed experience, with some finding recruitment agencies helpful in securing work and others finding them as ageist as some employers. One participant found that he was seen as not being able to adapt or evolve due to having been at the same workplace for a long time:

"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."

Another participant found generalist recruitment agencies a little reluctant to deal directly with age, particularly when he challenged them on it and they replied, "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".

Interviews

There were a broad range of experiences of age disadvantage and discrimination within the job interview process. Often these experiences were related to a sense that the process itself was rigged, a feeling that greatly affected the performance of participants in those job interviews. A fairly common experience was finding out that the existing workforce was very young and therefore worrying about whether you would be seen as being able to "fit in".

One participant, for example, spoke about the fact that he's "always got in the back of my mind about my age, and then, as I say, I looked around at the sales people on the shop floor, and they all looked more at the younger end". Another participant spoke about the way he was treated when he met certain members of staff on the way to the interview:

"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."

52%

More than half of older workers had not been able to find a job that met their needs

Other examples of more subtle experiences of feeling at a disadvantage due to age included things like interviews being wrapped up very quickly and feeling "off" from the start, as well as one job interview where the interviewer began to question whether the older person really wanted the job; for example, asking if they really wanted the long commute and also 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."

Examples of disadvantage and discrimination in the interview process were not always that subtle, though. In one job interview the interviewer made a joke about the date of the interviewee's work experience: "1985, I wasn't even born then!". At the time the interviewee laughed along with the interviewer, but in hindsight felt very embarrassed about it and worried about future job interviews.

On some occasions this had led to a change in the older jobseeker's behaviour, with one male participant reflecting that they "wear make-up which makes" them "look a little bit younger", "try to hide" their "grey hairs" and generally alter their appearance "outwardly as well as inwardly". He even decided to dye his hair, all "purely an effort to look more attractive to the working market".

Employers should ensure that interview panels are as diverse and inclusive as possible:

A lack of age diversity on interview panels can lead to older candidates feeling "out of place" and at a disadvantage as compared to younger candidates. This can lead to a loss of confidence which may in turn negatively affect interview performance. Interview panels must therefore be as diverse as possible to ensure that interviewees feel like there is a level playing field.

Employers should ensure that staff have the necessary skills to reduce bias in the interview process:

Interviewers should be mindful of the way in which they conduct interviews, particularly in terms of how an interview begins. A lack of engagement from the very start can make candidates feel as if employer interest – which was indicated by being invited to interview – has been lost due to a candidate's appearance (including indications of their age). This can affect candidate's confidence and therefore interview performance.

Ageism in the recruitment process has a negative impact on older workers

It is clear that from the perspective of older workers ageism operates across the whole recruitment process. This research also indicates that this ageism has a negative impact on older workers in a wide range of different ways.

Our nationally representative survey showed that of those aged 50 to 69 who had experienced age discrimination in the recruitment process (17% of the total age group):

– 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.

– More than two-thirds (68%) said it had undermined their confidence;

– More than two-fifths (43%) said it had affected their health and wellbeing;

– A quarter (25%) said they had wanted to move jobs, but felt unable to do so because of their age.

64%

of those aged 50 to 69 were financially less well off

As previous chapters have shown, the impacts at the forefront of interview participants' minds often related to effects on individual psychology and identity; for example, lowered self-confidence and a feeling of less value to society; and behavioural changes such as giving up applying for jobs entirely or avoiding applying for certain jobs.

Impact on individual psychology and identity

One of the most pervasive effects of ageism in the recruitment process was the undermining of participants' confidence. Many described their experiences as "frustrating" and others went as far as to say it was "soul-destroying". This reduction in confidence was often most prominent in the job interview process. One participant went to an interview and was directly told by the interviewers that they were looking for someone younger because they would be a better "fit". They implied that a younger worker would be "more energetic... dynamic and willing to take on changes" and even though she didn't "feel that's correct" it made her feel helpless and "on the back foot" not just in that interview but in future recruitment experiences. Being put off future job applications and interviews was a common experience, with another participant saying that they had felt belittled during an interview:

"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."

Impact on behaviour

Undermined confidence would often affect older applicants' behaviour, either putting them off applying for jobs or trying to hide their age in the recruitment process. This was often linked to certain sectors that were seen as having a younger workforce, for example the tech industry:

"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."

Some of our participants had "given up" entirely on trying to find a new job because of fears of age discrimination and their ability to compete with younger workers.

29%

Nearly a third of those aged 50 to 69 (29%) were told they were unlikely to be successful going for a job role due to having too much experience

Ageism affects all ages

Although no younger workers were interviewed as part of this research, the nationally representative survey indicated that ageism in the recruitment process is something that affects both those who are older and younger.

Generally speaking, those aged 50 to 69 were more likely to perceive being disadvantaged in recruitment on the basis of age (36% versus 15% of 18 to 29 year olds), whereas those aged 18 to 29 were more likely to see themselves as having been discriminated against (34% versus 17% of 50 to 69 year olds). It is unclear from this research exactly why this difference exists between "disadvantage" and "discrimination". However, regardless of whether it is felt as a disadvantage or discrimination these experiences negatively affect individuals and their job opportunities.

Despite slight differences in the prevalence of disadvantage and discrimination due to age, both the youngest and oldest groups experienced similarly stark effects. For those who said they had experienced age discrimination:

– Roughly half reported they had been unable to find a job that met their needs (52% of 50 to 69-year-olds and 53% of 18 to 24-year-olds)

– Around one third reported they were stuck in insecure work (33% for both youngest and oldest age groups)

– Around 70% said that it undermined their confidence (71% of those aged 50 to 59, 65% of those aged 60 to 69 and 73% of those aged 18 to 29)

However, there were some differences between the youngest and oldest in terms of whether the discrimination on the basis of their age had put them off applying for more jobs. Some 76% of those aged 50 to 69 stated that this was the case, as compared to a still large but lower proportion of 60% of those aged 18 to 29.

It is also clear that the impact of age discrimination was felt acutely regardless of age, although there are some differences particularly in terms of younger workers being put off applying for jobs generally and older workers being put off working at all.

Ultimately as younger workers were not interviewed, only surveyed, not much can be concluded about the differences here other than ageism is clearly felt across all ages and has effects on those who experience it. It is therefore imperative to aim for age inclusive recruitment processes if people of all ages are to have equal job opportunities.

Figure 3 - Impacts of age discrimination across age groups

When you were discriminated against, would say the following did or did not happen as a result?

18-29   30-49   50-69   70+
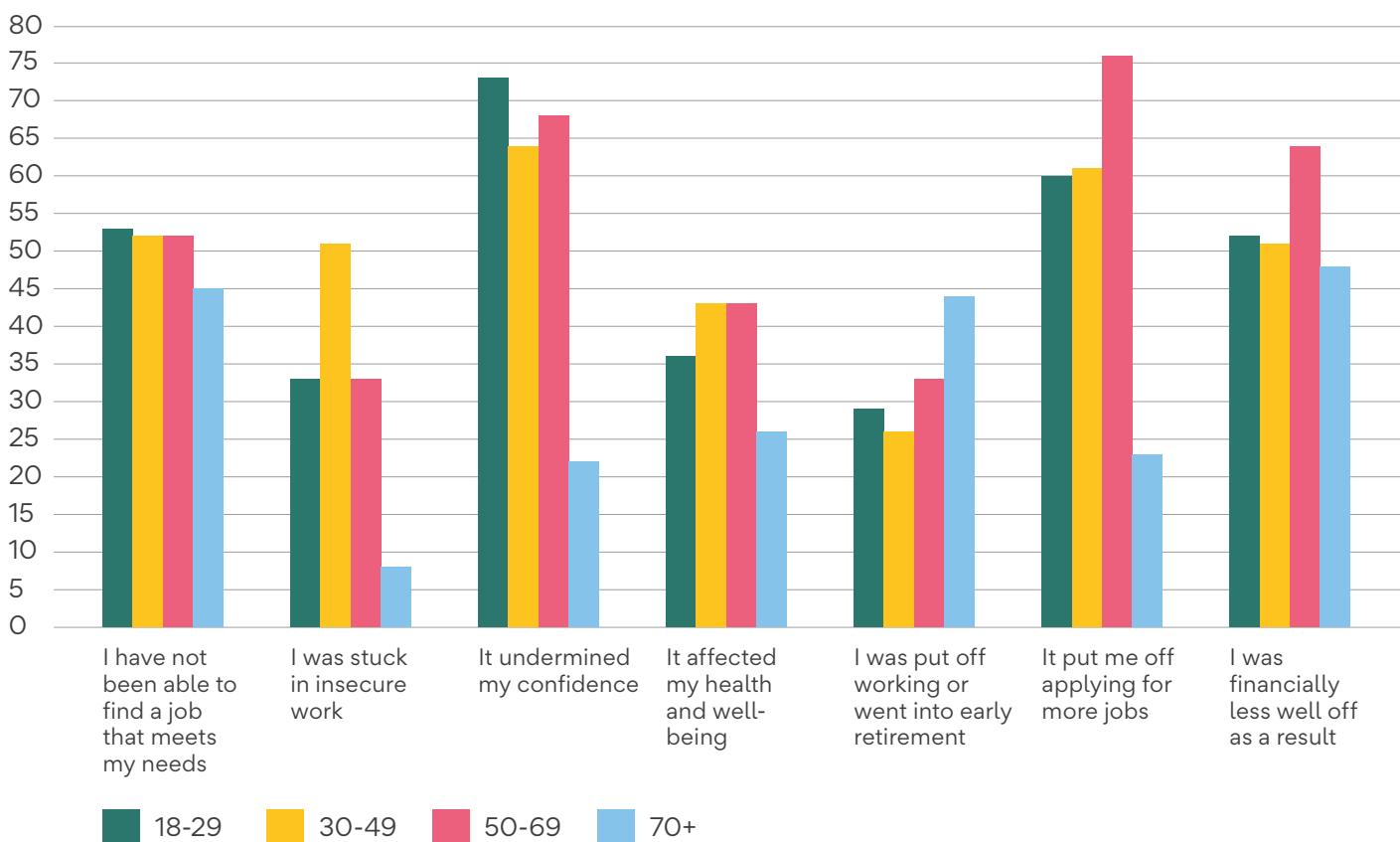
Conclusion

This research has clearly shown that many older workers feel disadvantaged or discriminated against within the recruitment process because of their age. These experiences have wide-ranging effects on older workers' confidence, health, and financial security.

Despite the fact that older workers have different circumstances, careers and ambitions they overwhelmingly feel like employers view them in a stereotyped manner. As a result, many felt they could not get jobs that they had the skills and experience for.

For many participants, the process of being stereotyped and rejected for jobs on the basis of age bias becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in which experiences of ageism in the recruitment process stops them trying to get a job.

This needs to change. As such, this research indicates a set of key principles that employers and recruiters should embed within their recruitment processes. These include:

– Regular collection and scrutiny of demographic data from the recruitment process;

– Avoiding making assumptions about older workers on the basis of stereotypes;

– Careful consideration of the framing and wording of job advertisements;

– Ensuring tools used within the application process do not discriminate or disadvantage particular age groups;

– Ensuring the interview panels are as diverse and inclusive as possible;

– Ensuring that interviewing staff have the necessary skills to reduce bias and avoid discrimination.

As well as these principles new, more age-inclusive recruitment processes, techniques and tools are also required. The Centre for Ageing Better is committed to working with employers and recruiters to develop and test new approaches so that in future no one is disadvantaged at recruitment (or other stages of employment) because of their age.

These changes are vital if we are to create an age diverse workforce and ensure that older workers are not left behind as the economy recovers and new job opportunities are created.

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Centre for Ageing Better

Let's take action today for all our tomorrows.
Let's make ageing better.

This report is part of our work on Fulfilling work and is freely available at **ageing-better.org.uk**