

Dave's Report

(Special Project Article)



A survey style article on the subject of those in the 60 plus age range who are trying to find a job before they retire. The Dave's Report project was first published in August of 2016 and is based on findings carried out over many years that have been simplified and combined together to highlight the main key points that people have commented on many times.

Sixty really is the magic number when it comes to being in active work and is very much a challenge for both people of that age to get back into work and for those trying to help them complete that very difficult task.

Due to changes and increases to the State Pension Age in the UK there will be for the very first time a significant number of 60 plus claimants seeking work on a grand scale, the likes of which, not seen before.

Despite the growing importance of this age group little is truly known about how to help them and what additional needs they may have. Therefore does Jobcentre Plus have a support structure in place ready for a growing number of people in their 60's who need to find employment?

Based on research carried out before and during 2012 Jobcentre Plus advisors and managers highlighted a number of key issues, this research also included job seekers aged 55 plus, employers and other DWP studies.

The aim of this article is not to just simply repeat what others have said but to highlight the ongoing difficulties and what kind of steps should be taken to resolve the problems faced by not only those trying to find work but also by those who have the task of helping them.

With some claimants being highly motivated and engaged in moving into work again others, for various reasons, are less engaged with job search methods.

There are a number of factors affecting the abilities of 60 plus claimants to move back into employment, most significantly a lack of modern job search skills, limited IT proficiency and limited experience of searching and applying for jobs online.

Other issues affecting a return to employment include unrealistic wage expectations, a narrow focus in terms of job search, outdated qualifications and certification, and for many people in this age range who are struggling to find a job, low levels of confidence and a belief that they are being discriminated against because of their age, which in some situations is the case.

Good practice already exists in terms of tackling some of the barriers faced by older jobseekers but many advisers wanted to see access to additional provision that focuses on the needs of older people. Such things as addressing perceptions and attitudes to work, transferable skills, IT skills and knowledge of modern jobs search methods, provision delivered in age specific peer group sessions and a need to update or gain accreditation for existing skills were the main items in question.

In addition to such things an assessment of the person's physical fitness should be taken into account in a far more specific way also, and any other relevant medical conditions that often a person in this age range may have, as such things could affect the type of jobs that they can apply for. They may be thought of as fit for work but some medical or age related conditions will be an important factor when it comes to certain types of work.

Jobcentre Plus Advisers felt that they would also benefit from additional training themselves with regard to helping to find job positions for people in this age group and how better to deal more specifically with such claimants as this age group faced a specific range of age related barriers to employment.

Findings from such studies illustrated that older claimants, and in particular claimants in their 60's, have issues that ranged from a lack of practical skills, such as IT proficiency and a limited ability to navigate job search and job applications online to more emotive responses to employment.

Issues such as confidence, motivation and a belief that employers routinely discriminate against older job seekers were highlighted often.

In the case of age discrimination this is not just a simple case of belief, myth or fantasy but a very real thing as many recruiters seeking a workforce will still on a regular basis shy away from taking on such people in this age group. To simply think that such a thing does not happen as it is illegal in this day and age would be very naive to say the least.

There are of course already provisions in place to tackle some of the employment barriers faced by older job seekers and some flexible approaches to helping them back to work but sadly most of these things are still based on methods used for decades for people in the 20 to 50 working age range and the attitude in many jobcentres by staff reflects this in various ways.

The assumption and attitude by many, if not all, jobcentre staff , recruitment and back to work providers still remains the same for both the younger age groups and 60 plus job seekers alike when it comes to being treated as not wanting to work or not trying hard enough to get a job and with the constant threat of sanctions adding to the problems that 60 plus job seekers have in addition, due to their age-related situation it does not help at all.

Often jobcentre staff, recruitment and back to work providers still fail to recognise that some 60 plus job seekers may have held very important positions of work in the past - long before jobcentre staff and back to work providers had even left school themselves in fact.

This attitude towards the 60 plus jobseekers is often thought of as offensive and patronizing by them and it does create a negative situation that will make them less responsive to any help or advice given in the future.

Job clubs, work experience and volunteering in many cases are looked upon in a negative way if they are a government run scheme as some, if not all, will find them a waste of time and not very helpful. This is very much the case with those who are over 50 years old due to their past experiences of such things, when out of work for periods of time, over the years.

A perfect example of how it was back then were such things as I.T. courses that simply involved jobseekers left all day long to play 'Space Invaders' on the computer with no teachers around to help them at all to forklift truck training that lasted for weeks but no true training was ever involved in the true sense of the word throughout that time.

Anyone who experienced such training back in those days will forever remember what a total waste of time such so-called 'back to work training' was like and will keep that negative image in their minds forever. Even in recent times many 'job clubs' still only offer help with making a CV in the main while the rest of the time job seekers are left to get on with it on their own.

Many job seekers will often be heard saying that they would rather do the same thing at home on their own laptops rather than spend time traveling to a job club. Although having said that, a job club can come in very handy if they need help with a CV or if they don't have a computer of their own at home.

All of these various situations are often clear to see when Jobseeker claimants are forced to attend such things and pay no attention whatsoever to what is being said to them and would rather go home. Although in all fairness there are those who clearly do not want to return to work for various reasons.

In-house training with a firm that may offer a real job position at the end of it all is often the best way forward for many people rather than spend time doing unpaid voluntary work or training courses run under government schemes that in most cases will never result in getting a real paid job.

Pre-employment training and real work experience placements that offer a good chance of a real full time job with that firm in the end is far more practical than what many would term unpaid slave labour or working for nothing schemes with no hope of a job in the end.

Jobcentre Plus will come under a far greater challenge when a significant number of 60 plus claimants seeking work increases in years to come and if not addressed now the end result will be poverty, misery and even mental health issues, due to lack of funds in the main, for people in this age range. Add any medical problems that they may have already to this situation and life is not going to be one many will be able to tolerate.

Therefore finding positive ways of helping people in this specific age range back into work, and done in a respectful way in recognition of their senior years, past work and life experiences and skills should be more of a priority than anything else.

There are other factors that will also affect the 60 plus claimant group. It is a known fact that older JSA claimants are more likely than younger claimants to experience long term unemployment or become economically inactive.

Figures researched show that more 50 plus Job Seekers will still be looking for work after a year than the younger age groups. In the case of the 60 plus age group many employers will not take that age range on as they will think of them as being retired in a short few years anyway or a risk with regard to any medical conditions that they may have.

With health and safety in the workplace being a concern to many employers these days it is not that surprising that they would worry about taking on an older person who could end up falling in the workplace or some other medical related accident. That being the case the 60 plus job seekers could find themselves still looking for work even longer than those in the 50 plus age range.

DWP research showed that those in the 60 plus age range were in part winding down to retirement. The evidence suggested that there was a firmly held view amongst some older claimants that they were no longer interested in looking for part time work or full time work and that they had reached a state of semi retirement.

However it should be added at this point that this is not the case for all people in that age range as many still wish to remain active and of course the need to earn money to pay bills is very much of concern to them.

Advisers felt this view was most strongly expressed by claimants who were in closest proximity to the State Pension Age. These claimants were willing to go through the motions of job search, but were in effect 'winding down towards retirement' and were content to live on JSA, (Job Seekers Allowance), until they became eligible for either State Pension or Pension Credit.

60 really is the magic number – it's when claimants really do change their mindset and stop thinking about work, or at least full time work, although there are many who still want to use their skills and experiences to help others, but not necessarily in work.

(Adviser Comment – Online Survey)

Advisers suggested that these claimants often questioned the logic of being put through training courses, placements and constant threats of sanctions for their age group, suggesting it was more relevant for younger claimants. Advisers noted that claimants in this position were extremely difficult to motivate and even more difficult to match to suitable jobs.

Despite increases to State Pension Age and Pension Credit eligibility, there was a prevailing view amongst claimants that '60' was the point at which individuals should begin to wind down. This was often indirectly encouraged by the actions of advisers.

Respondents to the adviser focus groups stated that they would suggest that older claimants should contact the Pensions Service to investigate their eligibility for Pension Credit. The assumption being that Pension Credit for men aged 60 plus would remove them from JSA conditionality.

Advisers felt that this mind-shift towards retirement was difficult to argue against and that there were no obvious incentives to keep a claimant seeking work if their inclination was to sign off and the financial pressures on them to work were not an overriding factor in their employment decision making. However, a number of advisers were of the opposite view and stated that they routinely challenged the 'winding down' mentality of older claimants and actively encouraged them to maintain their job search activities.

Older job seekers need to be challenged especially if they are fit and active. There is no reason why they cannot move back into work, they just need some convincing, (Adviser Comment, Online Survey). However, advisers also noted that there were many older claimants who were highly motivated and enthusiastic about re-entering the labor market.

Many said that they have knowledge and skills and experiences and if they get a job they would stay, not like younger people who only want work experience and then leave” (Claimant Interviews).

This highly engaged subgroup of the wider 60 plus claimant group appeared to fall into two distinct groups - 1 - The higher educated self starters - highly motivated with advanced job search skills and links to professional/career based networks.

This group of claimants required little direct support from Jobcentre plus and were most likely to move quickly back into employment.

2 - The highly motivated but lacking skills group. Again individuals who expressed a desire to move quickly back into employment but were thwarted by their lack of modern job search skills or narrow job search criteria and other factors such as lack of transport, medical restrictions and the like. This group often lost confidence and commitment to job search activities the longer their claim continued.

The correlation between declining confidence and length of claim was an issue that arose across all strands of the research.

Advisers noted that claimants were more likely to be positively disposed to employment at the beginning of their claim but would become increasingly pessimistic about their employment opportunities as their claim continued. Older claimants often concluded that their inability to secure employment was a direct result of their age, assuming employers had a natural preference for recruiting younger people.

Once this perception of age discrimination had been formed it tended to directly affect levels of motivation. Individuals assumed age discrimination would be difficult to challenge and therefore their chances of securing employment would be low.

Some Advisers noted that claimants often hit a crisis point in their claim, once they realized they were not getting the feedback from employers that they had first anticipated. It was at that point that many claimants started to voice negative statements about their age and job prospects. This pessimism about the job market often led directly to the conclusion that self imposed early retirement was a more rational and acceptable state to be in.

Advisers noted that many older claimants had well developed work based skills, often acquired during an apprenticeship term but unfortunately many of these trade based skills, were either not supported by formal qualifications, or the qualifications were outdated and had been eclipsed by newer certification. This was considered to be a significant barrier for many older claimants who wished to re-enter the same profession from which they had exited.

Older claimants found that many employers required very specific qualification criteria which they are deemed to be essential for the posts being advertised. Without being able to produce the necessary proof of qualification claimants found themselves immediately thwarted by not being able to satisfy the application criteria.

A construction worker may have worked for 35 years in the industry, he may have even been self employed, but now he is being asked for a CSCS card to apply for jobs. Sadly he will not get anywhere without this qualification. (Adviser comment Online Survey)

Many Advisers felt frustrated that they didn't have the ability to always address these specific training and certification needs so as a result, in many cases, claimants were encouraged to broaden their job search into areas which required fewer, if any, certified qualifications.

Now we come to the part that makes a comparison between the younger and the older worker.

Although age does not make that much difference in general speaking terms there are some qualities, and situations, that do favor the older worker in various ways. Although a younger person can have good customer skills the older worker also has the advantage of experience in addition. They often have better interpersonal skills, were better at dealing with customers and had a broader knowledge of the products and services that the company provided.

Many people also say that it is often the case that older workers were much more reliable and flexible than younger employers, particularly when it came to organizing shift patterns and holidays.

The reason given was that younger employees often had family commitments restricting their shifts such as taking their children to school, for example, while older workers would happily work evenings and had more flexibility in terms of annual leave arrangements.

There was however some concern voiced about the ability of older recruits lacking in I.T. skills and struggling with the I.T. based training for jobs that involved that area of work.

A call center employer, for example, noted that older recruits tended to be less confident in the training sessions, particularly when they felt out of their depth or were working alongside younger people. None of the employer respondents said that these concerns affected their recruitment and selection activities however.

When it came to the age factor Employer Recruitment Managers, (ERM's), provided some of the clearest insights into the complexities of perceived or actual age discrimination.

Once again a mixed picture of experience emerged, with many of the ERM's stating that employers only wanted to select the best person for the job and were not influenced by age. Other ERM's however said that some employers tended to be more discriminatory about younger claimants, who they considered to have low skills, little motivation and limited experience of work.

However other issues emerged when the ERM's were asked to discuss employer engagement and recruitment practice in a little more detail. ERM's said that employment agencies, (acting as the interface between employers and claimants), would often cherry pick younger claimants for key appointments.

Agencies often worked on the assumption that employers have a preference for younger recruits and therefore will select younger people based on that belief. ERM's also said that it is extremely difficult to prove whether or not an employer discriminates against older job seekers, particularly when so much of the selection process is based on competencies, previous experience and certified qualifications.

JOB CENTERS - A common theme to emerge from the claimant interviews, and was partially echoed by advisers, was the subject of older claimants having a dislike of jobcentre plus offices. This specifically was to do with older claimants' initial reception that they received from staff. Advisers, it should be noted, also felt a claimant's perception of such a poor service could negatively affect all future engagement with Jobcentre Plus.

A number of respondents to the customer interviews mentioned that their first experience of a Jobcentre was poor. Issues that were specifically highlighted included a perceived unwelcoming reception from door staff, a seemingly chaotic atmosphere, confusion over processes and the limited time available to talk with advisers and to discuss individual needs.

This attitude may in part be a reflection of claimants having had little previous experience of the Jobcentre Plus service and reflects the confusion many feel when entering a new environment. However what makes this finding of relevance to the age of the claimant is that older claimants assumed their age and their previous work experience would afford them some degree of status and preferential treatment.

Claimants were often dissatisfied when they realized that they would be treated in the same abrupt manner as younger claimants. On visiting a jobcentre 'I dread it, I get cold sweats the night before I need to go in and I feel sick at the thought of it (Claimant Interview)

There was also the expectation from a number of older claimants that they would receive support and advice from day one of their claim and were disappointed that they did not qualify for any support until they had been unemployed for some time.

Jobcentre Plus should offer more courses, particularly on improving your skills when they are outdated, but they don't offer anything at my age and you feel like you're on the scrap heap, (Claimant Interview)

Advisers noted that this dislike of Jobcentre Plus offices could lead to older claimants limiting their contact with the Jobcentre and be less willing to attend voluntary training and job search provision.

One adviser responding to the online survey noted that - You have to feel confident and comfortable with your surroundings before you can really get to grips with job search activities and many older claimants just simply feel ill at ease in the Jobcentre. (Adviser Comment Online Survey). However, a number of claimants also reported some very positive experiences of the support that they received from individual advisers, noting that they made great efforts to develop an understanding of their individual needs and presented them with a range of support options.

When I first saw an adviser he was really good. I wanted to start my own business and run a mobile Karaoke service. The Jobcentre were really good and helped me as much as possible in trying to set this up (Older JSA Claimant)

A pet hate amongst the 60 plus job seekers was the use of the terms 'mandatory' and 'sanctions'. People in this specific age range did understand their meaning and also agreed that when it came to the 'younger' generation of job seekers this was at times a justified thing to point out as there were some who simply did not want a job, for various reasons, and were unreliable when it came to attending a pre-agreed appointment - or even failing to turn up at all.

However for those in the 60 plus age group who had in many cases been in regular work for the best part of their lives, (some in fact may have held senior management or supervisory positions in the past), found the use of such terms towards them as offensive and uncalled for, (indignant reaction), when told such things on a regular basis. Many people in this specific age range found such terms insulting and would react by explaining that they have been a working man, or woman, all their lives and how dare younger people who are only half their age speak to them in such a way.

The use of these words were highlighted even more when jobcentre advisors spoke about these terms in a somewhat aggressive tone and in some cases in what some would term a 'threatening way'. Some in this age range stated that they found themselves a little scared under such conditions or at the very least felt intimidated. Some thought that this form of reaction from senior claimants could be due to the result of medication combined with age to a degree.

In defense of this highlighted item some jobcentre advisors did say that having to deal on a regular day to day basis with those, mainly younger job seekers, who often would not cooperate fully did make them treat everyone the same to a degree without even realizing it at times.

Some jobcentre advisors did agree however when explaining what the two terms meant. or what was required of them, it should be done in a more considerate way towards the more senior job seeker and that their past working life should be taken into account and not just automatically assume that they do not want a job or have been work shy in the past.

The general standard within various job center's did vary somewhat, job seekers had noticed, when moving to a new area or being sent to another job center for various reasons. While some job center's had a very relaxed way of doing things others, (most notably larger places in larger towns and cities), had a more formal and rigid approach to dealing with job seeker customers.

Appointment times for example would be somewhat relaxed at one place but very strict at another place. It was also very noticeable that while some job center's had no security guards monitoring their premises, others had many in attendance. Clearly at such places the problem of disputes over claimant benefits, sanctions and the like required such security measures for the protection of staff members.

Medical concerns about ill health and caring responsibilities were considered by many advisers to be a key barrier facing many older claimants. It was noted that for many older claimants, their long standing health condition had often been managed effectively by their previous employer. The employer had made the necessary adjustments to suit the employee and was willing to accept certain limitations. This type of support wasn't always available from new employers who had less time to get to know the employee or to adjust to their particular needs.

"I helped a butcher with 30 years experience find a new job, unfortunately he only lasted four weeks. He found it increasingly difficult to work in the cold store as it affected his joints and general mobility. In his previous job his colleagues were understanding and covered for him. However in the new post he had to earn his stripes and his condition put him in a difficult and uncomfortable position, he had to leave" (Comment to online Speak Up forum, JCP Adviser)

Advisers noted that in an effort to better manage health concerns many older claimants expressed a preference to work part time, or to find more flexible employment, however this preference for reduced hours could limit their job search parameters.

The preference for part time and flexible employment was also common to older claimants that had to balance their job search activities with caring for grandchildren, a spouse, or an elderly relative.

What works and what more needs to be done? Respondents from each strand of the study were asked to reflect on what sort of provision and support currently works for older claimants and to consider what more can be done to support their particular age related barriers. The section below reflects on these findings.

Broadening job search criteria -

Assisting older claimants in broadening their job search criteria was an issue raised across a number of research strands. Advisers in particular felt that many older claimants tended to focus their job search activities around jobs and industries in which they had previous experience. Very few claimants had a real grasp of how their particular skills set could be used within a different work context.

As one Employer adviser noted: Jobcentre Plus should have a role to play in broadening people's horizons, in older manufacturing areas many men (in particular) don't see shop work as proper work, they think of work as manufacturing, engineering etc .. but not all these types of jobs are still available or even suitable for them now. (Adviser Comment Online Survey)

A number of advisers felt that the support they could offer to older claimants was limited by the time they could allocate to each claimant. It was also noted that older claimants would often need greater amounts of 'adviser' time to talk through the details of their job search activities.

The value of being able to offer one to one support with claimants was also noted.

One to one sessions allowed advisers to build up a rapport and trust with a customer which helped them in tackling some of the more difficult conversations relating to job search criteria. This issue of time and rapport building was considered to be important for older claimants, who seem to respond better to longer and more thoughtful discussions.

Developing Modern Job Search Skills

The need to develop modern job search skills amongst older claimants was a significant issue for many advisers. It was felt that some current provision was not targeted appropriately or did not provide enough depth and details to meet the needs of older claimants.

Advisers suggested that training in basic IT was required, which focused on some of the core principles and skills such as word processing, how to search the internet, how to find suitable job search sites, how to make online job applications and how to send and respond to emails. It was suggested that much of this training should be provided in small group settings, possibly with one to one support.

The issue of mixed age group sessions was raised as a potential problem, as older claimants may get left behind in the training, by the more IT capable younger claimants.

Advisers also noted that older claimants often feel nervous or alienated from a group that has a mixed age profile, especially if the behavior of the other younger claimants were disruptive.

Having IT support available within the Jobcentre Plus offices was also raised as a potential benefit to older claimants. Advisers suggested that if the issue of IT skills was raised during an interview then it would be useful if some form of immediate in-house support was made available as soon as possible. Even if this support was limited it still could benefit claimants.

Another highlighted topic was the subject of encouraging Jobcentre Plus to develop a more detailed knowledge of local employers, and the local labour market, which was raised and agreed upon by both employer recruiters and Jobcentre Plus advisers alike.

It was suggested that by developing greater links with employers, the benefits of employing older workers could be promoted, the negative perceptions about older people challenged and more effective job and sustainable job matching could be achieved.

There was also a great deal of consensus between the two interview groups in respect of what activities could be implemented to develop greater links with local employers and generally improve adviser knowledge of local labour markets.

Better use of Job Fairs with the possibility of hosting age specific or age positive events was also highlighted. When it came to getting the more senior job seeker a chance to get their foot in the door both Jobcentre advisers and employer recruitment staff alike said that the old system of ringing employers and recommending a particular claimant should be revived.

This method had the benefit of breaking down some initial barriers between the employers and the claimants. It also gave the adviser the opportunity to build up the profile of a claimant and to explain to the employer how the individual's particular skills and experience would match their vacancy.

“Ringing employers to introduce them to claimants, especially older claimants, could and would really help. Employers are less likely to ignore them if they have a personal introduction from an adviser” (Adviser Comment Online Survey)

Contact between advisers and special service providers was thought of as a problem by many as the ability to communicate with providers was something of a frustrating restriction, advisers said. Advisers felt that having an open dialogue with local providers could produce real benefits in assisting the skill development of all claimants and in particular older claimants.

Such a dialogue would help advisers understand the role and structure of the provision being given in more detail, and as a result, help them decide what provision is better for individual claimants and also allow them to track and monitor the progress of individual claimants in a more understanding manner.

There was also a degree of scepticism and even suspicion voiced by advisers about the quality of some local provision delivered by local providers. Such a suspicion over the years has been well justified in various ways as complaints from job seekers have ranged from - no one being around or willing to help, train or assist them to even being sent home when staff failed to turn up themselves.

When job seekers were asked what efforts had been made by providers in contacting employers on their behalf their reply was often - none at all - or - we were told to just sit there and do job search and nothing else.

Many job seekers who had been on such 'provider' courses in the past would often say that being given a few minutes of help with their CV or just sitting there listening to how you should speak to someone in an interview for hours at a time everyday was just an utter waste of time and did nothing for them when it came to meeting an employer and talking to them about what they had to do. Many job seekers would say that all they did was do a job search and mess about then go home. So what was the point of all that?

A further complaint by job seekers was with regard to being sent on training after training courses that may look good on their CV but did nothing to help pay the bills at the end of the day.

Some of these feelings between all concerned appeared to have developed simply because there was little, or no, dialogue between providers, advisers and the client and no independent information about the quality or content of these service providers to ensure that all that could be done was being done and not just wasting everyone's time.

Often the only feedback advisers received was from claimants who had poor experiences to report. As one adviser at a focus group session noted: "We don't get to hear about the positive experience or the good outcomes, because those claimants leave benefits and move into work" (Adviser Focus group)

Job clubs also came under fire for being a total waste of time as just like job seeker service providers it all came down to just sitting in front of a computer all day long and doing a job search. Something that many job seekers would say, was that doing a job search at a job club, often supervised by volunteers themselves, could be done at home on their own laptops anyway rather than travel to get there and do the exact same thing as they do at home.

Volunteering and work experience schemes do have merit when it comes to school leavers who have as yet never experienced a working environment or for someone wishing to try their hand at a new line of work from what they have been doing in the past.

There are those who will say that with the opportunities provided by local charities and voluntary organisations, plus work experience schemes, young unemployed people can get valuable work experience through a placement with a local business or charity based organisation and such experience can truly help them in the future. Taking part in such things will not only give them valuable experience but it can also help them to build their CVs and make them more marketable to potential employers.

Work experience also provides young unemployed people with a potential new route to getting onto an apprenticeship or even an offer of pre-employment training and work experience placements in sectors with high volumes of current local vacancies. However people in the 60 plus age range often feel that at their age, and with only a very few years to go before retirement, such work experience or voluntary based training, or even qualification based training, to be a waste of time. More so as they really do not want to waste their valuable and very short limited time on such things.

Although even a more senior age job seeker may need to learn and experience new job skills, if needed, they are very reluctant to do so at their time of life.

Many 60 plus job seekers also find the term 'work experience' very silly when you take into account that they may have had high profile fully job experienced positions way long before many of those who run such courses were even born.

Job Agencies - were another focus of complaint by job seekers in the 60 plus age range.

They found them very limited with regard to assisting them with finding a job and soon realised that all the thousands of onsite agencies were all simply sharing the same job positions between them. They also came to realise very soon that many such agencies were contacting them with a job offer that did not exist, in an effort to make them either register with their agency website online or to visit them in person simply to recruit them onto their books.

As a result of this situation they could not understand why jobcentres were forcing, or at the very least prompting them, to join such agencies when they knew of this common practice.

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