



Past it at 40?

A grassroots view of ageism and discrimination in employment

- People in their forties now ranked alongside much older people as 'over the hill'
- 30-35% of over-fifties not in employment
- Loss to the economy – up to £31 billion per year
- Looming pension crisis will affect out-of-work over forties disproportionately

A report undertaken for Third Age Foundation
by SMA Associates



Ageism and discrimination against older people are having devastating effects, not just on over-fifties but, as this report shows, on over-forties too.

Why do so many people who want to work find it difficult to do so? Why are employers reluctant to employ 'older people'? Is it purely the effect of discrimination and ageist attitudes? Or are there some other reasons? Whatever the causes, what can and should be done to achieve change for the better in the future?

This piece of qualitative research begins to find some answers to these difficult questions. It is a contribution to the increasingly urgent debate about how to ensure that as many people as possible, from all age groups, can find suitable work, which benefits both employers and the wider economy. With the current concerns about the effects of the ageing population on future pension provision and, as this report shows, the striking lack of pension provision for many people now in their forties and fifties, the policy implications are more significant than ever.

Ageism, discrimination and age diversity

The terms of the debate need to be clear: what is the real problem? Definitions are not easy, but for this report we say that:

- *direct discrimination* takes place when age is used to bar people from jobs;
- *indirect discrimination* takes place when a particular group is disproportionately disadvantaged by rules and policies consciously or unconsciously designed to keep them out;
- *ageism* is negative, abusive or derogatory behaviour by individuals or institutions, based on age-related prejudices and stereotypes. It can affect how older (and younger) people think about themselves, sapping confidence and self-esteem.

“ You just accept it: oh, well, I'm over 40. You tend not to apply for as many jobs as you would have before 40, even if nothing else has changed. I did get several rejection letters. No reasons were given, but it was probably because of age. No one ever said 'We're looking for someone younger', you tend to put it on yourself. ”

jobseeker

What is being done about it?

The government's 1999 voluntary *Code of Practice on Age Diversity* is a useful first step – but by 2001, only a third of employers had heard of it (DWP research). None of the employers interviewed for this research were aware of it. Nor did they know anything about the European Union *Directive on Equal Treatment in Employment and Occupation* (2000), which is only due to be incorporated into UK legislation in 2006.

This report argues that much more needs to be done to publicise the *Code of Practice* and to make it work, as well as introducing the legislation as quickly as possible.

The research findings

Since 1994, Third Age Foundation has provided an holistic approach to helping older people (40+) get back to work. Upskilling in ICT, together with personal development, helps build up self-confidence and enables positive planning for the future, often in a new direction.

Third Age Foundation students, together with some from a sister organisation located in Bristol, were interviewed for this research.

- **102 students were interviewed: 16 pensioners and 86 active jobseekers;**
- **30 employers from 29 firms in Greater London were also interviewed.**

The jobseekers were a very diverse group, different from each other and different in London and Bristol.

In **Bristol** they were younger – just over half were in their forties – they had been unemployed for shorter periods of time, and more people had been made redundant or had lost their businesses. There were more men, and they were more likely to depend on Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance. Half had been referred through the local New Deal pilot or by Job Centres. Well over half felt "isolated", "depressed", "angry", "bored and fed up", "devastated" and "didn't know where to start".

In **London**, there were more people in their fifties and sixties, more women, more people from ethnic minority groups or with non-British nationalities, many with disabilities, and a much wider range of reasons why they were needing help to find a job. They had generally been out of the job market for longer than the Bristol group. They included:

- **people who had been made redundant;**
- **long-term (over four years) unemployed/out of work;**
- **women returners (recently divorced, widowed or children left home);**
- **people with disabilities seeking a new direction;**
- **people still in a job but fearful about the future and needing new skills to keep going.**

Again, many people had lost their self-confidence and self-esteem, feeling "lonely", "humiliated", "worried", "depressed" and "unempowered and under pressure to take low-paid jobs".

The realities of ageism and discrimination

It is not easy to know whether you have been discriminated against. Seventeen interviewees said "my age is against me" when asked what they thought about their prospects, but very few were sure that they had experienced actual discrimination. Nothing is said directly, yet the messages are unwelcoming:

jobseeker in his fifties

“ A few years ago, I applied for a job and was interviewed. There were three people in the room, all in their mid-twenties. I felt uncomfortable – they talked about this 'new, dynamic company'. It wasn't said directly, but I could feel they were trying to discourage me a bit. I don't mind if I'm surrounded by younger people, I was willing to learn and be as flexible as possible. As the interview went on, I felt I wouldn't 'fit in'. They said 'Don't ring us, we'll ring you' – and they didn't.

“ I was thinking about what to do about it, but it's so difficult to prove anything. It's easy to be an employer and be prejudiced and get away with it. As an individual, there was nothing I could do. I was upset and disappointed – but life goes on! ”

An important finding in this research was the attitude of employers. We asked about the 'positive' and 'negative' aspects of employing people over 40. A few said that they would make a decision based on the ability and skills of the applicants. Others talked about their 'young' industry, and how difficult it would be for older people to fit in.

“Some industries are younger, and an older person may not feel comfortable and will look out of place. They probably would not enjoy the job either.”

employer

“In this industry (banking) you are middle-aged at 33!... There is a perception that if you are old and have not moved on, then you cannot be good.”

employer

Collectively, employers came up with distinct stereotypes:

- *On the positive side*, older people were likely to be mature, more willing to learn, self-motivating, have more life skills and experience and have wider, transferable work skills. They would be more consistent, less likely to panic, keep good time and be stable and loyal. They would also provide a balance within the workforce.
- *On the negative side*, older people would have out-of-date skills and qualifications, not be good at IT, not be good at taking advice from younger people, be stuck in 'demarcation' habits and clock-watching, be inflexible and resistant to change, take longer to learn, cost more and take too much sick leave.

Out of 208 people recruited by these employers in the previous year, only 40 were over the age of 40. Several said there were too few older applicants. Many claimed to be following equal opportunities policies. They thought the 'gate-keepers' of human resource officers or recruitment agencies were to blame: education about ageism should be directed at them. But did the stereotypes also insidiously affect recruitment decisions? It is impossible to say.

Bridging the gap: recommendations

The two main gaps that **employers** identified were:

- **ICT;**
- **understanding the 'world of work'.**

If job applicants did not have at least the basics, they would not get far.

The main gaps that **jobseekers** identified were:

- **ICT;**
- **the need for self-confidence and a clear sense of direction.**

Putting these together, the barriers facing jobseekers over 40 could begin to be scaled.

This report comes up with a series of practical recommendations for government, employers, jobseekers, other organisations and employment agencies.

1. Jobseekers must be seen **holistically**, building up their skills (including ICT), regaining self-confidence and self-esteem, and sorting out personal problems. This is a job for New Deal, Job Centres and, ultimately, government. Specialist organisations should provide day-to-day support, but this needs to be properly funded.
2. **Jobseekers** need to be flexible about what they are prepared to try, and they need to work hard to acquire the skills that would get them as far as an interview.
3. **Employers** need to be more willing to take what they might see as a 'risk', and to provide on-the-job-training and support, through mentoring and other methods.
4. **Ageism and discrimination** must be tackled. They are bad for older people, bad for business, bad for society and bad for the economy. They create waste and demoralisation. Education *and* legislation are needed and needed fast.

“ *There is a problem of seeing something as discrimination when it may be something else ... but if it happened, I'd be pissed off to think you weren't 'good enough' because of your sex or because you were 'too old'.* ”

jobseeker

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