

Shut out

How employers
and recruiters are
overlooking the
talents of over
50s workers

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

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In partnership with:

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.

Institute for Employment Studies

IES is an independent, apolitical, international centre of research and consultancy in public employment policy and HR management. It works closely with employers in all sectors, government departments, agencies, professional bodies and associations. IES is a focus of knowledge and practical experience in employment and training policy, the operation of labour markets, and HR planning and development. IES is a not-for-profit organisation.

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Executive summary



This is the first report in a series from Ageing Better's Good Recruitment for Older Workers (GROW) project. This report looks at the current and future recruitment landscape for older workers. Later stages of the GROW project will explore older workers' own experiences and the effect of language in job advertisements.

Future trends in recruitment

The ways in which employers recruit are changing rapidly, and it is important that any new trends and behaviours are inclusive to all regardless of age. Employers can demonstrate their commitment to this through inclusive branding, creating a positive candidate experience and ensuring that long-term trends, such as the increasing

use of technologies like data analytics, are evaluated for their effect on diversity and inclusion.

Implications for employers and recruiters

From this summary of the existing evidence base as well as insights from interviews with employers and recruiters, we have highlighted some of the approaches that could be disadvantaging older workers as well as how these risks could be mitigated. Age-friendly recruitment would mean giving older workers a fair chance to progress and employers the opportunity to benefit from an experienced, diverse workforce – including people in mid- and later life.

Key Findings

- 1** Employers don't consider age diversity to be 'a problem' in their organisations, despite evidence of a range of negative perceptions towards older applicants.
- 2** Few employers consider age when looking to improve diversity and inclusion in recruitment.
- 3** Informal and opaque criteria such as organisational 'fit' have the potential to disadvantage older workers.
- 4** If employers did consider age in recruitment, it was often in the context of recruiting younger workers.
- 5** Despite many employers stating diversity and inclusion were important to them, few had organisational strategies aimed at making the recruitment process more diverse and inclusive – especially in the context of age.



Common recruitment processes that could disadvantage older workers

Lack of diversity strategies within an organisation, or the exclusion of age as a core element of a strategy.

Job descriptions that are not assessed for ageist language or include criteria that exclude older workers, such as particular qualifications or experience.

An emphasis on assessing the 'cultural fit' of a candidate, typically using subjective and unstructured approaches that are liable to age bias.

Use of unstructured interviews where interviewers do not use the same questions for all candidates or only one interviewer is present. This can result in candidates being assessed on different criteria and individual bias entering the recruitment process.



Measures that could make recruitment process more inclusive for older workers

Circulate job advertisements as widely as possible, using multiple digital and non-digital platforms, to make sure they reach people from a wide range of backgrounds. Consider the cumulative impact of how age interacts with other characteristics such as gender, ethnicity or disability.

Use application processes that reduce explicit and implicit age cues, such as standardised application forms rather than CVs.

Ensure that the criteria against which cultural 'fit' will be assessed are transparent, applied consistently across candidates and clearly communicated.

Structure the interview process using multiple decision-makers, predefined questions and scoring mechanisms to mitigate the impact of potential age bias.

Presence of age-related stereotypes and negative perceptions, such as older workers being less physically 'presentable' or having poor IT skills in comparison to younger workers.

Explicitly recognise the importance of age-inclusivity and build a workplace culture that acknowledges the contribution of people of all ages.

Poor use of age data – assumptions about the extent to which age diversity is an issue within an organisation are often made without critical analysis of workforce or recruitment data.

Collect and analyse the age profile of the current workforce as well as job applicants to evaluate whether job advertisements are attracting candidates of all ages. Report this to the Board in order to identify and improve under-representation.

Introduction



Our longer working lives, the need to move between different roles at different life stages and the increasingly challenging job market brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic mean that the recruitment environment is more important than ever.

Currently, many older workers applying for jobs feel that their age counts against them (Centre for Ageing Better, in press). This is particularly relevant as data shows that the oldest and youngest workers are among the hardest hit by the pandemic, and it is imperative that age is not a barrier to applicants in the recruitment process. Even before the pandemic it was clear that more could be done to make the most of the age shift in our workforce. Research has shown that more than 800,000 people aged 50 and over are not in work but would like to be, and that workers over 50 are half as likely to move jobs as someone under 50.

We know that older workers face particular challenges in recruitment. They are half as likely to be re-employed after being made redundant as younger workers. Data from before the pandemic shows that only a third (35%) of over 50s who are made redundant are in employment again within three months, the worst of any age group (Centre for Ageing Better, 2020). This is likely due to a variety of age-related reasons, for example health and carer status – but many people also believe that they have experienced age bias in recruitment. Research previously commissioned by Ageing Better shows that a third of people aged over 50 believe they have been turned down for a job because of their age, and two-fifths see their age as a disadvantage when applying for a job (YouGov and Ageing Better, 2018).

Based on the number of furloughed jobs earlier this year, we estimate that more than 400,000 people over 50 could be made redundant due to the pandemic, with many more older workers trying to re-enter the labour market, or change jobs, after time away.

The purpose of this research, undertaken by the Institute for Employment Studies, is to highlight the current recruitment landscape and future trends that older job applicants face. This includes a rapid evidence review, secondary data analysis of existing surveys with HR and recruitment professionals, and interviews with 20 HR or recruitment professionals at large, medium and small employers, as well as five interviews with recruitment and diversity specialists.

More than 400,000 people over 50 could be made redundant due to the pandemic

Age diversity in the workplace



Most employers felt they didn't have an age diversity problem. A few collected data on age and surmised that it was not an issue for their organisations, while others came to the same conclusion by 'looking around the organisation'.

Employers were more likely to believe that they needed to take immediate action on gender and racial diversity than on age. To do this, many analysed workforce and applicant data on those specific protected characteristics and measured these against broader diversity and inclusion strategies. None of the employers or recruiters interviewed had a specific strategy to improve age diversity in their workforce, although some stated a general desire to attract more younger workers. Wider research suggests that few employers do, with just one in five reporting that they discuss age strategically (IFF and Ageing Better, 2017).

A recent survey of CEOs and senior leaders found that 57% believed that they already had measures in place to reduce age bias in recruitment, however we know that this is not representative of the experiences of many older applicants, with the majority of over 50s saying they feel disadvantaged because of their age (McKenzie-Delis Packer Review, 2020).

Interviewed employers generally did not differentiate between their current workforce and job applicants, assuming age diversity in their workforce indicated age diversity in their recruitment pool. This was often based on subjective judgements rather than the gathering of age-specific data. This makes it difficult for employers to identify specific diversity issues within their organisation. Therefore certain groups, including older workers, are likely to continue to be adversely affected during the recruitment process.



“If it became a blatant issue if you look around, but it isn’t like that. We don’t need to focus on it because it happens naturally.”

Large employer, Technology

Several employers interviewed felt that there would need to be a ‘significant issue’, such as an age-discrimination claim, to provide the impetus to do something about age-inclusivity. Given the small number of claims (both successful and unsuccessful) made on the basis of age per year in comparison to gender and ethnicity, employers are more likely to prioritise changes in their employment practices to protect against claims on the basis of the latter rather than the former. By and large, these claims are made by employees; it is much more difficult to make a case for discrimination during the recruitment process.

Given the wider context of population ageing, and their own assessment of the age profile of their workforce, many of those interviewed did not seem to consider age as an issue that needed attention. However, gender, ethnicity, disability and social mobility were seen as important areas for employers to act on.



“Recruiting managers always say they want someone young. They have a perception of older workers that they will be a disadvantage – ‘55 might break a hip’, more ill-health, slower and less hard working.”

Medium employer, Manufacturing

Despite this, it was clear that those interviewed held a range of negative perceptions of older workers that could potentially influence the recruitment process. These included:

- Older workers ‘not tending to want to work in junior roles’.
- Older workers ‘having poor IT skills’.
- Older workers are ‘more likely to have issues with their fitness levels, impacting their effectiveness in physical roles’.
- Younger people are ‘more flexible to the needs of the business, particularly in terms of working patterns’.
- The appearance of younger staff being more ‘presentable’ for customer-facing roles as they are ‘less likely to look worn out’.

Some of the assumptions made about older workers by the interviewees were based on common stereotypes, such as older workers being perceived as performing poorly in comparison to their younger counterparts and being less flexible to the needs of the business. Despite little evidence to support these assumptions, this type of stereotypical thinking can be pervasive in organisations (Posthuma and Campion, 2009).

This matches existing evidence, which found that recruiters ranked older participants as less likely to be suitable for roles, despite having qualifications equal to other applicants. Furthermore, if a decision-maker held negative attitudes towards older workers they were less likely to be hired. Conversely, if a decision-maker held positive attitudes about the ability of older workers this reduced the negative impact on older workers (Fasbender and Wang, 2017).

Considering age bias in the recruitment process



When considering diversity and inclusion in recruitment, few employers specifically look at or consider age bias in their recruitment processes. Where they do, they are commonly looking at attracting younger workers.

Employers rarely considered age diversity to be a key tenet of their recruitment process. Those that did were specifically looking at attracting more younger workers. Throughout all the stages of the recruitment process, from job description to appointment, most employers placed emphasis on inclusion and diversity. This translated into assessing different stages of the process for potential biases usually only in terms of gender or ethnicity.

Often employers felt that general inclusive recruitment practices were sufficient to attract older candidates. For example, advertising all jobs as potentially flexible in terms of hours or location might be particularly attractive to

people with long-term health conditions or caring responsibilities, the majority of whom are older, but this had not been identified as a specific action to improve age diversity. Similarly, several employers spoke highly of using digital recruitment methods and the benefits these could have for people with long-term health conditions or caring needs, for example in not having to attend a physical interview, but did not relate these to age specifically.



“We will absolutely keep online interviewing – it’s more efficient and better. We used to have assessment centres [across the country] but [they were] too expensive to travel to for some. This is no cost and greener and it makes a big difference to the team not to have to deal with room-booking issues.”

Large employer, Public Sector

“If they did do all stage one interviews online it does help more people partake, for example if someone has caring responsibilities, they could do the interview out of hours to be more accommodating.”

Large employer, Financial Services



There was an assumption among these employers that skills shortages were best filled by younger people with more of their working lives ahead of them. Largely, however, employers did not specify why they had strategies to increase the number of younger workers but no equivalent for older workers

Where age was considered, this was in the context of attracting younger workers. Interviewees discussed graduate recruitment, partnering with local education institutes and offering apprenticeships and re-designing the recruitment process itself as they perceived this as appealing more to younger applicants. Pre-pandemic, some employers had made attracting younger workers a core component of their HR strategies. This was particularly the case in industries with acute skills shortages and an older workforce, like manufacturing and construction.

“The workforce is ageing, so recruitment needs to focus on younger generation and bringing in fresh talent. Millennials and Gen X are tech savvy and want an interactive and efficient recruitment process – not clicking through lots of clunky pages or long application forms.”

Large employer, Manufacturing



Designing the job role and recruitment approach

When speaking more generally about how to appeal to a diverse group of applicants, employers were aware of the need to indicate that they are an inclusive employer from the start. Offering flexible working patterns, such as remote working or condensed hours, was highlighted as a key way to attract qualified candidates who might not be able to attend a physical office from nine to five every weekday.



“Advertising all jobs as available flexibly has made a big difference in bringing in a more diverse applicant pool. It was work to get managers on board, but now they are seeing how working flexibly can work. This is an easy win-win and a benefit to lots of disadvantaged groups; it covers many diversity strands.”

Large employer, Education

With the explicit aim of widening the candidate pool, some employers have moved away from a static set of experience requirements towards capability assessments. This is primarily in order to attract people from a range of backgrounds, as some people might be less likely to fulfil experience requirements but are equally capable of doing the job. This is particularly the case in the public sector, where use of the Civil Service’s ‘Success Profile Framework’ is common. This is a more flexible framework of designing jobs that measures different aspects of capability (e.g. behaviour, strengths, ability) rather than competency alone, which is often demonstrated through previous work experience. However, one public sector interviewee thought that removing the minimum number of years’ experience required could adversely affect older workers, where typically they could gain an advantage due to experience from ‘previous careers’:



“We have a large older workforce and often get people in their second careers. Might have been working in [related practical fields], and then transition to [the employer], setting standards and assessing rather than being hands on.”

Large employer, Public Sector

In smaller organisations, interviewees suggested that job roles are often less well-defined and contain a wider range of responsibilities than in a larger organisation. Adaptability to the needs of the business is often a core candidate requirement for smaller employers. If this is combined with the negative perceptions we know some employers hold, such as older workers being less able to multi-task and less adaptable to the needs of the business, this can put them at a disadvantage in the recruitment process.

Branding and advertising

Using a diverse range of advertising methods that specifically targets older workers is likely to increase the chances of an age-diverse shortlist. This is not, however, a common recruitment approach. Research from a sample of more than 80,000 employers found that word-of-mouth and personal recommendation were the most popular recruitment methods in 2019, with 71% using this approach (Department for Education, 2020). Recommendations from existing employees, or ‘refer a friend’ schemes, as well as internal recruitment, are arguably the least effective ways of improving diversity in an organisation as individuals are likely to surround themselves with people like themselves (Montoya, Horton and Kirchner, 2008).

Increasing the number and diversity of recruitment platforms is likely to increase the number of older applicants. Research has found that employers who particularly target older workers used more diverse recruitment pools to select candidates, and these efforts are more likely to be effective when inclusiveness towards all groups is displayed (Goldberg, et al, 2013).

Many of the employers we interviewed placed strong importance on creating an inclusive brand in order to increase their talent pool, as well as targeting specific groups. One public sector organisation discussed using imagery to attract older workers due to the ‘life experience’ they can bring to the organisation:

“In our imagery, we try to use more mature people. For our degree-holder programme, we are getting more people in their 40s. There is a slight shift and the rebranding includes [a specific job role] to get more mature applicants [for that role specifically]... [We] have metrics to monitor but have to ask for them, could commission age-related data but it’s not a focus.”

Large employer, Public Sector

Explicit and implicit cues such as job descriptions, employee benefits, the working environment, social activities and flexible working arrangements are fundamental in building the brand of an organisation. If these seem aimed at attracting younger workers, this signals to older potential applicants that this is not a job ‘for them’.



“When I was in [a recruitment] agency you were told that you didn’t want people who were old working in young tech companies. Clients we worked with wouldn’t say it directly, but would say things like ‘graduated in the last six years’.”

Large employer, Technology

Most employers were aware that job descriptions and advertisements should be carefully worded to attract as many candidates as possible and took action to ‘de-bias’ the language used. Several discussed the negative impact on the attraction of women to job descriptions and adverts that use ‘masculine’ themed language, such as ‘determined’, ‘competitive’ or ‘ambitious’. In some cases, organisations used online tools (such as Textio) to ‘decode’ gendered language in job adverts. However, the same consideration was not given to use of ageist language. Although potentially ‘age unfriendly’ language can appear in a person specification (e.g. ‘recent graduate’, ‘digital native’) and in how a company chooses to represent itself (e.g. ‘frequent nights out’ or ‘we work hard, play hard’), employers did not identify this as an issue. As with gender-coded language, job descriptions and adverts that imply they are looking for someone young are likely to lead to older potential applicants self-selecting out of the recruitment process.



“A lot of this [improving diversity] is in the wording – very strict on wording – careful about him/her pronouns. Making sure each piece is completely neutral, not biased. Focus is to encourage people with the right talent. Not based on their characteristics.”

Large employer, Public Sector

Selection process

Legally, employers cannot ask for date of birth on a job application form unless there are age requirements for the job in question, such as selling alcohol. This information can be collected through equality and monitoring forms, but should not be shared with the shortlisting panel. However, many employers do not use standardised application forms, instead inviting candidates to send CVs that are more likely to explicitly or implicitly indicate someone's age.

To try to limit the impact of bias, some employers use 'blind' CVs, concealing the demographic details of candidates e.g. date of birth. The extent of 'blinding' varies by both organisation and role. One employer stated that graduate applications were blind because they went through a different channel that used software to remove the personal information; however, more senior roles asked for CV applications and it was considered too time-consuming to blind them in-house. The interviewee also felt that hiring managers want to know the full background of the candidate for these roles.

Although 'blind' CVs are a relatively common recruitment tool, the evidence is mixed on their effectiveness for reducing age bias

One public sector interviewee reported that the use of 'blind' CVs improved ethnic diversity at first stage interview, but the positive impact reduced at later interview stages. Other evidence suggests that removing details such as name or address does not necessarily work for reducing bias based on gender (Krause, Rinne and Zimmerman, 2012) or ethnicity (Behaghel, Crepon and Barbanchon, 2015).

There are implicit and explicit indicators in CVs that allow us to make assumptions about someone's age, such as their work experience, types of qualifications and hobbies. There are very few studies looking at the impact of CV blinding on age diversity, but research has shown that applicant CVs that included more implicit cues referring to older age (such as their name or hobbies) were seen as less suitable for the role, even when more explicit age cues (for example, date of birth) were removed (Derous and Decoster, 2017). Given that the efficacy of blinding CVs is questionable, some researchers have suggested employers use standardised application forms rather than accepting CVs (Lacroux and Martin-Lacroux, 2019).

Other areas of the recruitment process were considered easier channels through which to demonstrate commitment to diversity and inclusion. For example, specifying that interview panels must include an individual from an under-represented group, such as someone from an ethnic minority background. Several interviewees raised the prospect of revising their policies for interview panels in light of global Black Lives Matter protests throughout the last year.



“Line managers do the sift in a recruitment panel, typically of three people, which must have gender diversity. This year, we are also asking for people from an ethnic minority background or disability on panels. They must have attended training (there is an eLearning module around bias). The panel sift individually and then combine to get the shortlist.”

Large employer, Public Sector



“With everything going on [referring to BLM] the diversity and inclusion team have had lots of feedback from workers from ethnic minority backgrounds and pressure to increase [the number of people from] ethnic minority backgrounds [in] leadership and senior roles.”

Large employer, Transport

However, some employers preferred instead to focus more on any unconscious biases that the panel might hold, rather than prescribing a specific make-up of the panel.



“We don’t insist on a representative from an ethnic minority background like [other employers] do now – we used to in the past but have moved away from this. We may change again given recent events but have struggled with the idea that a token person on the panel makes it balanced. [It’s] much more powerful to teach everyone to challenge themselves.”

Large employer, Public Sector

Employers should consider the impact of the attitudes and overall influence of the decision-makers and take action to demonstrate an organisational commitment to an inclusive culture, challenging negative perceptions of older workers and celebrating the contribution of workers of all ages.

Assessing cultural 'fit'



Informal and opaque criteria such as cultural 'fit' have the potential to disadvantage older workers.

Most interviewees emphasised the importance of cultural 'fit' in making job appointments. Typically, fit was assessed as alignment with organisational goals and values. While this is sometimes assessed via a framework of competencies and behaviours, it is usually much less structured. Such informal criteria, as well as unstructured processes such as having only one decision-maker, can allow for bias, potentially disadvantaging older applicants (Wolgast, Bäckström and Björklund, 2017). These are particularly opaque criteria against which to be assessed as 'fit' is both subjective and influenced by the current workforce make-up.

Various stages of the recruitment process are used to assess cultural fit. Most commonly, this is through the interview process, as well as suitability for the job role. For example, an interviewee reported that their organisation looks for someone who is 'dynamic and ambitious' or 'sociable and outgoing', characteristics that are often associated with younger people (Posthuma and Campion, 2009; Zaniboni, et al 2019). Cultural fit is considered important by many employers because they 'can train-in the skills but they need to share values and outlook'. This is a significant barrier for older workers as ageist views can masquerade as 'poor cultural fit'.



"It wouldn't be good to have someone who is clearly on a different page as the person would probably just leave within 6-12 months."

Large employer, Technology

Multi-stage interview processes and wider assessment of fit seem to be more common for more senior roles. Interviewees described 'meet the team' exercises, or informal senior stakeholder interviews or meetings, to see how they 'gel' together and assess the 'synergy between them'. Employers gave this significant weight, feeling that many candidates can 'do the work', but they will not be successful if they do not 'get on' with the team.



“[They] will assess candidates’ scores but also the team fit and cultural fit of the candidate through their conversations... [They] have to find a balance between a good fit and someone who scores highly.”

Large employer, Manufacturing

Across all job levels, trial periods are another method through which employers can assess cultural fit. This gives employers more information about capability, but can also allow them to assess candidates based on non-job specific criteria, such as personality or social factors. Feedback is often informally collected from the wider workforce during these trials, which could be problematic for older workers if most employees are younger as people tend to favour those similar to themselves (Montoya, Horton and Kirchner, 2008).

Including age in diversity and inclusion



Despite many employers stating diversity and inclusion were important to them, few had organisational strategies aimed at making the recruitment process more diverse and inclusive, especially in the context of age.

None of the employers interviewed had a strategy explicitly aimed at increasing the number of workers or job applicants in later life. Some had specific, measured goals to increase the proportion of applicants who were women or from ethnic minority backgrounds, but how this was assessed and tracked was often unclear.

Overall, there is very little evidence that employers evaluate the efficacy of initiatives designed to reduce discrimination. For example, language decoding tools were commonly used as standard as a way of reducing gender bias in the recruitment process and are deemed a relatively quick

and easy way to appeal to a wider audience. Employers cited the use of such tools as a method of improving diversity and inclusion, but do not seem to be evaluating whether they are working. Evaluating the efficacy of these initiatives, as well as implementing other practices to improve diversity, may be perceived as too complicated or time-consuming.

There is no evidence that employers are using toolkits or approaches specifically aimed at de-biasing the recruitment process for older workers as they might for other protected characteristics. Even if these tools do exist, most employers do not see age diversity as a problem so are unlikely to devote significant resource to the issue.

Most interviewees could speak in detail about the emphasis their organisations put on diversity and inclusion, as well as specific steps they had taken to demonstrate this commitment through de-biasing the recruitment process. Often this was for

identified groups e.g. people from ethnic minority backgrounds or with disabilities. Rarely were the intersections of protected characteristics explored. Research suggests that people from multiple under-represented groups experience heightened levels of discrimination. This is also true when it comes to age. One study found that older Black-British applicants were 9.4 times less likely to be invited to an interview compared to an older White-British applicant and were invited to interviews at firms offering 5.8 times lower salaries compared to those of firms that White-British applicants were invited to attend (Drydakis, et al, 2017; 2018).

Older Black-British applicants were 9.4 times less likely to be invited to an interview compared to an older White-British applicant

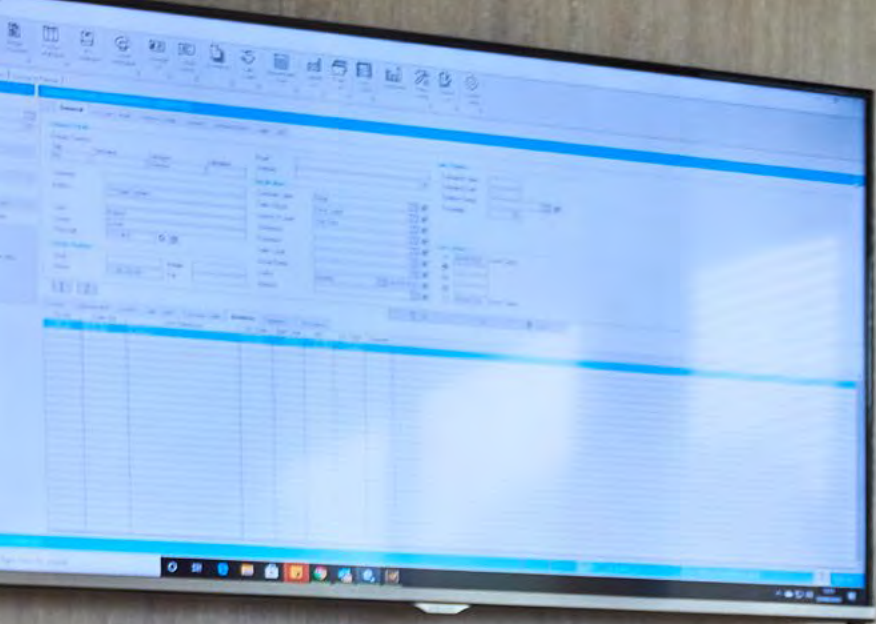
Conclusion

Most employers say they are committed to the principles of diversity and inclusion in their recruitment processes, but this broad commitment does not take the specific needs of older jobseekers into account. Without a 'burning platform', few employers are taking concrete action to appeal to older applicants, or to ensure their recruitment processes are age-friendly. This limits the options available to older workers who want to change or progress in their careers, as well as those who might be trying to return to the labour market.

This research suggests that there are steps employers and recruiters can take to make sure their recruitment processes are fairer to all applicants and that they're benefitting from a diverse workforce, including people in mid- and later life. These include:

- Circulate job advertisements as widely as possible to ensure they are reaching people from a wide range of backgrounds.
- Consider the impact of recruitment processes on people from multiple under-represented groups, e.g. older women, people from ethnic minority backgrounds with disabilities.
- Use application processes that reduce explicit and implicit age cues, such as standardised application forms rather than CVs.
- Collect and analyse the age profile of the current workforce as well as job applicants to evaluate whether job advertisements are attracting candidates of all ages. Report this to management boards in order to identify and improve under-representation.

- Structure the interview process using multiple decision-makers, predefined questions and scoring mechanisms to mitigate the impact of potential age bias.
- Ensure that the criteria against which cultural 'fit' will be assessed are transparent and clearly communicated to applicants.
- Recognise the importance of age-inclusivity explicitly and build a workplace culture that acknowledges contributions of people of all ages.
- Challenge any negative perceptions and assumptions made in the workplace about older workers and explicitly celebrate contributions of workers of all ages.



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