

Enhancing employment support and skills offers for experienced workers

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Introduction

Phoenix Insights is a think tank from Phoenix Group, dedicated to catalysing the changes we need to see in society if more of us are to be able to make the most of the opportunities of longer lives. A key element of this is supporting people to stay in good work for as long as they want and need. Understanding what support people need to change jobs or return to the workforce after a break will be key to this.

Our recent research highlighted that over a third of 45 - 54-year-olds are expecting their career to change before they retire¹. However, many people are unsure how best to navigate these changes or where to get information and advice on what opportunities are out there.

There are currently an array of government employment support options available to the general public. These have been supplemented by announcements in government's Budget for Growth² which introduced multiple mechanisms to "help people move into work, increase their hours, and extend their working lives, including for those on benefits"³. This announcement included the introduction of 'Returnerships' - refining existing skills programmes to make them more accessible to older workers - and increased support for the Midlife MOT strategy.

Not only is this a priority for Government, but the opposition have also laid out their plans to "modernise job centres, shift resources and guarantee local innovation in the design and delivery of employment support services"⁴.

¹ [Careers advice for longer lives | Phoenix Group](#)

² [Chancellor unveils a Budget for growth - GOV.UK](#)

³ [Spring Budget 2023 speech - GOV.UK.](#)

⁴ [Jonathan Ashworth speech at the Centre for Social Justice - The Labour Party](#)

In order to understand public perception of these announcements we commissioned research consultancy Public First to conduct focus groups testing the following:

- What are the levels of awareness of the announcements and existing schemes?
- What barriers are stopping over 50s from accessing support?
- What would make over 50s more likely to engage with employment support?

We selected focus groups in the following areas to ensure the groups were representative of a crosscut of society - see methodology for more information. All the participants were either in work and looking to retrain or out of work and looking to return to the workforce.

Summary

Our focus groups highlighted a number of challenges to getting over 50s engaged with employment support mechanisms. Below we outline the challenges, potential solutions and recommendations for this:

Challenges

- Awareness of current schemes are low and with that comes some scepticism about the intentions of the proposals.
- Established barriers to retraining remain such as a lack of confidence, caring responsibilities and perceived risk.
- The role of employers is considered a barrier for many when it comes to engaging with the Midlife MOT.

Potential solutions

- Further develop communications campaigns to reflect the language preferences of over 50s including:
 - Focussing on utilising experience and building on their strengths rather than their weaknesses.
 - Targeting support at experienced workers more widely than an arbitrary 'over 50s'.
 - Using role models to enable potential participants to visualise the purpose and effectiveness of the schemes.
- De-risk engagement and remove barriers through providing face to face consultations and more information about the schemes including key supporting information such as potential employment opportunities

- Explain the role of employers in the delivery of the Midlife MOT to allay concerns about their involvement in the process

Policy recommendations

Short term

- Consider alternatives to job centres and traditional forms of delivery.
- Promote greater flexibility in work.
- Provide support with other aspects of the modern workplace.
- Develop a coordinated cross-government strategy for the over 50s.

Long term

- Create more opportunities for initial engagement with employment support.
- Empower older workers who want to work for themselves.
- Devolution of adult education and skills spending

Methodology

Four focus groups of individuals both in and out of work – all focus group participants were between 50 and 65 years old. Participants were recruited from a range of geographies. Two groups focussed on people in social grades ABC1 whilst the other two focussed on those in social grade C2DE. Each group was recruited to include people who were considering changing jobs or returning to the workforce following a break.

All focus groups included descriptions of returnerships and other employment support offers taken from gov.uk webpages⁵. All research activities were undertaken between June and August 2023.

Public First is a member of the British Polling Council and Company Partners of the Market Research Society, whose rules and guidelines it adheres to.

⁵ [Budget 2023: What are 'returnerships' and who are they for?](#)

Key Findings

How do over 50s feel about employment support?

The focus groups revealed several important themes for how the participants felt about work, retraining, and support for both. Many of these themes are supported by our previous research such as our Never Too Late To Learn report⁶ which highlighted barriers to retraining such as perceived risk, caring responsibilities and a lack of confidence.

Many over 50s feel left behind in the workplace. Most of our participants spoke of feeling 'left behind' or 'undervalued' in the workplace. Many also felt that there were limited options for them in terms of career development or career changes into what they considered to be 'quality work' which capitalised on their experience.

"If you've been out of work or you've been in one company the whole time, you're not used to some of these other companies who are far more young or dynamic...they work differently" - 63 year old consultant, Devon and Cornwall

There is scepticism about existing support offers. Participants' views towards job centres were overwhelmingly negative. Some shared that their experiences of these and other government support services were very generic.

"At the end of that I see a Tesco till I don't see a job as a social worker, or a job as a college lecturer, or a job as a doctor. I don't see it. I see them trying to get people into work. But I don't see them trying to get people into a career." - 57 year old customer services manager, Devon and Cornwall

Who provides support matters. There was widespread scepticism about employers' role in the Midlife MOT. Expertise and confidentiality were considered key - many participants were keen to hear from someone independent or had expertise in the specific area e.g. a GP for health.

"My question would be, why would my employer necessarily be qualified to deliver something like that? Their expertise might be in a completely different area?" - 56 year old, musician manager, East Midlands

⁶ [Never too late to learn: Attitudes, behaviours and overcoming barriers – engagement with lifelong learning for midlife and older people](#)

Many people may lack the confidence to engage. Many participants felt that they were unlikely to be considered for new opportunities - both with present employers and for new jobs - to their age.

"Who are all these employers who are going to take on all these over 50s? Are you really going to put somebody on an apprenticeship who's 64 who's probably got, you know, three years left before they retire, who's going to invest in us?" - 59 year old caretaker, Devon and Cornwall

How do over 50s feel about the current Government offer

In our focus groups we tested awareness and initial reactions to the Government offer for employment support.

What are Returnerships?

"A 'returnership' is a new offer which brings together three programmes to help get older workers back to work. These include Apprenticeships, Skills Bootcamps and Sector-Based Work Academy Programmes (SWAPs). 'Returnerships' will raise awareness of these pathways, providing a clear route back into work and encouraging employers to hire older workers."⁷

Awareness of returnerships and other elements of return-to-work support is very low - however, they have the potential to be popular. Almost none of the participants had heard of returnerships and other employment support offers from government. There were mixed views of term returnership - in particular the association of apprenticeships with young people and low wages - however, the concept itself (once explained) was broadly popular.

"I think it's something to do with bringing back the brightest and most intelligent people from particular sectors and to try and get them back into the industry irrelevant of their age, which you tend to think they will be older. I think that's what Returnership means." - 56 year old ex-road maintenance worker, Yorkshire

Investing time in retraining can feel high risk. Many participants perceived the programmes as having a discrete ending - either getting a job or not. The programmes were not seen as part of a wider network of support and therefore considered high risk.

⁷ [Budget 2023: What are 'returnerships' and who are they for?](#)

“What do you do after six weeks? If you don't get a job? You know, back to square one. And an even worse backswing, because you've left one job, and now you don't have that job.” - 50 year old bus driver, North East

What adjustments might increase take up?

The language used to engage over 50s needs to reflect the way they feel about work and their value and skills in the workplace. Some participants shared that they no longer feel valued in the modern workplace and that retraining opportunities should focus on building on their strengths rather than focussing on potential weaknesses.

“We are the ones who can teach this generation how to excel at their job. We are the ones who can train the apprentices. We are the ones who can motivate people, because we've done it and we've seen it. Recognise that in the way they speak to us, say I recognise that you have got so much experience, so much to give, come at it from a point of - we value what you have to offer, rather than we're offering you something we hope you'll value.” - 57 year old customer services manager, Devon and Cornwall

Focus on employment support for all experienced workers, not using a chronological age signal.

The categorisation of 'over 50s' was broadly unpopular and considered trivial by many. Adapting communications to reflect how programmes are targeting experienced workers was considered a preferable alternative for many.

“I feel there's more resources for the younger people than there is for the older people. Because when you get to a certain age, it's sort of like your back on the shelf.” - 57 year old accommodation manager, East Midlands

“Over 50 is a wide spectrum. So you know for someone at 50 it might be a good thing to do an apprenticeship, but for someone at 60 or 63 probably not so.” - 57 year old accommodation manager, East Midlands

Invest in a broad communications campaign. Awareness of returnerships and other Government employment support was very low. Developing targeted communications campaigns which reach potential users will be essential in driving uptake.

“The government could send you a text, the over 50s - like they do for everything else” - 60 year old ex-support assistant, Yorkshire

"I think TV adverts like between half seven and eight o'clock when everybody's watching soaps or something like that" - 50 year old receptionist, North East

Provide relevant information and role models. Participants were keen to hear more about the specifics of schemes - for example, some participants' interest was linked to the level of commitment required for the scheme. They were also supportive of using role models to help people understand how these schemes could be used to change career.

"Examples of people who have retrained using these things and are now doing something totally different that they enjoy or whatever." - 59 year old ex-electrician, North East

De-risk engagement with more evidence of employment outcomes. As with our previous research on retraining, participants considered engaging with provision such as Returnerships as high risk if they were already in work. Almost all participants said they would want more information on the employment outcomes of these schemes and whether there were employers linked to courses.

"There would have to be a definite job at the end of it. To make you want to move, no one's going to move if it isn't definite. Some of these might be ideal for people who have retired and maybe had a year out and have decided that they want to go back to either do a part time work or whatever. Seems very enticing for someone like that, but not someone who's actually got a family to support." - 50 year old bus driver, North East

Promote face to face engagement with the Midlife MOT wherever possible. There was an overwhelming preference for face to face engagement for the Midlife MOTs with participants characterising online provision to 'impersonal' and lacking 'bespoke' information. Participants also felt that discursive activities were mostly more effective when done face to face. When they spoke of online support they had high expectations for good online provision.

"I wouldn't be keen to do something like this online, because I do think you'd get the very generic, not very creative answers that an AI bot or whatever it is, is coming up with. But I could see a benefit in it being delivered in person." - 60 year old ex-engineer, East Midlands

Explain the role of employers in the Midlife MOT. Participants were unsure about *why* employers were delivering midlife MOTs given the topics discussed. Developing materials to better explain the scope of the midlife MOTs and the role of employers in the scheme will be key to inspiring confidence in over 50s.

“To go to an employer and suggest that you might want retraining for a different job within the company might perhaps have your employer thinking that you're not happy and something's not quite right. Maybe some employers will not be of the mind to say, well, 'let's sit down, let's look at what we can do for you'. A lot of people will say, 'Well, what's wrong? And what's wrong with him? If he's going to be a problem? Let's just get rid of him'” - 56 year old ex-road maintenance worker, Yorkshire

“If it's money you go to a financial adviser, if it's health you go to see a doctor. I was always self employed so had no one to talk to, I don't know where that leaves you?” - 58 year old ex-grinder, Yorkshire

Remove practical barriers to engagement. The most common barriers to engagement were the financial impact on individuals - either taking time out to do a free course or taking a lower wage – and a lack of confidence that the scheme was for them. Ensuring schemes are flexible and embedded in the community could enable individuals to engage around their current work. Promoting the individualised nature of support could also encourage more individuals to engage.

“The apprenticeship sounds good, but I just don't think financially, it would be beneficial for somebody who's 50 plus - when they've got a house, got a mortgage, got a family.” - 50 year old receptionist, North East

What else is missing from the policy package?

Despite being broadly positive about the Government's offer for employment support, participants felt there was still more to be done to help over 50s become aware of and access these schemes and subsequently either change roles or return to work.

Short term

- **Consider alternatives to job centres and traditional forms of delivery.** Bespoke support in non-traditional settings was popular amongst this group. Different approaches to work coaching should be piloted including new settings and bespoke approaches to engagement. There is increasing expertise within charities and social enterprises in providing career, employment and business start-up coaching that is tailored for people over 50. Government could do more to signpost people to this growing industry of specialist support.
- **Ensure that MidLife MOTs**, including those delivered in job centres and the national Midlife MOT website, provides information and signposting to returnerships and related skills offers from Government.

- **Promote greater flexibility in work.** Caring and other responsibilities are often a barrier to engaging with work and employment support for this group. The implementation of the Flexible Working Act⁸ will be key to ensuring people in this group are able to access work. Resources and a clear implementation plan could help more businesses be able to employ people over 50 in flexible roles.
- **Provide support with other aspects of the modern workplace.** Some participants were nervous about adjusting to modern expectations of work such as how they should approach equality, diversity and inclusion. This is perhaps one particular expression of broader uncertainty about the realities of working in multigenerational workplaces with as many as four generations working alongside one another (Gen Y, millennials, Gen X and baby boomers). Returnerships and other training programmes for the over 50s should reflect this so that people feel empowered to find their place within the modern workplace.

“It’s a very different world out there than it was when we all started work 30 or 40 years ago” - 63 year old Consultant, Devon and Cornwall

- **Develop a coordinated cross-government strategy for the over 50s.** Participants often shared that barriers to engagement were multifaceted and included concerns around health and wellbeing, money, education and transport. A cross-government strategy for over 50s - engaging key departments such as the Department for Education, the Department Health and Social Care and the Department for Business and Trade - could ensure work to support this group to live more sustainable longer working lives would be coordinated, efficient and effective.

Long term

- **Create more opportunities for initial engagement with employment support.** Participants responded well to the flexible and bitesize nature of bootcamps. Government should look to create further programmes which act as an initial step back into work and a gateway to accessing more extensive support and retraining. The Kickstart programme for young adults could offer a template to adapt for workers over 50.
- **Empower older workers who want to work for themselves.** Many over 50s want to do work which excites them, enables them to work flexibly around their existing commitments and in roles

⁸ [Millions to benefit from new flexible working measures - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/millions-to-benefit-from-new-flexible-working-measures)

that make the most of their existing skills. Sharing campaigns such as the Help to Grow scheme⁹ and signposting people to other start-up support organisations may be beneficial for this group.

- **Devolution of adult education and skills spending.** Expanding trailblazer deals¹⁰ to ensure that more local governments are able to deliver services bespoke to the needs of local people and local labour markets. Investment in high quality evaluation of local innovations would help areas learn from each other and build the evidence based for what works.

Conclusions and next steps

Our research has highlighted that more can be done to ensure that over 50s feel empowered to engage with Government schemes to help them change career or get back into work.

Incorporating these insights into the attitudes of this group towards work and retraining, and how they are likely to respond to these initiatives into their design will help to make them more successful. Without further change, we think there is a risk that offers such as Returnerships will not resonate powerfully enough with this group or meaningfully address the practical and emotional barriers people face in engaging with them, and so fail to make a significant difference.

But there is also a need to look beyond what has been proposed by the Government so far. New programmes which are tailored to meet the needs of the over 50s and can be brought together into a coherent strategy for this group will be an important part of solving this very significant policy and economic challenge.

⁹ [Help to Grow](#)

¹⁰ [Greater Manchester Combined Authority Trailblazer deeper devolution deal - GOV.UK](#)