



Improving Employment Programme Outcomes for Over 50s

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The ReAct Partnership

About Us

The ReAct Partnership is a new, industry-led, active collaboration to support a continuous improvement community in the Restart programme through action research, shared and iterative learning, and the development of applied, evidence-based resources.

The Partnership is co-funded by the eight 'prime providers' for the Restart programme — FedCap Employment, G4S, Ingeus, Jobs 22, Maximus, Reed, Seetec Pluss and Serco — and is being managed by the Institute of Employment Studies (IES), working alongside the Institute for Employability Professionals (IEP) and the Employment Related Services Association (ERSA).



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Introduction

This research project was designed to help employment support providers understand and meet the needs of older Restart participants. Historically job outcome rates from employment programmes have been comparatively poor for people over 50. Providers from the ReAct partnership are keen to ensure that lessons from both historic programmes and the first year of Restart are learned and embedded in ongoing delivery.

Primary research, which consisted of conducting a series of focus groups with Restart advisers, employment consultants, team leaders and participants, was analysed in conjunction with an assessment of the existing evidence base on employment support provision for participants over 50. The latter process was aided by support in identifying sources and experts from the Centre for Ageing Better.

A rapid evidence review conducted by the Centre for Ageing Better¹ found that individuals over the age of 50 face greater difficulty in re-entering employment, compared with younger age groups. The same review also found that job loss after 50 tends to result in longer-term unemployment and economic inactivity, compared to when job loss occurs earlier on in a lifetime. These difficulties generate spill-over effects on older people's financial security, health, and well-being.

¹ Parsons, D. and Walsh, K. (2019) *Employment support for over 50s: Rapid evidence review*. Centre for Ageing Better. Available at: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/Employment-support-over-50s.pdf>.

However, despite the employment-related difficulties faced by over 50s, evaluations show that previous employment support programmes (including the Work Programme) have not adequately addressed the needs of jobseekers and workers over 50. Indeed, the Work Programme evaluation found that over 50s were the group least likely to secure sustainable employment.

This research project aims to identify different challenges faced by over 50s in finding employment, as well as determining how these challenges may be alleviated. Specifically, our research asks the following questions:

- What does the current employment support provision for individuals over 50 look *and feel* like, especially in the context of the Restart Programme?
- Which factors hinder or enable employment for individuals over 50?
- Which features of employment support are best suited to the needs of jobseekers and workers over 50?
- What models and strategies should employment support providers adopt to prioritise those features identified above, and promote positive employment outcomes amongst individuals over 50?

We answered these questions through an initial review of related literature, which then informed the conduct of virtual, and in-person focus group discussions with different stakeholders of employment support programmes.

We used the Centre for Ageing Better's² rapid evidence review on employment support for over 50s (written by Parsons and Walsh in 2019) as the starting point for identifying key themes within the literature. We supplemented this evidence review through an additional review of related literature that was made available in the three years since the publication of the Parsons and Walsh report. Since the availability of published evidence was limited, we spoke with representatives from the Centre for Ageing Better to steer the focus of the study and outline areas of interest from current programmes of work.

To build on the existing evidence and to fill the remaining gaps in the context of Restart and the ReAct Partnership, the project team also conducted four virtual focus group discussions with employment advisors, employment consultants and team leaders from across six Prime

² (Parsons & Walsh, 2019)

providers. In addition, three in-person focus group discussions were conducted with programme participants over the age of 50. The discussions were semi-structured, with pre-developed topic guides serving as an outline.

The qualitative data collected from the focus groups were professionally transcribed and thematically analysed by the research team using ATLAS.ti. The coding framework used for the thematic analysis identified different factors as either hindering or enabling the employment of individuals over the age of 50. In addition, transcripts were analysed per participant group to identify similarities and discrepancies across the responses of different stakeholders.

The analyses described above served as a basis for the findings that will be presented and discussed in the succeeding chapters.

Report Summary

This research echoes earlier findings that individuals over the age of 50 face a number of hurdles in finding sustainable, decent employment. Over 50s experience worse job outcomes than any other age group, with the evidence showing that job loss amongst older workers tends to be more protracted, resulting in long-term unemployment and economic inactivity. Addressing this issue is critical - lack of access to decent employment generates a negative knock-on effect on older individuals' well-being, including their mental health, physical health, and financial security. Furthermore, businesses stand to gain from enabling the employment of older workers, with evidence demonstrating that a multigenerational workforce can benefit organisations.

Many of the barriers over 50s face when looking for work are similar to those experienced by their younger counterparts which means some of the recommendations are applicable to all those accessing employment support. However, some are more commonly, if not exclusively, faced by older workers and jobseekers. For instance, employers can be reluctant to hire older workers due to a real or perceived need to invest in training, aggravated by presumptions that older workers will not stay long enough to warrant training. Digital skill gaps are another important barrier that prevents the employment of jobseekers over 50. Circumstantial factors, such as ill health and caring responsibilities may also adversely negatively influence the employment of over 50s.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also introduced additional barriers. The vulnerability of older people to the disease has created much anxiety amongst over 50s, making their search for suitable employment more complicated. In addition, at the height of the pandemic, business closures and downsizing due to lockdowns have resulted in job losses and fewer job openings, hence further limiting opportunities for sustainable employment.

Existing provision specifically for over 50s in the UK is scant. Not only is employment support for over 50s usually dependent on time-limited, one-off project funding, but it also largely offers general rather than tailored support.

Our research shows providers best serve the needs of over 50s through tailored support and upskilling as well as wraparound support in other areas. The jobseekers we spoke to identified support with finances, housing, and mental health as especially important to their employment success.

To complement the existing literature, we looked to successful employment support programmes in different countries and identified common features. Organisations that specialise in the delivery of employment support for individuals over 50, and provide support tailored to the wide variety of needs, were identified as examples of good practice in multiple countries. In addition, we found that early intervention is most effective to prevent motivational dips and limit the negative impact of unemployment on health, well-being, and financial security.

Effectively supporting the employment of individuals over 50 requires raising awareness amongst all stakeholders and equipping them with the knowledge and skills to support older workers and jobseekers, ensuring that interventions are context and location-sensitive.

On the part of employers, instituting anti-discriminatory hiring policies and introducing flexible working arrangements to accommodate the circumstances of older workers make a positive difference. In addition, the literature we reviewed identified age-inclusive hiring practices, flexible work arrangements, and wraparound support as critical to employment success amongst over 50s – this aligns with the enablers reported in our focus groups. Moreover, the literature pointed towards career development opportunities for over 50s, together with an age-inclusive culture, as enabling workers over 50 to get on well in their jobs.

From the combined literature and data collected within the focus group discussions, it is possible to identify five key recommendations for providers to improve the support offered to those in the over 50 group. The focus group discussions also allowed for feedback on the recommendations made within the literature. These are explored in the final section of this paper.

Providing tailored and holistic support

- Running accurate diagnostics for over 50s is especially important as they have diverse needs and can be subject to ageist assumptions when addressed as a homogenous group. For example, a lack of digital skills may be an issue for some participants, but this is certainly not the case for all older participants.
- Older people in our focus groups emphasised the need for well informed, specialist advisers and thought good rapport was essential. However, in contrast to some other research they did not place emphasis on the need for those advisers to be in a similar age group to themselves.
- A holistic approach to support which offers more than jobsearch is necessary since many participants have significant barriers to manage. This might include support with non-work aspects of benefits, impact of returning to work on pensions, housing, drugs/alcohol issues, and managing health conditions. This is also picked up in recommendation 4.
- Training needs to be focused on clear employment-related outcomes to demonstrate value to participants and help improve motivation (eg digital skills targeted at the correct level and ideally closely linked to the programmes/processes that may be required in future jobs).
- Offering support for participants with varied and different employment histories. Within current programmes support is more likely to focus on those who less than £20k and those looking to return to positions with salaries over £40k but there is less focus on those in the £20-40k bracket.

Intervening early to support motivation and confidence

- Early identification of transferable skills is critical in engaging older participants. Providing ways in which previous (paid and unpaid) experience can be endorsed helps demonstrate the valuable contribution jobseekers make to roles and invites participants to consider opportunities they may have discounted or ignored previously. This helps with motivating participants and boosting confidence.

- For example, success was seen through matching participants who previously worked in manual trades with local training organisations to work as assessors demonstrating the value in passing skills down to the younger generation.
- Practically this means it's important for advisors to use transferable skills to pin down three sectors of interest in first meeting to give participants a broader range of potential areas to consider.
- Encouraging social interaction can be helpful to build confidence – this can be done on the programme through encouraging attendance at workshops (and designing and delivering workshops aimed at fostering social interaction and peer networks. This is particularly important for those participants who were very isolated as a result of Covid.

Improving stakeholder awareness

- Identifying age-friendly employers by working with local businesses. [Restless](#) / [55Redefined](#) are useful resources for this.
- To help improve recruitment practices, advisors should identify organisations that make efforts to avoid the use of language which has certain age connotations as this will be less off-putting for the participants and helps identify those employers who might be more age-friendly, as well as feeding back to employers who are struggling to recruit the impact of the language they use on potential workers.
- Encouraging honest (off the record if needed) dialogue with employers to get feedback if participants are unsuccessful – this could help identify employers with ageist hiring practices – also important to reiterate value of hiring older workers (eg more experience, likely to remain in the organisation for longer).
 - Participants felt it would be helpful if advisors were able to provide character references in cases where they lack recent employment references which could be used as a way to better engage and inform employers.
- Continuation of the IEP training for advisors working with over 50s (but with recommendations incorporated from recent evaluation to strengthen provision – see Box 4).
- Creating opportunities for advisors across providers to share experiences and ideas for how to support groups with poor job outcomes. This is done through the Action Learning Sets in ReAct, and the website could be better utilised to share good practice.
- Ensure diagnostic interviews are participant-led and avoids assumptions based on age, for example, that the participants wants to be 'steered towards retirement' or does not want a full-time role.

Collaborating with local partners

- Building relationships with local businesses can help identify age-friendly employers but also can help identify opportunities for participants with limited English-language skills by matching them to organisations where their language is more widely spoken.
- Signposting to other local services can be helpful so that the full range of adult learning opportunities are identified.
- Over 50s may be reluctant to want to learn in a college environment because of the perceived difference in age between themselves and other students, so opportunities for similar training delivered in an alternative setting could be more appealing.
- Referring participants to local job clubs, volunteering opportunities, mentoring schemes (eg PRIME Cymru) and other community groups can help with issues such as social isolation and building confidence in social settings.

Support navigating difficult conversations

- Advisors need to be able to legitimately challenge clients but also help them see the full range of opportunities that could be available to them through identifying transferable skills, areas of interest and showcasing all of the roles within a certain sector.
- Sector taster days were suggested as an example of how to show the full range of roles available within a certain sector which can be useful to participants who have spent their whole careers in one area.
- Providers should be flexible about the arrangements used to match advisors/participants and respond to requests to move if needed.
- Advisors must be well supported and have sufficient training/support with having difficult conversations and communicating with different types of participants – opportunities for advisors to share experience with others within peer networks could also be effective.

The case for focusing on the over 50s

As this chapter aims to demonstrate, to date 21st-century employment programmes have provided insufficient or inadequate support for jobseekers over the age of 50. While the New Deal 50 plus showed some promise in this respect, mainstream programmes in more recent years have been less successful in supporting this group back to work. Furthermore, the pandemic has led to significant numbers of over 50s leaving the labour market. While benefit receipt increased across all ages during Covid-19, older people tend to stay on benefit for longer, so understanding how to support a quicker return to work is critical. There are lessons that can be learnt from past and existing initiatives, pilots and programmes in order to support the development of a 'consistent and effective mainstream provision for all over 50s'.³ With these aims in mind, this chapter outlines the current context and landscape of support, in addition to the challenges that over 50s face, before the discussion moves to outline what can be done to improve outcomes for this group.

³ Learning and Work Institute (2021) Supporting Over 50s Back to Work: Understanding the Local Picture. Centre for Ageing Better. Available at: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-07/supporting-over-50s-back-to-work.pdf> p.48.

Why consider the over 50s as a separate group?

In the UK, the discussion surrounding the ageing population is often focused on the additional resources that will be needed to support people in the later stages of their lives. Less widely recognised is the immense, valuable economic contribution that older workers make – after all, they remain a significant proportion of the labour market.

At the individual level, working in later life can give employees greater financial security before reaching the rising state pension age.⁴ In the workplace, there is a clear evidence base showing how organisations benefit from the combined experience and expertise of a multigenerational workforce.^{5, 6} Nationally, the economic contribution of older workers counters the productivity loss incurred from early retirements.⁷ Despite this, globally, workers over 50 experience the worst job outcomes when re-entering the labour market.⁸

In the UK, older workers who lose their jobs are twice as likely to be out of work for over 12 months than younger workers.⁹ It is, however, important to recognise that over 50s are not a homogenous group and that job outcomes vary significantly between those aged between 50-55 and those over 55. Evidence also suggests that women over 50 are the focus of the highest level of negative public scrutiny, are more likely to experience sexism in the workplace and be overlooked for promotions, whilst also shouldering sandwich caring responsibilities.^{10, 11} Therefore, the business case for providing meaningful, good quality employment for workers in their later life is clear, yet significant barriers to getting this group back into work remain. Drawing on insights from focus group discussions conducted

⁴ Chaplain, K. (2020) What next for the older workers losing their jobs to coronavirus? | Institute for Employment Studies (IES), Institute for Employment Studies. Available at: <http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/news/what-next-older-workers-losing-their-jobs-coronavirus-0>.

⁵ BIC (2020) Becoming an age-friendly employer. Business in the Community. Available at: <https://www.bitc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/bitc-toolkit-age-becominganagefriendlyemployer-nov20.pdf>.

⁶ OECD (2020) Promoting an Age-Inclusive Workforce. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Available at: <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/Promoting%20an%20Age-Inclusive%20Workforce%20Living%2C%20Learning%20and%20Earning%20Longer.pdf>.

⁷ (Chaplain, 2020)

⁸ (OECD, 2020)

⁹ Learning and Work Institute (2020) A mid-life employment crisis: How Covid-19 will affect the job prospects of older workers. Centre for Ageing Better. Available at: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-08/Midlife-job-prospects-for-older-workers.pdf>.

¹⁰ Marvell, R. and Cox, A. (2017) What do older workers value about work and why? Centre for Ageing Better. Available at: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-12/What-do-older-workers-value.pdf>.

¹¹ Wilson, S. (2017) Women, work and caring: unspoken expectations and stifled careers, Institute for Employment Studies. Available at: <http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/news/women-work-and-caring-unspoken-expectations-and-stifled-careers>.

with employer engagement specialists, employment support providers, and participants of employment support programmes who are over the age of 50, the next section presents various factors that promote or hinder the employment of over 50s.

Barriers and enablers

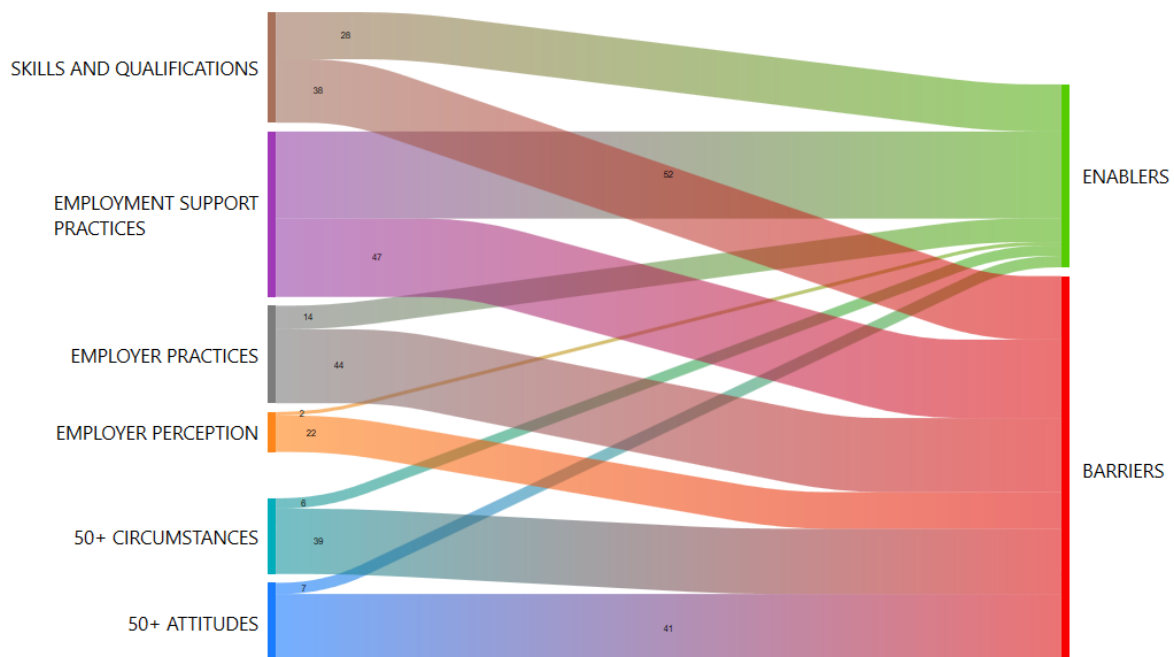
Our research explored the barriers and enablers faced by this group. Our analysis exposed six main themes: participants' attitudes; participants' circumstances; participants' skills and qualifications; employer perceptions; employer practices; and employment support practices.

According to the stakeholders we consulted for this research, negative participant attitudes, adverse participant circumstances, and inadequate skills and qualifications were common barriers to the employment of over 50s. On the supply side, discriminatory hiring practices hindered the employment of older participants.

Generic employment support provision was also a notable constraint. For instance, participants over 50 spoke about jobs being flagged that either did not align with their interests or that were not feasible in view of their physical or illness-related situations. Highly qualified individuals over 50 also discussed how they had been recommended jobs that were below their level of qualification, noting how employment support programmes seem less able to provide assistance to highly qualified participants. The quality of support given, and the ability to flex to the needs of the participant is the key driver of why employment support practices were most frequently identified as both a barrier and enabler to the employment of participants over 50.

Conversely, anti-discriminatory hiring practices, tailored employment support, and active stakeholder engagement on the part of employment support providers facilitate the employment of over 50s. These barriers and enablers are discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

The Sankey diagram in Figure 1 illustrates the most common barriers and enablers identified in this research. The thickness of the rays represents the number of times each theme (on the right of the diagram) appeared in our focus group discussion transcripts – the thicker the ray, the more frequently a theme was identified as either a barrier or enabler.

Figure 1. Sankey diagram: most common enablers and barriers to employment of over 50s

Whilst different stakeholders tended to converge on the same themes, there was variance in their understanding of the relative importance of each theme to employment outcomes. For instance, employer engagement professionals (often termed consultants in employment support organisations) most frequently mentioned participants' attitudes, circumstances and skills and qualifications as barriers to the employment of over 50s. On the other hand, both participants and employment advisers most frequently mentioned existing employer practices and employment support practices as hindering the employment of over 50s. When talking about enablers, consultants most frequently cited employer practices, whereas both participants and employment support professionals mentioned employment support practices the most.

These differences, which are illustrated in Figure 2 below, could be attributed to the nature of the interactions regularly had by these stakeholders. For instance, consultants – due to the nature of their job – are more exposed to the needs and sentiments of employers and likely less exposed to those of participants. In consequence, they might hold more favourable views of employers and attribute employment-related difficulties to participant-side shortcomings. On the other hand, the job of employment advisers is to help participants overcome negative attitudes and adverse circumstances. As such, recognising that participants' attitudes and circumstances can change through external prompting, advisers would be more likely to look for strengths and shortcomings in their own practices, as well as in employers' human resource management practices.

Given these differences, it would be productive to ensure regular conversations across consultants, advisers, and jobseekers. This would create a feedback loop that bridges potential disparities between participant and employer expectations. The data collected through the focus group discussions makes no reference to such conversations happening in either an informal or structured way.

Figure 2. Between-group analysis: identified barriers and enablers¹²

| | BARRIERS | | | | ENABLERS | | | |
|------------------------------|--------------|----------|--------------|-------------|--------------|----------|--------------|-------------|
| | Participants | Advisers | Team Leaders | Consultants | Participants | Advisers | Team Leaders | Consultants |
| Participant attitudes | | | | | | | | |
| Participant circumstances | | | | | | | | |
| Employer perceptions | | | | | | | | |
| Employer practices | | | | | | | | |
| Employment support practices | | | | | | | | |
| Skills and qualifications | | | | | | | | |

The barriers faced by jobseekers over 50 are similar to those experienced by younger workers yet may be exacerbated for older workers. This group is also unique in the sense that some are in a position whereby they need to face difficult decisions about the impact of re-entering paid employment on their retirement plans.¹³ However, because of the current cost of living crisis, the decision to return to paid work for over 50s is becoming more of a *necessity* than a *choice*.¹⁴

¹² The shade of red or green represents frequency of coding in the transcripts. The deeper the shade of red, the more times the theme had been identified as a barrier. Similarly, the deeper the shade of green, the more times the theme had been identified as an enabler.

¹³ (Parsons and Walsh, 2019)

¹⁴ The Guardian (2022) Britain's 'great unretirement': cost of living drives older people back to work. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/jul/25/britains-great-unretirement-cost-of-living-drives-older-people-back-to-work>

For many over 50s on Restart, the recent loss of a job is a huge setback and blow to their confidence. Others may have applied for hundreds of roles and been unsuccessful and this continuous rejection can also be particularly difficult to manage. Because of this anxiety about returning to the workplace, many participants reported feeling as though they no longer were able to deal with the stress involved in the roles that they held previously. For others with long-term health conditions, returning to their previous work was not possible either because of the physicality of the role or the pressure associated with it. This presents an interesting challenge to the guiding ethos of progression in employment and suggests there is space to examine the value of formalized support for those looking to downsize careers, as well as how to appropriately challenge that assumption. It also highlights the critical link between age, work and health.

“It should be our decision if we want to go for a job that's not as responsible as we used to do. Because we need less stress. I can't then put on my CV well, I need less stress because I've had a brain haemorrhage, I've got high blood pressure and I'm on anxiety tablets, if I put that down I'm not going to get an interview. They'll think my gosh, she's a liability.” (Restart Participant)

A further barrier experienced by older workers is the persistence of age discrimination within recruitment practices. Despite evidence suggesting that transparent and objective screening and interview processes can help eliminate age and other biases, employers continue to justify hiring decisions based on the subjective idea of ‘suitability’ or ‘fit’. This issue of perceptions of ‘suitability’ and ‘fit’ can also be off-putting for the participants themselves and creates a situation whereby they are reluctant to apply for roles if they feel other people who are their age won't be working within that organisation. In sectors such as retail, this can be a particular barrier for over 50s because there is a perception that employers are looking for a younger aesthetic/physicality. In other sectors, the youth preference can also be justified based on cost since under 25s are paid a lower rate.

“At the moment you see the words 'would suit a recent graduate'. They're not looking for somebody 63 years old. There are also always ways of putting things, it will say 'we are looking for somebody to grow, thrive and develop with the company' which is 21st century speak for 'we're looking for younger blood, 63-year-olds do not darken our doors'.”

(Restart Participant)

There are clear examples from the evidence in which the barriers that over 50s face in achieving positive job outcomes manifest in different ways, including legislative, personal, mental, and physical barriers. However, while employment support providers have an important role to play in providing the support needed to break down these barriers, it will require a multi-stakeholder approach to incite significant, long-lasting change.

The discussions we facilitated through this research surfaced specific practices of employers and employment support providers that helped participants over 50 overcome barriers to employment. **According to consultants, employers with anti-discriminatory recruitment policies, flexible working hours, and apprenticeship and work placement schemes promoted the hiring and development of jobseekers and workers over the age of 50.**

Both participants and employment support staff mentioned confidence-building and individualised support as important enablers.

However, only **participants highlighted the importance of wraparound support in securing employment** for over 50s; this might signal a crucial element of employment support that providers may be missing or under-utilising for this group. Whilst employment support staff, for instance, mentioned initiatives seeking to address mental health issues, participants over 50 described those initiatives as inadequate. For instance, they noted that advisers were unable to provide individualised advice regarding mental health-related concerns. This points to an opportunity to address this gap through upskilling and raising awareness of signposting options.

The Impact of the Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about new barriers, especially for over 50s. Employers and employment support providers need to understand these new barriers if they are to effectively address the needs of participants over 50.

In 2020, older workers accounted for one-third of the total workforce¹⁵, but have since suffered severe job losses. While the risk of unemployment because of the pandemic reduced with age, it began to increase again among people in their 50s (since sectors such as manufacturing and construction were significantly exposed)¹⁶. Like younger people, the impact of the pandemic disproportionately impacted older employees and workers from ethnic minorities, both of whom experienced a greater threat to their health because of the virus¹⁷. However, while health and care-related issues drove large numbers of over 50s out of the labour market, 15 per cent also became economically inactive because of direct job losses¹⁸. Consequently, the number of over 50s seeking unemployment benefits doubled during lockdown¹⁹ which has created a situation where over 50s are being referred to the Restart programme in large numbers.

Our research found that the pandemic exacerbated some of the existing barriers that over 50s experience when trying to re-enter the labour market. However, new challenges have also arisen that are preventing over 50s from accessing paid work. Before the pandemic, it was acknowledged that the over 50 group have suffered from lower levels of self-confidence; the social isolation brought on by the lockdown has created a situation where larger numbers of jobseekers are struggling with health-related anxieties, social isolation and mental health issues.

¹⁵ Centre for Ageing Better (2020a) State of Ageing in 2020. Centre for Ageing Better. Available at: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/work-state-ageing-2020>.

¹⁶ Centre for Ageing Better (2020b) Written evidence submitted by Centre for Ageing Better (COV0113). Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/5587/html/>.

¹⁷ BIC (2020) Becoming an age-friendly employer. Business in the Community. Available at: <https://www.bitc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/bitc-toolkit-age-becominganagefriendlyemployer-nov20.pdf>.

¹⁸ ONS (2022) Reasons for workers aged over 50 years leaving employment since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/reasonsforworkersagedover50yearsleavingemploymentsincethestartofthecoronaviruspandemic/2022-03-14>.

¹⁹ (Learning and Work Institute, 2020)

“The one thing I've noticed with the over 50s is that the biggest area they need support in is with confidence, not saying they're agoraphobic but they need help literally getting out the house. Covid has affected them more than it has the under 50s.” (Executive Recruiter)

Furthermore, the shift toward hybrid working in certain industries may present an additional barrier for people who need extra support with their digital skills or do not have internet access at home. Restart providers have also reported significant numbers of over 50 participants who were previously employed in more senior roles. While some providers have a programme of executive support, others have suggested that they lack the in-house expertise needed for this group as the demand for these types of services (eg advanced skills retraining) is far greater than that in previous programmes.

The support landscape is adapting to both the needs of the over 50 group and the unique challenges that the pandemic has created, sharing of best practice in this area will ensure this support is available to all participants that need it.

What support is currently available?

Much of the support for over 50s in the UK is reliant on time-limited, project-based funding.²⁰ Often the distinct barriers faced by older workers are underestimated.²¹ While over 50s can access mainstream welfare and employment programmes, there are very few examples of case studies that provide tailored support for over 50s.²² The evidence also suggests that mainstream programmes have by and large performed worst for over 50s. For example, in the case of the Work Programme (which ran from 2011 to 2017 to reduce unemployment after the recession), older workers experienced significantly worse outcomes than younger workers which has been attributed, in part, to a failure to

²⁰ (Learning and Work Institute, 2021)

²¹ (Parsons and Walsh, 2019)

²² (Learning and Work Institute, 2021)

implement a tailored programme of support for this group.^{23, 24} Furthermore, because of the way the programme was structured, providers were incentivised to achieve positive job outcomes as quickly as possible, which meant that clients who faced more significant barriers to employment, such as the over 50 group, were ‘parked’.²⁵ There are clear lessons to be learnt from the Work Programme.

The New Deal 50 plus is the only example of a national programme of support for over 50s in the UK. In 2000, the New Deal 50 plus was established as part of New Labour’s broader welfare-to-work approach and was successful in securing job starts for 120,000 individuals.²⁶ As part of this programme, clients were allocated a New Deal Personal Advisor (NDPA), a wage-top up and a training grant to help them re-enter the labour market. The NDPAs were identified as having the most immediate positive effect on job outcomes for over 50s as they made for more effective job searches, boosted the confidence and clients and improved their relative position in the labour market.²⁷ However, it could be suggested that participants on the New Deal programme were relatively close to the labour market and were voluntarily engaging²⁸ outcomes appear inflated when compared to the Restart programme where participants are likely to have spent much more time out of paid work.

²³ Brown, J. et al. (2018) ‘Age, health and other factors associated with return to work for those engaging with a welfare-to-work initiative: a cohort study of administrative data from the UK’s Work Programme’, *BMJ Open*, 8(10).

²⁴ (Learning and Work Institute, 2020)

²⁵ Age UK (2016) Helping 50+ jobseekers back into work: lessons for the Work and Health Programme. Available at: https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/active-communities/rb_nov16_work_and_health_programme.pdf.

²⁶ (Parsons and Walsh, 2019)

²⁷ Kodz, J. and Eccles, J. (2001) Evaluation of New Deal 50 Plus Qualitative Evidence from Clients: Second Phase. ESR70. Employment Service: Institute for Employment Studies.

²⁸ (Parsons and Walsh, 2019)

Evidence of what works

Chaplain²⁹ has suggested that the under-performance of previous employment programmes, together with a drive to protect older workers from the virus, has painted this group as one that needs to be looked after, rather than one that can actively contribute to the re-building of the economy. This chapter presents recommendations based on the best practice outlined within the literature, and potential areas for improvement identified through focus group discussions with employment support providers and Restart participants.

Role of employers

While the primary purpose of this report is to outline what works in getting over 50s into employment from the provider perspective, it is helpful to consider the role that employers play in the process. Business in the Community³⁰ identifies five key dimensions that are necessary to help support over 50s getting into and staying in workplaces:

- **Recruitment:** Examples of good recruitment practices may include management training to tackle age-related bias and developing returner re-entry programmes;³¹ using both

²⁹ (Chaplain, 2020)

³⁰ (BIC, 2020)

³¹ (BIC, 2020)

digital and non-digital methods; assessing job advertisements for ageist language; using standardised interview questions and problematising the idea of a ‘cultural fit’.³²

- **Flexible work:** Often needed for older workers in order to meet caring (including ‘sandwich caring’) and personal health needs.³³ This is particularly important since employers may be more reluctant to provide flexible working opportunities for those with dependents who are not their own children. However, some caution is needed around the nature of the ‘flexibility’ being offered and how this impacts the rest of the work offer – older workers should not be forced into low-paid insecure roles, simply because they seek flexible working conditions³⁴ – thus good quality flexible/part-time employment should be provided.
- **Health and wellbeing support:** Older workers are more likely to suffer from long-term health conditions, so they may require further support – the offer of which should be made clear at the recruitment stages if employers are committed to being age/disability-friendly. This may include things such as providing full, equal access to adjustments, promoting a cultural shift surrounding reporting health conditions (eg menopause) and encouraging a holistic approach to the career trajectory and different needs at each stage.
- **Career development:** It is important to ensure that career development opportunities are offered at all stages by providing equal access to training and progression opportunities. This requires action to tackle age bias by identifying where employees might need further career support (eg through mid-life MOTs).³⁵
- **Culture:** Promoting an age-inclusive culture will also require actions such as allocating age champions, carrying out training for managing older workers, in addition to conscious/unconscious bias training and analysing company age profiles.³⁶ Only by inciting a cultural shift would it be possible for organisations to seek the benefits of having a multigenerational workplace.

These characteristics of age-friendly employment practices can be helpful for employment support providers to help identify which types of organisations are best placed to provide good quality, sustainable employment options for older workers, and help employment

³² Edwards, M. et al. (2021) Shut Out: How employers and recruiters are overlooking the talents of over 50s workers. Centre for Ageing Better: Institute for Employment Studies. Available at: <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/shut-out-how-employers-and-recruiters-are-overlooking-talents-over-50s-workers>.

³³ (BIC, 2020)

³⁴ (Parsons and Walsh, 2019)

³⁵ (BIC, 2020)

³⁶ (Edwards *et al.*, 2021)

consultants build awareness and develop networks that they can utilise when trying to match older workers with opportunities.

The Role of Employment Support Providers

The following section outlines good practice examples drawn from the existing literature, followed by a set of recommendations for Restart providers which also draws on the data collection conducted by IES.

Good practice examples

Parsons and Walsh³⁷ note that there are few examples of good practice for getting over 50s into work via support programmes within the literature. Interventions are not directly targeted to over 50s in the UK which means that this group typically have to use the same routes for support as others. While this can work in some cases, it can mean that the distinct barriers faced by this age group may not be recognised.

Within the review, international examples of targeted age support are drawn upon. In South Korea, dedicated support centres (or campuses) for over 50s were seen to be particularly effective since they offer a holistic approach to broadening work outcomes by improving the opportunities given to over 50s through counselling, capacity building and retraining and support for social engagement³⁸. In Germany (see Box 1), the support offered was provided at a local level by individual employment support programmes and can be compared more closely to the regional Restart support landscape in the UK.

³⁷ (Parsons and Walsh, 2019)

³⁸ OECD (2018) Case Study: Seoul 50+ policy. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/gov/innovative-government/Republic-of-Korea-case-study-UAE-report-2018.pdf>.

BOX 1 Case study: Germany Perspektive 50+

What happened? Perspektive 50+ was rolled out as a government initiative across Germany to get over 50s back into the labour market. As part of this programme, the government subsidised local organisations and employers who were willing and able to prioritise older job applicants. The policy tools that were drawn upon included profiling assessments, special training measures, internships in companies, placement activities (all tailored to over 50s) and wage subsidies for companies³⁹. However, there was also a larger objective of awareness-raising that took place to try and change the attitudes of employers, companies, and participants on the programme. Participation was voluntary, yet a sense of competition was encouraged across job centres to develop the best labour market strategies which incurred more interest in the later phases of the programme rollout.

Why was it successful? Unlike previous programmes, Perspektive 50+ allowed job centres to develop region-specific strategies via ‘regional-pacts’. This meant it became a ‘vibrant space for experimental learning’ and revealed the advantages of providing personalised individual services⁴⁰. It was found that previous standardised approaches that had provided subsidies had incurred heavy deadweight losses, whereas Perspektive 50+ helped move one-third of participants into the labour market.

What would have worked better? Despite moving participants into the labour market, because of the nature of the roles and shape of the German welfare system, the number of benefits recipients did not fall since most were moving into low-paid or part-time roles (eg ‘mini jobs’⁴¹). Furthermore, the programme did not produce new instruments (or combinations of instruments) that work for over 50s. Rather, it showed how with the correct governance, welfare-to-work programmes can be successful if they develop a case-oriented approach.

Could it be transferable to the UK? The evaluators of Perspektive 50+ felt the strength of the programme was that it could be transferred to other country contexts, yet the following conditions need to be met: (1) good economic conditions/positive prospects for growth (eg not during a recession period); (2) complementary policies to alter employers’ behaviour (eg fighting age-related stereotypes, subsidies, protection against dismissals); (3) involvement of local and regional actors in implementing active labour market policies (eg need for rich networks, a willingness to collaborate across organisations, high-quality public employment services).⁴²

³⁹ (OECD, 2005)

⁴⁰ Bosch, G. (2019) Assessment of public initiatives to combat labour market segmentation in the EU Member States. Case study: Perspektive 50plus (Germany). *Eurofound Working Paper*. Available at: <https://euagenda.eu/upload/publications/untitled-278483-ea.pdf> p. 14.

⁴¹ Rubery, J. and Grimshaw, D. (2016) ‘Precarious work and the commodification of the employment relationship: the case of zero hours in the UK and mini jobs in Germany’, in G. Backer et al. (eds.) *Den Arbeitsmarkt verstehen, um ihn zu gestalten: Festschrift für Gerhard Bosch*. Springer.

⁴² (Bosch, 2019)

Since the Parsons and Walsh review was conducted, research by the Centre for Ageing Better in collaboration with local and national partners such as the Barclays, Humanly, Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has helped broaden the evidence base regarding the role that employment support programmes can play in helping over 50s re-enter the labour market⁴³ (see Box 2). This research has demonstrated how employment support services can be best prepared to offer a tailored and relevant service for over 50s with particular needs (eg if it is known that they will likely see an influx of clients from a certain industry) but also notes that these groups need to be identified early so that they can be best prepared for re-entering the labour market.

BOX 2 Case study: West Midlands Redundancy and Training (Centre for Ageing Better, 2021)

What happened? The Centre for Ageing Better, together with support from Barclays, were looking to improve the support available for workers over 50 in the West Midlands who were likely to be made redundant from the automotive and manufacturing industries. They did this by mapping the current provision and drawing on lived experience from clients who had used employment support services to better understand how the current provision could be improved.

What did they find? They identified some of the unique characteristics that over 50 jobseekers, who have spent most of their working lives in a single industry, have. This might include being unsure whether retraining is worth the investment, the feeling at their loyalty is not valued by employers, being more likely to trust advice from friends/family more than from external organisations, responding well to a holistic approach and that training needs to be linked with direct and clear employability prospects. They also highlighted the importance of viewing over 50s as a non-homogenous group with differing needs which should be considered (eg long-term health conditions, caring responsibilities, receipt of other benefits).

What was the outcome? From the research it was possible to identify several interventions which were considered as being suited for assisting over 50s back into work, including:

- Partnering with other community organisations and local agencies,
- Creating an accessible online hub,
- Careers coaching,
- Support to up-skill on the job,
- Providing training before the transition into work,
- Establishing local (or place-based) job hubs/clinics or clubs for over 50s.

⁴³ Centre for Ageing Better (2021) West Midlands Redundancy and Training Programme. Unpublished.

More recently, an ongoing collaborative design and research project has been rolled out in Greater Manchester which seeks to help improve employment outcomes for over 50s. While this programme is still awaiting commissioning, it has been successful in identifying the unique needs of this group and trialling different ways in which they can be supported. This provides a valuable evidence base for employment support providers who are looking to tailor their offer to the needs of over 50s. The project that has been taken forward is the rollout of a web-based platform which offers many of the tools needed to support over 50s in employment (see Box 3).

BOX 3 Case study: Greater Manchester (Humanly, 2022) – Centre for Ageing Better, GMCA and DWP Partnership

What is happening? A co-created project is currently underway which involves people with lived experience, people in local government and the DWP, local service providers, labour market experts and local employers. The aim of the project is to improve the economic activity rate among people over 50 to the state pension age across the region.

What did they find? Focus groups were held with people with lived experience (over 50) and found that this group wanted a service that was tailored to their personal, individual needs, valued their skills, was not patronising and gave clear steps which could be used to reach their job goals.

What was the outcome? From these findings, they prototyped four schemes – one of which was found to be feasible.

The feasible scheme is called ‘**Reach**’ which is an online platform designed to help support over 50s in their journeys into work. This includes resources such as a live support chat, information on careers in Greater Manchester, links to JCP and benefits support, information on local activities and success stories from others who have used the platform and tools for developing skills. All designed with people over 50 in mind.

This takes a holistic approach to employment support and is not just careers focused. The key focus of the platform is that it includes an activity which allows people to develop a personalised action plan which emphasises the value of their transferable skills. Currently, this platform is awaiting commissioning at GMCA level.

In 2018 it was reported that 96 per cent of internet non-users in the UK were over the age of 45.⁴⁴ From this, it could be possible to suggest that accessing and navigating this website could be somewhat problematic for those who are on programmes with low levels of digital literacy. Nevertheless, when this query was raised with the project team it was suggested that concerns surrounding digital poverty, as opposed to digital literacy were likely to be the most significant contributing factor that prevented participants from accessing the tool. Therefore, Ingeus (the employment support provider centre local to Manchester) had the responsibility of ensuring the necessary resources and assistance to access this online tool were provided. On a recent field visit to the Ingeus site made as part of this research it was possible to observe that the office had been designed with access to computers for participants in mind. The computers are located in the centre of the site and are set up in a way that participants can both use them freely and receive support if needed, helping navigate some of the challenges related to digital poverty within this age group in the city-region.

⁴⁴ ONS (2019) Exploring the UK's digital divide - Office for National Statistics. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04>.

Recommendations for providers

While good practice examples are somewhat limited within the research, from the combined literature and data collected within the focus group discussions, it is possible to identify five key recommendations for providers to improve the support offered to those in the over 50 group. The focus group discussions also allowed for feedback on the recommendations made within the literature.

- Providing tailored and holistic support.
- Intervening early to support motivation and confidence.
- Improving stakeholder awareness.
- Collaborating with local partners.
- Support navigating difficult conversations.

Providing tailored and holistic support

One of the most commonly cited suggestions within the literature is the need to acknowledge that over 50s are not a homogenous group which means that support needs to be customised to reflect the individuals' personal circumstances and employment background. Part of tailoring the support to individuals' needs is providing a holistic approach to identifying which offers would be best suited to programme participants. The

literature suggests that a ‘biopsychosocial’ approach for over 50s can be effective since they are often facing other challenges which need to be resolved or improved for them to be successful in gaining and sustaining a job.^{45, 46}

We also found that holistic support is especially important for this group, as many need support working through challenges in other parts of their life which, if unresolved, will negatively impact their chances of moving into paid employment. For example, **many need support managing physical and mental health conditions (in some cases caused by social isolation during the pandemic), others need help with debt, benefits, pensions and housing issues and others may need support with caring responsibilities.**

The team leaders involved in the focus groups suggested that large proportions of the over 50 group had a mental health condition, either formally or self-diagnosed. This was reflected in the experiences shared by those in the focus groups who were searching for roles that would be less stressful than those they were in previously (and in particular had less customer interaction). However, some participants were very reluctant to disclose these conditions for fear of it being perceived as a liability by potential employers. For others, it was felt that their mental health was so poor that they were months away from being able to begin applying for jobs. Therefore, it was the role of the employment advisors to develop their functional and social skills to a stage where it would not be detrimental for them to begin applying for jobs. This could take 4-5 months before getting to the stage that they are discussing potential sectors.

Another barrier we saw was English proficiency, it was reported by focus group participants that the number of caseloaded participants who cannot speak English is much higher within the over 50 group. Approaches such as partnering and building relationships with local community organisations, businesses and training providers are essential.

⁴⁵ DWP (2012) How ready is Jobcentre Plus to help people in their 60s find work? (IHR11), Gov.uk. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-ready-is-jobcentre-plus-to-help-people-in-their-60s-find-work-ih11>

⁴⁶ (Brown et al., 2018)

“We have a lot of over 50s on ESOL, so a lot of language barriers at the same time and they don’t know how to speak English, they don’t know how to read and write. It’s a massive barrier. What we’re looking to do at the moment is trying to visit the local communities and see if any employers are willing to take on those people, maybe speak their language and even get them into employment.” (Team Leader)

We also found that generic employability programmes were not suited to the growing group of over 50 jobseekers who had previously held more senior, professional roles. For this group, it may be more effective to direct resources towards developing the employer/consultant relationship to identify employers who are age-friendly and less likely to use the excuse that these participants are ‘overqualified’. **This group may also benefit from support with networking**, which poses a significant contrast to other others in the same age bracket who may need assistance with job readiness, again highlighting the heterogeneity among this group.

Understanding the needs of individuals is important, particularly surrounding digital skills. The digital skills need among the over 50s is diverse so advisors will have to identify the most suitable training to help support these needs. For example, some participants may have been in the same career for decades and will have never used a computer before, whereas others will need upskilling on the use of new programmes and software. Generic courses will offer much less value to this age group for that reason. Other issues arise when specialist courses are needed to re-accredit participants on certain software that are more costly than would typically be spent by providers on re-training or when their English proficiency is too low for them to attend digital skills courses with other native English speakers. Nevertheless, running an accurate diagnostic is especially important to ensure

that the needs of the individuals are being properly addressed and the support given is not just based on stereotyped assumptions about what support *should* be given to over 50s.

Recommendations

- Running accurate diagnostics for over 50s is especially important as they have diverse needs and can be subject to ageist assumptions when addressed as a homogenous group. For example, a lack of digital skills may be an issue for some participants, but this is certainly not the case for all older participants.
- Older people in our focus groups emphasised the need for well informed, specialist advisers and thought good rapport was essential. However, in contrast to some other research they did not place emphasis on the need for those advisers to be in a similar age group to themselves.
- A holistic approach to support which offers more than jobsearch is necessary since many participants have significant barriers to manage. This might include support with non-work aspects of benefits, impact of returning to work on pensions, housing, drugs/alcohol issues, and managing health conditions. This is also picked up in recommendation 4.
- Training needs to be focused on clear employment-related outcomes to demonstrate value to participants and help improve motivation (eg digital skills targeted at the correct level and ideally closely linked to the programmes/processes that may be required in future jobs).
- Offering support for participants with varied and different employment histories. Within current programmes support is more likely to focus on those who less than £20k and those looking to return to positions with salaries over £40k but there is less focus on those in the £20-40k bracket.

Intervening early to support motivation and confidence

Not only does support need to be targeted and intensive, but it is also suggested that it needs to be provided as early as possible to jobseekers over 50 (Learning and Work Institute, 2020). It is necessary to ensure that those in the over 50 group are being engaged in the process early to improve the chances that they sustain motivation in their job search.

Age UK⁴⁷ found in the Health and Work Programme that a failure to engage these workers early meant that they suffered from worse employment prospects. Similarly, DWP⁴⁸ reported that early interventions (at the start of a workless period) are valuable to avoid prolonged economic inactivity. However, the extent to which this could be rectified by Restart is somewhat limited since there is a nine-month period before participants can be referred.

Nevertheless, strategies could be adopted within Restart to engage jobseekers from the beginning. The literature suggests that offers such as work trials, work experience and associated work transition can help with this as it could help jobseekers 'keep in touch' with the labour market. However, as found by DWP⁴⁹, GMCA and Centre for Ageing Better⁵⁰ this needs a significant amount of employer buy-in and can be deemed unfeasible in some cases. Others suggest that entry into part-time work can provide a valuable route back into the labour market⁵¹. While good quality part-time work can help ease people back into work and build routines and confidence, caution needs to be taken surrounding the quality of the part-time roles being offered. Evidence suggests that older workers can feel forced into insecure and low-paid part-time roles because of their desire for lower numbers of hours⁵². Therefore, it is suggested that more innovative methods need to be used to engage employers. Our research also found that sometimes it is assumed that over 50s might want part-time work, yet this is not always the case. For some, there was a need for a substantive amount of hours to, in effect, make the work pay. For others, the spiralling cost of living crisis is putting growing numbers of older jobseekers in a position where they are looking for full-time, permanent work. And it remains the case that jobs being advertised as temporary or 'seasonal' poses problems for people who are on Universal Credit because of the complications and delays in making changes to their benefits.

It came through strongly in our research that employment support providers felt there was a need to focus on '**shifting the mindset**' of over 50 jobseekers since providers found that often a negative mindset was the most significant barrier that prevented this group from

⁴⁷ (Age UK, 2016)

⁴⁸ Perren, K. et al. (2011) Evaluation of the 50+ Face-to-Face Guidance Pilot. DWP, p. 104. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/214495/rrep720.pdf.

⁴⁹ DWP (2017) Sector-based Work Academies and Work Experience Trials for Older Claimants. Research Report 938. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sector-based-work-academies-and-work-experience-trials-for-older-claimants-combined-quantitative-and-qualitative-findings>.

⁵⁰ Humanly (2022) 50+ Employment Support in Greater Manchester: Final Report and Recommendations.

⁵¹ Atkinson, J. (2000) Evaluation of New Deal 50 Plus: Qualitative Evidence from Clients - 1st Phase. Employment Service.

⁵² (Parsons and Walsh, 2019)

engaging in the support offered as part of Restart. Advisors and team leaders suggested that there was often anxiety around re-entering the labour market or the need to learn/try something new. **Many found it useful to offer opportunities for this group to engage in social settings, whether this was in different types of training, social groups or volunteering programmes.** It was suggested that while the content of these sessions was important, it was the social interaction element and the opportunity to interact with others that were the most valuable in terms of building confidence – especially for those who were finding the transition back into social settings challenging after the pandemic.

Lack of confidence was an issue for those who had been in the same career for most of their working life and now needed to transition because of health conditions or a lack of work in that area. For those jobseekers identifying transferable skills improves confidence and sustains motivation in the early stages of being engaged on the programme.

Employability training has been found to work less effectively on older jobseekers than on younger people since it can have the effect of de-motivating them if they feel as though their existing experience is not valued or relevant.⁵³ **Employment programmes can support over 50s by emphasising the relevance of their experience and transferability of the skills they have within the current job market.** Not only can this help identify roles that participants might not have envisaged themselves working in previously, but it can also help advisors identify a broader range of potential areas to consider. A good example of this was identifying cases whereby people who had previously worked in manual roles could look to move into an assessor or a trainer role by partnering with local training providers. Identifying this kind of opportunity can empower the individual by showing them they have something valuable that they can offer to the younger generation and feel comfort in working with tools/skills that they are familiar with, just in a different setting.

⁵³ Vegeris, S., Smeaton, D. and Sahin-Dikmen, M. (2010) 50+ back-to-work evidence review and indicators guide for secondary analysis. Research Report 615. DWP. Available at: https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/download/25ed26183b2e6cc3113c1b030018fddc970dce303ca13ba8bb0586215d3880cb/695357/dwp_rrep615.pdf.

“It’s that transaction from one way of working to another. He’s mentioned doing office work, but I couldn’t see myself doing owt like that. Answering phones etc I couldn’t see myself doing it. if I tried it, I might be good at it but it’s just in my head it’s something I’ve never thought about doing. I’ve done manual work all my life.” (Restart Participant)

Recommendations

- Early identification of transferable skills is critical in engaging older participants. Providing ways in which previous (paid and unpaid) experience can be endorsed helps demonstrate the valuable contribution jobseekers make to roles and invites participants to consider opportunities they may have discounted or ignored previously. This helps with motivating participants and boosting confidence.
 - For example, success was seen through matching participants who previously worked in manual trades with local training organisations to work as assessors demonstrating the value in passing skills down to the younger generation.
- Practically this means it’s important for advisors to use transferable skills to pin down three sectors of interest in first meeting to give participants a broader range of potential areas to consider.
- Encouraging social interaction can be helpful to build confidence – this can be done on the programme through encouraging attendance at workshops (and designing and delivering workshops aimed at fostering social interaction and peer networks. This is particularly important for those participants who were very isolated as a result of Covid.

Improving stakeholder awareness

Employment support advisors

Within the literature, it is also suggested that stakeholders involved in supporting over 50s back into employment would benefit from training, building awareness and having their mindsets challenged. For advisors, this might include building a range of options for

reskilling and making good use of networks to understand all of the adult training options available to participants.⁵⁴ For example, some over 50s might not feel comfortable going into a college environment with lots of younger learners, so enrolling them on training with other people their age may be more effective.⁵⁵ Similarly, it has also been found within the literature that some participants respond better to advisors who are closer to their age as can help the client build confidence and instil a sense that there is a level of mutual understanding.⁵⁶ However, our research found that participants valued building a good rapport with their advisor over having someone who was of the same age.

It could be useful to consider how older workers' jobseeker support networks could be used to build empathetic understanding among their peers. Indeed, participants involved in the focus groups for this research expressed how useful they found sharing their experiences within those sessions. In particular, they noted the benefit of comparing experiences of applying for jobs that used ageist language and entering a workplace with large numbers of young workers. **Developing more opportunities for sharing should have the effect of making individuals feel less isolated throughout the process.**

It was also suggested that older jobseekers have typically responded to training (eg digital skills training) that is delivered by someone closer to their age, alongside people who are their age (eg not within a college setting). This chimes with a report by CLES⁵⁷ in which it is suggested that it could be effective to match over 50s with mentors (in addition to an advisor) of a similar age who can offer 1-to-1 support and guidance in a particular sector of interest (as currently rolled out as part of the PRIME Cymru project).

⁵⁴ (Learning and Work Institute, 2021)

⁵⁵ Age UK (2016) also note that skills funding should be offered across the board both through public providers and in private organisations and should not be allocated on the basis of age.

⁵⁶ (Atkinson, 2000; Moss and Arrowsmith, 2003)

⁵⁷ CLES (2011) Barriers to employment for people aged 50+ in Blackburn and Darwen: Research Study. Centre for Local Economic Strategies.

“Most of the advisors are younger than me. The oldest one here, I’m 20 years older than them. I don’t think that matters. If you get somebody that you can get on with well, build up a good relationship. It doesn’t matter about age. It’s if they can help you.” (Restart Participant)

To ensure that advisors are in a position to provide an appropriate, tailored programme of support the evidence suggests that further training might be necessary, such as the IEP training trialled in Greater Manchester (see Box 4).

However, it was also suggested within the focus groups that there is value that could be derived from developing opportunities for cross-provider collaboration that allows advisors who work with the over 50 group to meet, discuss and share best practice. The ReAct Action Learning Sets will provide a facilitated opportunity to do this. Unfortunately, it was possible to observe within the focus groups that ageist assumptions existed among those providing the employment support, this can also be addressed through further training and dialogue to ensure that stereotypes are not perpetuated within the advisor-participant relationship.

BOX 4 Case study: Upskilling employability workers in Greater Manchester (Centre for Ageing Better, 2022)

What is happening? Training was provided for key workers (eg advisors) on the Work and Health Programme in Greater Manchester to help provide better support for over 50 clients. The training was developed by the Centre for Ageing Better, the Institute of Employability Professionals and APM/Ingeus and comprised of four online self-learn modules. The aim of this training was to change practices and attitudes among key workers to improve outcomes for over 50s.

What did they find? Over half of Ingeus key workers reported a higher score between the initial survey and its follow-up regarding their ability to support older clients, demonstrating good levels of impact.

What could be improved? While the training was well received, the impact measured was not as significant as had hoped. The reasons for this included that the recipients of the training preferred face-to-face sessions and group discussions as part of the training, reflecting their different learning styles. Some felt as though the training did not teach them anything new, yet it was effective in instilling confidence in advisors and reminded them of what is important when supporting over 50s (eg adopting a personalised approach and focus on confidence building/transferable skills). It was felt that the training would be best replaced in induction sessions but could also be valuable to more experienced advisors who need a refresher.

Employment consultants

On the employer side, it is the role of employment consultants to build awareness among those they work with as this could have a positive impact on job outcomes. It is suggested that there is a need to address the stereotyped perceptions of over 50s in the workplace (eg that there are under-skilled and reluctant to train). In the literature, it is suggested that this will likely require specialist employer engagement staff who are able to convey the value of the older jobseeker to employers.⁵⁸

However, we found that more simply, there is a need for employment consultants to be willing to be more direct with employers to identify why they are choosing not to take on older participants. Off the back of this information and other resources (such as [Restless /](#)

⁵⁸ McNair, S. (2011) Older people and skills in a changing economy. UK Commission for Employment and Skills. Available at: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/10461/1/equality-older-people.pdf>.

55Redefined), consultants should aim to build age-friendly networks of engaged local employers by drawing on innovative methods to match them to potential participants. This may also mean circumventing the traditional recruitment methods which can be alienating to some older jobseekers (eg online job applications, working with smaller enterprises and offering other incentives).⁵⁹

Finally, it is worth reiterating that employers themselves have a significant role to play in reducing ageism in the workplace. Given the current tightness in the labour market, there is a clear argument that employers may begin to understand the valued contribution that these workers can make which should improve outcomes for all going forward.

Recommendations

- Identifying age-friendly employers by working with local businesses. Restless / 55Redefined are useful resources for this.
- To help improve recruitment practices, advisors should identify organisations that make efforts to avoid the use of language which has certain age connotations as this will be less off-putting for the participants and helps identify those employers who might be more age-friendly, as well as feeding back to employers who are struggling to recruit the impact of the language they use on potential workers.
- Encouraging honest (off the record if needed) dialogue with employers to get feedback if participants are unsuccessful – this could help identify employers with ageist hiring practices – also important to reiterate value of hiring older workers (eg more experience, likely to remain in the organisation for longer).
 - Participants felt it would be helpful if advisors were able to provide character references in cases where they lack recent employment references which could be used as a way to better engage and inform employers.
- Continuation of the IEP training for advisors working with over 50s (but with recommendations incorporated from recent evaluation to strengthen provision – see Box 4).
- Creating opportunities for advisors across providers to share experiences and ideas for how to support groups with poor job outcomes. This is done through the Action Learning Sets in ReAct, and the website could be better utilised to share good practice.

⁵⁹ (Parsons and Walsh, 2019; Learning and Work Institute, 2021)

- Ensure diagnostic interviews are participant-led and avoids assumptions based on age, for example, that the participants wants to be ‘steered towards retirement’ or does not want a full-time role.

Collaborating with local partners

In the literature, it is suggested that employment support can be best delivered by embedding the offer within communities and that there is value in offering local solutions to help develop a sense of involvement⁶⁰, accessibility, visibility and familiarity.⁶¹ There is a clear need for collaboration between local partners by developing an integrated cross-agency approach to supporting over 50s. Both of the initiatives across GCMA (see Box 3 and 4) and the German case of Perspektive 50+ (see Box 1) have been successful in combining resources and responsibilities for older returners across relevant agencies. This allows for the provision of a holistic range of support activities (eg specialist health services, training providers, local and community networks) to be provided which is particularly effective for over 50s who are likely to have a diverse range of needs which may not be available in-house⁶². Furthermore, collaborating with local businesses can also pave new routes to employment for groups who face additional barriers (eg matching participants with businesses who also employ non-native speakers or with disability-friendly employers).

It is suggested that holistic support for over 50s is best delivered in a non-institutional setting (ie not in a job centre-style location) where a range of support can be accessed, as these environments are much considered to be much more conducive to participant engagement.⁶³ The over 50 development campuses in South Korea previously mentioned are a good example of this, yet similar dedicated centres also exist in Germany and Belgium.⁶⁴ It is suggested that this type of support could be best delivered as part of a job club or network that brings older jobseekers together. This could also be effective to develop informal support mechanisms within the group.⁶⁵ For example, advisors have found that over 50s have responded better to digital skills training when it has been delivered in a community setting. In Sefton, Humankind have referred participants to an eight-week

⁶⁰ (CLES, 2011)

⁶¹ (Learning and Work Institute, 2021; Humanly, 2022)

⁶² (Learning and Work Institute, 2021)

⁶³ (European Commission, 2012)

⁶⁴ (Parsons and Walsh, 2019)

⁶⁵ (CLES, 2011; Centre for Ageing Better, 2021)

programme running at a local community centre where people are able to learn basic digital skills, access computers and interact with other jobseekers their own age.

“There are some great services in our local area. Our local community centre has an internet café where they’ll teach them from the basics and they can grab a brew that costs them 50p. It helps a lot to be with other people their age. We try and coax them to go into college, but I think they feel they’re going to be on a course with a load of 20-year-olds that already know what they’re doing.” (Team leader)

Recommendations

- Building relationships with local businesses can help identify age-friendly employers but also can help identify opportunities for participants with limited English-language skills by matching them to organisations where their language is more widely spoken.
- Signposting to other local services can be helpful so that the full range of adult learning opportunities are identified.
- Over 50s may be reluctant to want to learn in a college environment because of the perceived difference in age between themselves and other students, so opportunities for similar training delivered in an alternative setting could be more appealing.
- Referring participants to local job clubs, volunteering opportunities, mentoring schemes (eg PRIME Cymru) and other community groups can help with issues such as social isolation and building confidence in social settings.

Support navigating difficult conversations

An important part of being an advisor is being able to successfully navigate challenging conversations with clients so that they are setting goals that are ambitious but also realistic. This requires skill to be able to legitimately challenge participants, to get them out of their comfort zone but maintain the trust and rapport needed to ensure that they continue to stay motivated and engaged in the process. It was found within our research that a particular area that advisors need support navigating is when participants have a very

narrow idea about the work that they see themselves doing which makes matching with potential roles especially difficult. Some reported finding that over 50s can be less open to the prospect of trying different opportunities when re-entering the labour market as many will have worked in one industry for several decades – help is needed to help shift this mindset. When advisors are inexperienced, it can be difficult for them to navigate these challenging conversations. It is necessary to ensure that advisors have the support and training that they need to effectively advise the over 50 group. Therefore, advisors themselves must receive the necessary support and training to ensure that they are best placed to steer their participants towards a positive job outcome.

"...they're coming from Claire's Accessories or they've worked in Next for the last 2 years and they've done a bit of hospitality while they were studying at uni and we expect them to be able to sit down with a 55-year-old male and have a really challenging conversation. That's really difficult." (Team Leader)

In some cases, participants were struggling to find a job that offered the 'right amount' of flexibility to allow them to manage caring responsibilities alongside work. However, unlike parents, over 50s with caring responsibilities may not be granted the flexibility they need to allow them to manage work and care. Therefore, advisors need to identify employers who offer flexible working from day one in order to help participants. Again, this can be an especially difficult conversation for advisors to navigate because getting the participant into work might mean that their child needs to come out of paid employment, which in effect shifts the Universal Credit claim from one person to the other.

Recommendations

- Advisors need to be able to legitimately challenge clients but also help them see the full range of opportunities that could be available to them through identifying transferable skills, areas of interest and showcasing all of the roles within a certain sector.
- Sector taster days were suggested as an example of how to show the full range of roles available within a certain sector which can be useful to participants who have spent their whole careers in one area.

- Providers should be flexible about the arrangements used to match advisors/participants and respond to requests to move if needed.
- Advisors must be well supported and have sufficient training/support with having difficult conversations and communicating with different types of participants – opportunities for advisors to share experience with others within peer networks could also be effective.

Conclusions

As this research has shown, individuals over the age of 50 continue to face various hurdles in finding sustainable, decent employment. Addressing this is critical, given how lack of access to decent employment generates a negative knock-on effect on older individuals' well-being, including their mental health, physical health, and financial security. Furthermore, businesses stand to gain from enabling the employment of older workers, with the evidence demonstrating how a multigenerational workforce can benefit organisations.

Whilst over 50s may face similar barriers as their younger counterparts, some are more commonly, if not exclusively, faced by older workers and jobseekers. For instance, employers can be reluctant to hire older workers due to a real or perceived need to invest in training, aggravated by presumptions that older workers will not stay long enough to warrant training. Digital skill gaps are another important barrier that prevents the employment of jobseekers over 50. Circumstantial factors may also negatively influence the employment of over 50s, such as ill health and caring responsibilities.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also introduced additional barriers, especially given how older individuals are amongst the most vulnerable to the disease. This has created much anxiety amongst over 50s, making their search for employment even more complicated. In addition, at the height of the pandemic, business closures and downsizing due to lockdowns have resulted in job losses and fewer job openings, hence further limiting opportunities for sustainable employment.

However, the existing provision specifically aimed at over 50s in the UK is scant. Not only is employment support for over 50s usually dependent on time-limited, one-off project funding, it has also largely offered general rather than tailored support.

Our discussions with both employment support professionals and jobseekers over 50 have shown that the principal enablers of employment for older individuals relate to the practices of employers and employment support providers. Providers can best serve the needs of over 50s through tailored support and upskilling. Wraparound support in other life domains is critical. Those participants we spoke to specifically identified finances, housing, and mental health support needs.

To complement the limited literature, we looked to successful employment support programmes in different countries and identified common features, including early intervention, and provision designed specifically for older people.

A solid network of stakeholders is critical to address multiple and complex needs.

There are a range of areas that can be addressed by employers, including instituting anti-discriminatory hiring policies and introducing flexible working arrangements to accommodate the circumstances of older workers. In addition, the literature we reviewed identified age-inclusive hiring practices, flexible work arrangements, and wraparound support as critical to employment success amongst over 50s – in alignment with the enablers that were mentioned in our focus group discussions.

In summary, whilst the barriers faced by workers and jobseekers over 50 are plenty, concerted, multi-stakeholder action can help overcome them. It is our hope that the research we have conducted will support Restart providers in strengthening services for older jobseekers.

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