

Action Guide: Frontline Workers

Challenging Age

Information, Advice and Guidance for Older Age Groups

Understanding Older Adults and Overcoming Barriers to Work and Learning

This Action Guide is designed for frontline workers providing IAG to older people wanting to work and learn, and gain a clearer sense of career and life direction. The Guide is based on feedback from the many older adults consulted during the DfES-financed *Challenging Age* research project to identify the information, advice and guidance (IAG) needs of the 45+.

Challenging Age shows that unemployment and inactivity can affect all occupational groups of older workers including professional, managerial, skilled technicians and operatives, and unqualified manual workers. Those in work may need help in developing their careers, and identifying suitable training. Some may want a change of career direction which enables them to utilise previously unrealised talents and interests, but need help in doing this. Others may want to find a more satisfactory work/life balance. The vast majority want to make positive contributions to the economic and social life of their community, and are frustrated because of the difficulties they have encountered in doing so.

Deciding factors that help older people to retain or obtain work include:

- the extent to which their **skills and abilities** match the demands of local labour markets;
- individual **experience, motivation, determination, and presentation**;
- the attitudes and policies of **local employers** towards older employees;
- local supply of **opportunities**.

Guidance workers who are able to understand and appreciate the individual circumstances, feelings, needs and barriers that can affect clients aged 45+ are better positioned to provide appropriate support.

The following lists of common factors that can affect older adults are not intended to be exclusive. Circumstances vary considerably between individuals and geographical areas, and guidance workers will be able to add to the factors identified here from their own experience.

Some of the group described the feelings of panic that older people can experience because of a sense of time running out - in trying to find suitable employment, satisfy an unfulfilled sense of vocation, and in other areas of their lives. "You're determined not to give up.....but people can become disheartened." Some participants had direct experience of disappointment and disillusion, accompanied by a sense of panic, in their own search for employment. Two participants had also witnessed the process in their husbands who had been made redundant, and the loss of confidence and hope that the individual can consequently experience. "I could see his personality changing...he lost confidence and didn't feel good about himself any more ...he hasn't been the same man since".

Challenging Age focus group, York and North Yorkshire

PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES AND BARRIERS EXPERIENCED BY OLDER ADULTS

them to realise life goals not attainable in their paid work, others in the hope that volunteering may lead to paid work and because it provides a sense of purpose and involvement during prolonged periods of unemployment.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS WORK

- Many 45/50+ are deeply concerned about the **waste of their experience, skills and potential**.
- The gap between 50 and 65 is considerable, and **the chances of obtaining employment tend to decrease further as people approach 60**.
- **Many older people want to work and enjoy working**, although not necessarily in their existing or previous occupation. Work provides purpose, status, scope to use one's skills and abilities, financial independence and the opportunity to contribute to the community.
- **Individuals' skills, values, interests and objectives can change markedly between 20+ and 45+**. Many 45+ are conscious of unfulfilled ambitions and potential which they wish to realise, and may see redundancy as a **second chance** and an opportunity for **career transition**. They don't just want 'a job' – they want to find an occupation, or 'vocation', that allows them to express their changing ambitions, values and interests, and to progress.
- **A significant number of 45+ are involved in voluntary work** - some as a first option because it enables

"You're on the scrap heap. You have to work really hard at remaining positive and keeping your motivation and self-confidence. All the time there's this unspoken innuendo – you're too old. But we've all got something to offer employment and the community. We need opportunities to use our experience – where necessary to be trained and retrained – and to work. There are social costs here – costs to the economy, costs to health and costs to social services and the community. It's an issue that the country has simply got to get hold of because there's so much waste - at some point it could be any of us."

Challenging Age focus group member,
City of Sunderland

Voluntary work at the centre provides "a lifeline" for one and is the "mainstay of my life", for another. One participant found that her experiences of office and care work are valued at The Bridge. Through voluntary work she has been able to re-enter employment after two redundancies, and the "distressing and discouraging" experience of being unemployed. Another who was made redundant/early retired found voluntary work at The Bridge to be so fulfilling that he no longer wishes to return to paid employment. Volunteering is a valued source of self-esteem and structure, and provides the opportunity to use and develop skills.

Challenging Age focus group, Derbyshire

- **Many 45/50+ engaged in learning**, including IT, would like to work if opportunities were available.
- **Some 50+ describe themselves as 'retired' but are not happy in their retirement.** Often they are 'early retired' who initially wanted to work but met with various forms of rejection. They may use the term 'retired' as a form of self-defence to mask frustration at the waste of their potential.

However, numbers of older people (often 60+) are happily retired. Often they are individuals who find fulfilment not only in their personal lives but also in learning and voluntary work, have a range of social contacts, and are supported by a pension.

INTERNAL BARRIERS

- **Unemployed older people vary in their determination to find employment.** Some adopt a structured approach to jobsearch and job applications; others feel defeated by constant rejection and effectively withdraw from the labour market.
- **The experience of rejection (real or perceived) can rapidly undermine morale, motivation and self-confidence,** and cause many older people to give up and join the 'hidden unemployed'. Large numbers write themselves off and regard themselves as 'too old' to work and learn.
- **Unemployment, rejection, and social isolation can erode employability** by causing some individuals to: lose their sense of identity, status and purpose; develop inflexible attitudes towards new areas of work; show disappointment (for example, by developing a 'chip on the shoulder' and a tendency to retell one's own 'hard luck story'); and attribute their problems to other people's attitudes to age, without looking critically at possible personal shortcomings (eg in self presentation).

Older people tend to blame themselves after unsuccessful applications, resulting in feelings of rejection, depression and the temptation to write themselves off – "it must be me".

Challenging Age focus group,
York and North Yorkshire

- **Some older members of ethnic communities** may regard third age unemployment as inevitable, and require additional support to sustain motivation, overcome constraints, and progress with jobsearch and learning. **Older women from minority communities** are particularly likely to suffer often severe isolation.

Whilst all had financial imperatives for working, the Asian women articulated the social importance of going to work for their personal wellbeing. One older woman described the enforced unemployment brought about by redundancy after 20 years of continuous employment, as leading to depression.

Challenging Age focus group,
New Challenge, Wembley

- **Older adults with physical disabilities** are often keen to find suitable employment but may need extra advocacy and support to help them do so.
- **Unemployed men** are more likely than women to experience long-lasting depression and to seek refuge in the home. Some – especially those with no previous tradition of learning - may resist learning.
- **Older women** are less likely than men to experience unemployment as a blow to self-esteem, and are more likely to remain active in the community as carers, volunteers and learners. Often they are more flexible in their search for work, for example by accepting part-time employment even though full-time work is their main objective.

PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Many people aged 45/50+ have substantial **financial commitments** (eg mortgages, children, accumulated debts). Low income levels and poverty can make it difficult for many older people to: pay for retraining courses in order to improve skills, employability and choice; meet the costs of job-search; and raise the capital to fund self-employment. Many are worried about pensions and breaks in contributions. Anxiety about losing benefits if a job does not work out can inhibit job-search. Lack of finance may erode hope and incentive.

EXTERNAL BARRIERS

Many older adults report experiences of **age discrimination**, especially by employers. **Practices** include:

- not considering older applicants on their merits;
- automatic rejection of older applicants;
- labelling experienced older applicants as 'over-qualified';
- reluctance to train older employees and negative attitudes towards their career development;
- targeting older people for redundancy;
- not providing them with adequate support during difficult transitional stages such as redundancy and early retirement.

Participants considered thatnowadays, a good employment history is not valued. Continuous applications for appropriate vacancies, with no responses, cause real feelings of despondency. Rejections become upsetting and depression can set in. Attempts to apply for more routine jobs are no more successful, except in care work. This can be "OK if your back holds out" but the low wages cannot support a family. There is strong agreement that ageism exists, often implicitly as well as overtly. In spite of all this, the positive attitude needs to be maintained. "You need to be in the right place at the right time. Sooner or later someone will see your value. You can't give up – if you do, you've had it."

Challenging Age focus group, Kent

Local economic and labour market

factors that can affect older adults include:

- new technologies replacing old skills;
- redundancies (large and small scale);
- sectoral unemployment affecting industries employing a higher than average older workforce;
- a prevalence of short-term, part-time and low-paid jobs over 'high quality' opportunities;
- few low-cost opportunities to retrain.

Older clients can feel under pressure to accept low-level jobs which they may consider unsuitable, and which could mean their giving up personal ambitions including career and skill development.

LEARNING NEEDS

Common barriers can include:

- **Finding suitable adult training opportunities.** Older adults who have been made redundant or wish to extend their skills may have difficulty locating suitable training courses, additional to IT, to prepare them for other occupational areas. Many 45+ are concerned about the cost of training. Widespread concern about the 6-month qualifying period for Jobcentre Plus programmes often reflects the lack of alternative employer-based training and workforce development opportunities for mature adult applicants, and local shortages of adult training provision.
- **Basic skills requirements** (literacy, numeracy), and **fear of IT.** Conversely, many 50+ are involved in learning including IT, and have well-developed computer knowledge and skills.
- **Anxiety about returning to learn** and not being able to cope; and **not knowing one's own potential and preferred learning style.** Male manual workers in particular are likely to feel anxious about learning especially if they were unhappy at school or have no previous tradition of learning.

- **Inadequate job-search skills.** Many redundant 50+ are inexperienced in job-search skills including preparing CVs and presenting themselves at interviews.

INFORMATION, ADVICE AND GUIDANCE

During the research older adults were asked to identify the forms of help and support they required in order to overcome barriers that might be preventing them from working and learning. Although few used the term 'guidance', the activities and services they identified are integral to high quality IAG. Their responses are itemised below.

ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES

Clear and concise descriptions outlining:

- the **services offered** by IAGPs, local networks and providers;
- **how to access** those services.

They all wanted better information about where they could get IAG and what was involved. They wanted some kind of structuring of the help: instead of offering the same block of time or kind of help to everyone, to have a system whereby information and advice is on hand according to need, and guidance can also be offered for those who want it.

Challenging Age focus group, North London

We discussed the distinction between information, advice and guidance The group felt that agencies offering IAG should make it clear to everyone about these differences, and be very clear about what they offered It would be really good to know what they could expect from a guidance interview.

Challenging Age focus group,
Lincolnshire and Rutland

Accessible, personally relevant, up-to date and detailed information to help older adults to:

- identify suitable local opportunities (jobs, learning, volunteering);
- obtain background knowledge on finance, benefits, self-employment and active retirement;
- make informed decisions and choices;
- locate local organisations that can help.

Expert advice and guidance that enables them to relate the information to their own circumstances. Wherever possible this should be *holistic* – some older people bring considerable 'personal baggage' to the guidance process.

Ready access to **expert information and advice on financial issues** (including pensions and benefits) and **self-employment**.

Skilled assessment – this includes identification of: occupational and transferable skills, aptitudes and experience; previously unrealised potential; and preferred learning styles.

One participant required that guidance advisers should have "been there themselves." This relates to the experience of redundancy, unemployment, and struggling to find a place in an ageist employment environment. More pragmatically, it is a plea for empathy and understanding of the issues for and needs of, mature people. They must be able to listen and be a "people person" - to "provide the service that you want rather than the service that they think you want." Counselling skills and psychologist training were thought to be appropriate. They should be able to "boost you up." There is a scenario emerging here of a holistic personal approach that is transformational as well as 'informational'. Another ... participant stated a requirement for ... "jobs and guidance, not just guidance."

Challenging Age focus group, Kent

Access to **computer-aided guidance packages** (eg Adult Directions, and psychometric tests) and **information on relevant websites**. Many older people appreciate the help CAG and the internet can provide with: personal 'stocktaking'; establishing direction; gaining/regaining the self-knowledge needed to make sound career decisions; action planning; and jobsearch more generally.

Skilled help in **relating individual skills, aptitudes and experience to the changing labour market and needs of the local community**. This may necessitate support in drawing up and implementing **personal action plans**.

Coaching in **personal presentation, writing CVs, interview techniques, jobsearch and self-advocacy**. Many 45+ also need help in techniques and approaches that can help them overcome age stereotyping and hidden or overt discrimination.

Training and career development opportunities that provide them with the skills required by local employers, and which they can afford.

Opportunities for **work trials, work sampling and work experience** so that they can act as their own ambassadors, try out their skills, find out about unfamiliar occupations, and prove themselves to employers.

Opportunities to form **peer group support networks** – peer support can prove invaluable in helping individuals to: regain confidence and motivation; re-establish direction; implement action plans; obtain work; progress in learning; and achieve personal objectives.

Members of the group wanted assessment. One said, 'We keep being told we are a wasted resource, but how do we know what it is that is wasted if we are not assessed?' They wanted impartial and authoritative help, and advice. They wanted staff who had the ability and the time to listen, and who were open-minded. Also, people who were particularly keen about their work, well-trained, and preferably who had experience of being unemployed themselves.

Challenging Age focus group,
Lincolnshire and Rutland

The group wanted help to look at options, and they wanted serious, professional assessment, including but not only psychometric testing, to explore alternatives. They very much wanted honesty and realism from the guidance: if they were offered training as part of their job search they didn't want to waste that on training that wouldn't really lead to work.

Challenging Age focus group,
Lincolnshire and Rutland

Participants valued having the opportunity to practise interview techniques and presentation skills, and to learn how to 'sell' themselves, and how to use agencies and networks as well as job adverts in their job search.

Challenging Age focus group,
Experience Works!, Loughborough College

One participant is on a work experience programme set up through the Island Partnership. She described her delight in having the opportunity to not only retrain in floristry but to be able to work at a local store and test her skills. The satisfaction of the employer is demonstrated by an offer of a job for the next vacancy that comes. The group analysed this example and identified the value of an employer seeing you at work, with the right attitudes and the right skills to do the job and age becomes a lesser barrier. CVs and application forms are thought to be barriers - the employer does not see you, the person.

Challenging Age focus group, Kent

STAFF ATTITUDES AND APPROACHES

Positive efforts should be made to attract people aged 45+ and make them feel welcome. Many 45+ feel uncomfortable visiting IAG agencies, especially those serving wider age groups including young people. Reasons include: lack of self-confidence; belief that they are too old and that staff are more interested in younger age groups; and embarrassment because they are having to ask for help.

Feedback from older adults shows that they react positively to staff who:

- make older adults **feel welcome**, and can **smile**.
- are genuinely **client-centred** and **listen**, and have the ability to act as “sounding boards” and “sources of ideas”. Older people dislike directive advice and guidance, and want room to make their own decisions.
- **motivate**, provide **hope and encouragement**, and offer **help and support** in regaining lost confidence and self-esteem.
- **appreciate** that many redundant 45/50+ are conscious of unrealised potential, have unfulfilled ambitions, and see redundancy as “the opportunity to do something about it”.

Meeting others who were in a similar position helped participants to overcome a sense of demoralisation and provided emotional support. The supportive environment at Experience Works! contrasted with the “hostile environment” outside and helped participants to build their confidence and motivation, and to feel valued. Participants appreciated being able to drop in after completing a programme, especially to gain interview practice.

Challenging Age focus group,
Experience Works!, Loughborough College

They thought it very important that a specialist agency, or one that was attempting to give special help to over-45s, should do a lot of its work with companies, explaining the benefits of employing older people.

Challenging Age focus group,
North London

- **provide continuity**. Older clients dislike having to “repeat their story” to different members of staff on each visit.
- **offer skilled personal support** over a period of time (ie personal advisers and mentors). These staff should be able to **work holistically** and understand the complexity of motives, values and personal circumstances that older individuals may sometimes need to work through to arrive at a satisfactory decision.
- where advisable, are prepared to act as **advocates on behalf of clients**, and provide employers and learning providers with a clear picture of older individuals’ skills, qualities and experience and suitability for the opportunities available.
- during **contact with employers**, are able to: promote the business benefits of employing an age diverse workforce; and help employers to appreciate the importance for their businesses of current demographic trends, and the importance of workforce development policies that include older workers.
- **keep in touch** - feedback shows that many older clients welcome follow-up and tracking of progress - these also demonstrate that staff are genuinely interested and care.

HELPFUL IAG PROVIDERS

IAG providers identified by older people as being particularly helpful tend to be highly personalised and 'people-focused'. The staff: are welcoming; understand the needs of older adults; show genuine care and commitment; are expert in their field; and show professional integrity by following through and implementing any promised action.

The *Challenging Age* research also shows that older adults are genuinely appreciative of the help they receive, and especially so when they receive a high standard of service.

The staff of Target have received many letters of appreciation from past and present third-age users. An analysis of these letters shows that some of the features that users particularly welcome include: the warm and supportive atmosphere; the encouragement they receive from the staff and from each other; and the patience and teaching skills of the tutors.

Challenging Age focus group,
Target Third Age York

FURTHER INFORMATION

The Challenging Age research was carried out by the Third Age Employment Network (TAEN) in partnership with the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling and the Centre for Guidance Studies at the University of Derby.

Copies of the full report, *Challenging Age - Information, Advice and Guidance for Older Age Groups*, can be obtained from TAEN or downloaded from the website www.taen.org.uk

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The main *Challenging Age* report contains detailed case studies of interesting practice for IAG Partnerships and operational tools laid out to aid copying of material for training and review purposes. These tools were developed by the research team: Geoff Ford, Barbara Watkins, Sara Bosley, Ruth Hawthorn, Barbara McGowan and Patrick Grattan.

Reports on the participating IAGPs, local networks, focus groups and third age specialist agencies are available from the Third Age Employment Network in separate Annexes:

1. Derbyshire IAG Network
2. Kent IAG Network
3. Lincolnshire and Rutland IAG Network
4. North London IAG Network
5. Guidance Advice and Information Network, City of Sunderland
6. York and North Yorkshire IAG Network
7. Third Age Specialist Organisations

The Learning and Skills Council is supporting dissemination of the findings of the research and of the diagnostic and planning tools. These tools include this Action Guide, an Action Guide for Managers (*Harnessing Third Age Skills and Experience*), and Presentation and other Resource Material to assist Information, Advice and Guidance Partnerships to deliver their services for older age groups. They may be copied and used free of charge so long as copyright is not infringed.



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