

FUTURE AGENDA

Open Foresight

# THE FUTURE OF AN INTERGENERATIONAL WORKFORCE

## Global Insights gained from Multiple Expert Discussions

# Introduction

Amid the noise around AI, the gig economy, outsourcing, automation and broader anxieties about the future of work, the challenges facing workers at the beginning and end of their career spectrum are increasing. Graduates, lumbered with significant debt and rising rents, are facing huge competition for a declining number of entry level roles. On the flip side, older workers, particularly those returning after a career break, are largely overlooked. This while the UK is ageing rapidly and unevenly.

The accelerating imbalance between those over 65 and the working population poses serious risks to both workforce sustainability and economic resilience. With the state pension age rising and fewer young people entering the labour market, longer working lives are set to become a necessity. However, this message is somehow not getting through. Older workers are often overlooked for younger candidates with less experience while school leavers and graduates struggle to climb onto the first rung of the career ladder.

Long term growth and innovation is driven by diversity. Unlocking a skilled, motivated and currently underutilised talent pool at both ends of the age spectrum should be a priority.

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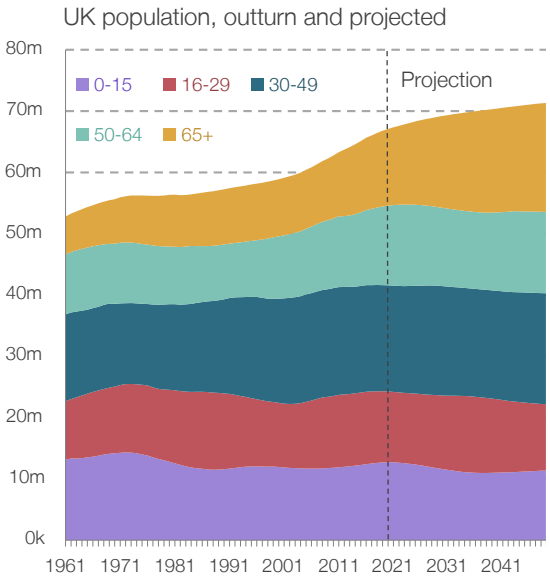
Although age is one of the nine protected characteristics under the 2010 Equality Act, older workers face significant barriers. They are more likely to experience long term unemployment after job loss and often have fewer opportunities to retrain. Age bias in recruitment remains widespread, with an unspoken assumption that individuals in their mid to late 50s are "too old" to hire.

For women, these challenges are compounded. Many step away from work for caregiving responsibilities and later return to lower-paid, less secure roles. This is contributing to persistent pension gaps and financial insecurity later in life. Enabling more women to remain in or re-enter the workforce is not only a matter of helping to achieve equity but also presents substantial economic gains. According to the UK government, increasing women's employment by 5% could boost the economy by up to £125 billion annually.

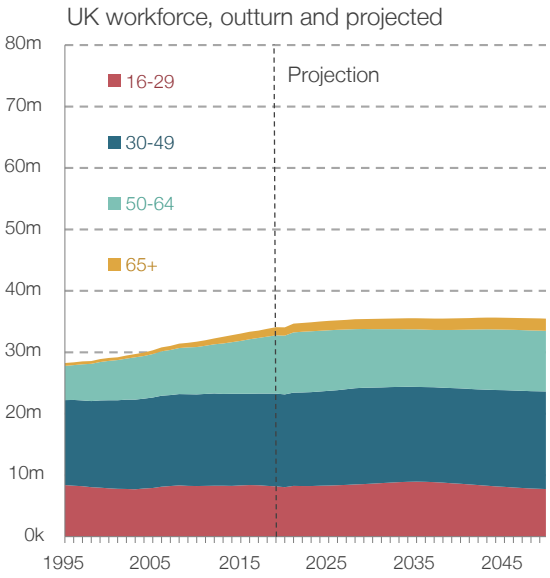
New graduates are also finding it hard to find work. Although science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) degrees are still a worthy investment, some are questioning the cost of their degrees. There simply aren't enough jobs to go round. Recent figures from Adzuna show that graduate positions have dropped nearly a third across the UK, twice the amount of all job vacancies. It's not just a question of parity, adapting systems to better support a multigenerational and gender-diverse workforce is essential to building a more resilient and inclusive economy.

Policymakers, organisations, and workers themselves are all grappling with the shifting sands of the new normal. While the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated change, longer-term forces, demographic trends, technological advances, net zero imperatives, and geopolitical realignments, are also redefining the labour market. Traditional employment models are being reshaped as businesses turn to outsourcing, automation, and AI to streamline operations. These technologies are not only transforming what we do, but also how and where we work.

Historic and projected **population estimates,** by age group, 1995-2050: UK




Historic and projected **workforce estimates,** by age group, 1995-2050: UK




Source: The Resolution Foundation, Big welcomes and long goodbyes 2022 https://economy2030.resolutionfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Big-welcomes-and-long-goodbyes.pdf

Always-on connectivity has reduced the burden of the daily commute yet it has also made cultivating corporate culture and building professional networks more challenging. While technology is driving growth in some sectors, others including healthcare, education and the green economy, continue to face acute and persistent skills shortages. Regional disparities persist as well: the Southeast maintains its economic lead, while other parts of the UK struggle with underemployment and stagnation. All of this unfolds against a backdrop of tight public finances and growing global protectionism making the path to sustainable growth increasingly complex.

In this context, Future Agenda conducted a series of interviews to explore how the UK could build more inclusive workplaces that draw on the experience of all generations. Speaking with recruiters, employers, policymakers, and jobseekers, we examined how older workers can be better integrated into today's evolving labour market.

**Our conversations focused on three core questions**

1. What are the challenges and opportunities for diverse groups of older workers in a rapidly changing labour market?
2. What skills development approaches are needed to support a multigenerational workforce?
3. How can governments, employers, and individuals work together to shape a more equitable future of work?

This report shares insights from those conversations, organised around six key areas of debate that emerged as priorities. It is intended as a stimulus for further discussion. We welcome your comments and contributions.

**The six areas are:**

1. Changing ways of working
2. Skills and experience
3. Bridging the midlife gap
4. Rethinking recruitment
5. Silverpreneurs
6. Intergenerational collaboration

# Changing Ways of Working

Remote and flexible work models are reshaping expectations. Although flexibility is often associated with younger workers, it's equally valuable for older professionals. Although gig platforms and freelance work offer autonomy, they lack of support and are inconsistent. Some organisations innovate with flexible models that maintain loyalty. More widespread adoption is needed.

> ***Flexibility is now important to all generations. We saw that millennials and Gen Zers value it above other benefits but it's just as crucial for older workers who want to stay in the workforce on their own terms."***

Remote working, digital tools, and shifting expectations have created an open talent economy that in theory allows people to better align work with personal responsibilities across all life stages. This has been widely welcomed. In its report Flexible Lessons from the Pandemic (2021), research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) found that employees of all ages value flexibility - for Gen Z it was over 90% and for Boomers 73%. This was corroborated in our interviews. We were told, *"Flexibility is now important to all generations. We saw that millennials and Gen Zers value it above other benefits but it's just as crucial for older workers who want to stay in the workforce on their own terms."*



While gig working may be most commonly associated with unskilled and students, for older workers, freelancing has become a well-travelled path towards retirement. Some find task based platforms such as Upwork, Uber and Etsy provide new ways for them to offer their services. These platforms often control fees and don't cap the number of freelancers who work on any given day, so although it might seem to offer opportunity, their presence can flood the market. The result is that clients can be more demanding and set the rules of engagement: lower pricing, intense work and potentially unsocial, irregular working hours.

Increasing skills shortages means that some forward-thinking employers are rising to the challenge. Insurer **Zurich UK** became the first large employer to advertise all vacancies as flexible by default as long ago as 2019. Since then the total number of employees they have hired on a part-time basis has almost quadrupled. But Zurich is in the minority. Despite the introduction of the Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act in April 2024 which grants employees the right to request flexible working from their first day, implementation varies across sectors. For some industries, healthcare or construction for example, it may well be impractical. However, as the demand for flexibility grows and traditional employment lifecycles continue to evolve, more organisations will need to come up with creative ways to offer fractional employment models.

Task-based work is not a silver bullet. Not everyone thrives in environments with irregular income and limited support. Some companies also find it difficult to adapt. Those with complex operations often struggle to onboard temporary staff, unfamiliar with internal systems or culture. In this instance, organisations that have access to a dedicated cohort of talent makes sense. For employers, this can provide fast access to trusted, experienced professionals who already understand the business, reducing training time, improving resilience, and boosting overall workforce participation. For experienced workers, having formal yet flexible arrangements around freelance work can open the door to extended careers, phased retirement, or be the first step in a return after a break.

Unilever's **U-Work** model is a good example here. It provides a small monthly retainer to a pool of employees who stay connected to the company without a fixed role or hours.They are brought in for specific projects when needed, giving them the freedom to work on their own terms while maintaining a sense of belonging.

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Other UK organisations are trialling similar approaches. The **NHS** has expanded their flexible staffing banks to re-engage retired healthcare professionals, including nurses and GPs, during periods of high demand. These systems allow experienced clinicians to return on their own terms, often part-time, and sometimes remotely, without the administrative hurdles of full re-employment. Although, driven by crippling skills shortages, for older workers this offers a low-friction way to continue contributing their skills.

Alongside the practical benefits for business, these models help maintain or rebuild loyalty and trust, elements in short supply in today's disrupted labour market. As one recruiter told us, *"Whatever they say, few organisations today place enough value on corporate loyalty, so employees are either going up or going out."* By offering continuity and autonomy, flexible frameworks help retain valuable workers who might otherwise exit the workforce prematurely.

Some we spoke to felt that as the boundaries of traditional employment continue to blur, the most forward-thinking employers will be those who create work that fits people's lives, not the other way around. Others disagreed, ***"Not all organisations can (or should) adapt. But that doesn't make them bad. I think people have to consider their needs and find the organisations to match."*** Whatever your view, as working lives lengthen and career expectations shift, for the companies that can offer it, flexible working models point to a future where contribution is measured not by fixed hours, but by value, adaptability, and trust. In competitive markets this, alongside other purpose driven initiatives, could mean they are better placed to attract new talent, retain experienced workers, increase workforce participation, and build resilience across generations.




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# Skills and Experience




Older workers bring rich experience but myths about their tech capabilities persist. AI and intuitive tools help level the playing field. Continous professional development is vital, but access is uneven. Developing a sustainable culture of intergenerational learning and ongoing mentoring is key.

> ***When it comes to AI, the use of natural language is leveling the playing field so people who may feel their tech skills have slipped can easily get on the front foot again."***

Older workers bring something few others can match: deep experience, strong networks, and a steadying influence. They mentor and support colleagues as well as build resilience within teams. Yet the myth that they can't keep up with new technologies lingers. As one expert warned, ***"If we assume only younger people can thrive in a tech-driven world, we're going to miss out."***

Of course, tech skills matter but *"when it comes to AI, the use of natural language is leveling the playing field so people who may feel their tech skills have slipped can easily get on the front foot again."* In a world where today's tools are outdated by tomorrow, adaptability is key.

Older workers may have different development needs and motivations than their younger peers, but with the right support, they are just as capable of mastering new technologies and often bring sharper judgment to how those tools are applied. In fact, as Harvard Professor Arthur Brooks has noted, "crystallised intelligence" the ability to draw on accumulated knowledge and experience tends to increase with age. It offers a valuable counterbalance to rapidly changing tools and trends that are easier to learn. Platforms like Coursera, LinkedIn Learning and FutureLearn offer affordable, accessible ways to learn. The appetite for ongoing development is clear: a recent Kantar survey for Unilever found that 94% of employees would stay longer at a company that invested more in their learning.

Although the value of back to work programmes is widely recognised, only large organisations can really afford them; even successful candidates require additional support which makes them expensive to run and remain highly competitive. In the UK government support for them has dwindled. Post the pandemic the government's plan to support thousands of extra returnships specifically for the over 50s has been watered down. However, it still signposts existing work academy programmes and skills bootcamps.

Encouragingly and despite the challenges, several UK initiatives are already helping older workers retrain and re-enter the workforce:

- **55/Redefined** partners with major employers like Barclays, Diageo and Amazon to create roles and pathways specifically for older professionals.
- **Barclays** has pioneered age-inclusive hiring and development programmes to support the ongoing employment of older workers.
- **Atos** and **Aviva** actively promote recruitment and upskilling for older talent, recognising the value of experience in a multigenerational workforce.
- Social enterprises like **Now Teach** and **Wise Age** help experienced professionals pivot into new sectors such as education or entrepreneurship.
- The **Third Age Foundation** offers digital skills training and personal development tailored to those over 40 seeking entirely new careers.
- **BraveStart** is a non profit organisation that helps people, typically aged between 46 - 65+ for the next stage of their careers.

Perhaps the real challenge lies in embedding a culture of lifelong learning across the generations, and in making it financially and practically sustainable. We all need to take some personal responsibility here. At a Future Agenda workshop in Singapore, one idea stood out: a *"20-year Master's"* that allows people to step in and out of education throughout their career, realigning their skills with the evolving job market. We also heard calls for stronger public support, particularly for those displaced by automation or industry shifts.

Long-term, a greater focus on faster reform in education, training, and incentives to better prepare the next generation for the jobs of tomorrow is needed.

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Alongside learning new skills, older workers are well placed to mentor younger employees bringing distinct and complementary strengths. When harnessed effectively, these generational differences can lead to greater creativity, resilience, and institutional learning.

Mentoring, both traditional and reverse, can help transfer knowledge in both directions. Programmes like Aviva's cross-generational mentoring and initiatives within the NHS to pair newly qualified staff with experienced returners offer blueprints for how collaboration across age groups can build stronger, more agile organisations.

In a fast-changing labour market, the ability to adapt and keep learning is increasingly important for workers of all ages. Supporting older workers means going beyond assumptions about what they can or can't do, and ensuring that learning and development opportunities are accessible throughout their careers. By recognising the value of experience alongside the need for up-to-date skills, organisations can build more resilient teams and make better use of the talent they already have.



# **Bridging the Midlife Gap:** Returning from Career Breaks

Longer career breaks can result in lasting setbacks. Re-entry is especially tough for women and those over 50. Targeted programmes offer support, but training and coaching remain inaccessible to many. Apprenticeships for all ages, paid training leave, and greater government support would help.

> ***Women often take maternity leave right at the peak of their career progression. Later, they still carry the bulk of domestic and caregiving responsibilities so they're doubly handicapped."***

Changes in personal circumstances, such as caring responsibilities, health issues, or redundancy, often lead to midlife career breaks. These breaks, while sometimes necessary, can carry lasting professional and financial consequences. For many, especially white-collar professionals, we heard that ***"fifty is a watershed"*** when trying to re-enter the traditional corporate world. Age bias, outdated perceptions of skills, and a lack of flexible opportunities all play a role in making re-entry difficult.



This challenge is particularly acute for women. As one participant put it: *"Women often take maternity leave right at the peak of their career progression. Later, they still carry the bulk of domestic and caregiving responsibilities so they're doubly handicapped."* While part-time roles, job shares, and contract work offer short-term flexibility, they can also limit access to advancement, benefits, and long-term financial security. There is a clear need for employment systems to evolve to provide not only more flexible options, but also better support for those rebuilding careers and income after time away.

Providing mid-career advice and planning support is one way to prevent skills mismatches and help experienced workers remain relevant. But for those returning after extended breaks, targeted reentry support is essential. Organisations like **Career Returners**, **Back2Businessship** and **Brave Starts** are leading the way. They offer tailored training, confidence-building programmes, and opportunities to rebuild professional networks. These networks are often the missing link for returners who may have lost touch with their industry during time away.

For those out of work, self-funding through debt is a major barrier to retraining. Midlife apprenticeships are therefore a great way to provide a fresh route back into work, especially for those looking to pivot entirely. While many schemes still focus on school leavers, some of the larger employers are expanding their access. For example, **Amazon** has around 1,700 apprenticeships in the UK and Ireland ranging in age from 18 to 70, while **Barclays** and **Lloyds Banking Group** also offer schemes designed specifically for older workers.

Many existing programmes claim to be age neutral but better framing and language around this would be helpful to flag that they aren't just for young people.



Furthermore, policies such as the right to paid training leave could give employees of all ages the confidence to take part. The government has a role to play here. The Lifelong Loan Entitlement scheme, set to launch in 2026 will provide individuals with a loan entitlement equivalent to four years of post 18 education. Creative ways are needed to incentivise midlife and older people to engage with the scheme.

Another valuable resource is career coaching. This has grown rapidly over the past decade. Many coaches support senior professionals in navigating longer, more complex working lives, and encouraging better planning. There is a wide choice so a careful approach is necessary. Qualified psychologists are regulated and, although that doesn't necessarily mean better quality, this does offer greater protection. While organisations like the **International Coaching Federation (ICF)** and **European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC)** offer certification and ethical standards, adherence remains voluntary. Introducing regulation or minimum standards for coaches would improve trust, protect clients, and raise the overall impact especially as more workers turn to it in midlife and beyond.

Despite these promising efforts, older workers remain significantly underrepresented in training programmes. According to the **Centre for Ageing Better**, employees over 50 are half as likely to access training as those aged 18–29. Reasons vary from confidence and lack of employer support to structural barriers like cost or rigid course formats, but the effect is the same: reduced opportunity, slower re-entry, and untapped potential.

As more people take career breaks for caregiving, health, or life transitions, re-entering the workforce must be made easier, not harder. Employers and policymakers who proactively support returners through targeted programmes, inclusive hiring practices, and flexible pathways, will likely gain access to an experienced, motivated, and too-often overlooked talent pool.

Investing in older workers returning after a break isn't just socially responsible; it's economically smart. Research by the Centre for Aging Better argues that it could improve the employment age gap for older workers which in turn could generate an additional £9bn a year for the UK economy.

# AI in Recruitment:
## New Efficiencies, New Barriers



AI is increasingly used to screen candidates. Often the systems lack transparency and human oversight. While some employers are auditing tools for bias, stronger governance is needed. Done well, AI could enable more inclusive hiring but it requires conscious design, fairness standards, and human intervention.

> ***The human intervention in the process is coming much further down the line. We're getting into a pickle."***

As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly embedded in recruitment processes, it brings both promise and risk. Automated systems are now widely used to screen CVs, rank candidates, and conduct video interviews often, long before a human sees an application. While this can improve efficiency, it also introduces new barriers. Aggressive filtering for example could mean that older candidates are excluded because their skills are outdated while younger candidates will suffer the same due to lack of experience.

AI tools are typically trained on historical data, reflecting past hiring decisions that may already include bias. As a result, these systems can unintentionally replicate and even amplify age discrimination. For example, candidates with longer work histories, non-linear careers, or gaps due to caregiving or redundancy, all common among midlife and older applicants, may be deprioritised by algorithms that favour recent technical skills or rigid career trajectories. As one participant warned, *"The human intervention in the process is coming much further down the line. We're getting into a pickle."*

This bias is difficult to detect. When a person makes a hiring decision, their reasoning can be challenged. But when an algorithm filters out candidates before any human involvement, the exclusion becomes invisible and far harder to correct. Without strong oversight, AI could make age bias more systematic and harder to address. Equally without more human intervention it could also mean that recruitment consultants find it increasingly difficult to differentiate fact from fiction.

> ***When an algorithm filters out candidates before any human involvement, the exclusion becomes invisible and far harder to correct."***

The solution lies in balancing efficiency with fairness and ensuring technology is designed and deployed with inclusion in mind. Encouragingly, some larger employers are beginning to audit their AI hiring tools for bias, and bodies like the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation are pushing for stronger governance, transparency, and accountability.

Beyond bias, AI hiring systems present broader challenges: opacity in decision-making, susceptibility to scams and misinformation, and lack of recourse for applicants unfairly filtered out.

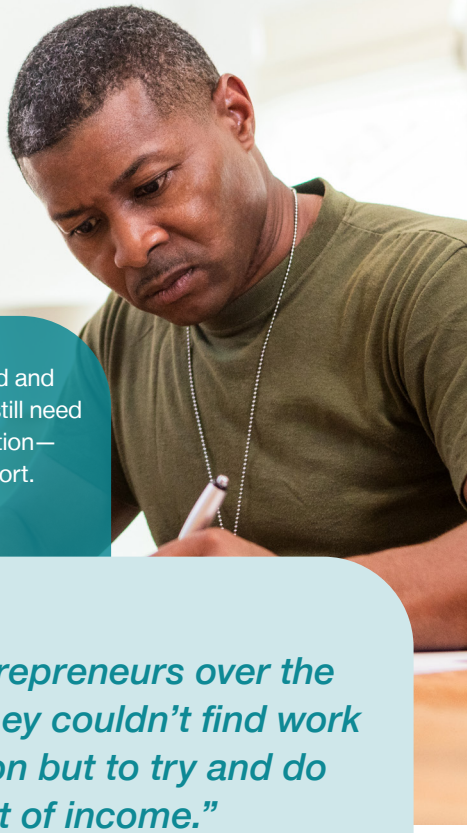
If left unchecked, these technologies risk closing doors rather than opening them, especially for applicants who may already face systemic disadvantages.

If used well, AI has the potential to make hiring faster, fairer, and more inclusive. But realising that potential will require a deliberate shift in how organisations approach recruitment. Systems must be designed with broader definitions of experience in mind, and supplemented by human oversight at critical stages. Transparency, explainability, and fairness must become standard features not optional extras of AI hiring tools. Importantly, conversations between people will still matter, so working alongside technology and not being dependent on it, remains key.

> ***"Transparency, explainability, and fairness must become standard features not optional extras of AI hiring tools."***



# **Silverpreneurs:** Unlocking the Power of Midlife Enterprise



"Silverpreneurs" now account for 42% of the UK's self-employed and have higher survival rates than younger founders however they still need support. Enterprise in later life can be a flexible, empowering option—but requires tailored financial, community, and mentorship support.

> ***"There's been so much growth in entrepreneurs over the age of 50 I guarantee it's because they couldn't find work as an employee so they had no option but to try and do their own thing and create some sort of income."***

We're often told necessity is the mother of invention and for many older workers, a career break or redundancy has been the catalyst for starting their own business. As one contributor told us, *"There's been so much growth in entrepreneurs over the age of 50 I guarantee it's because they couldn't find work as an employee so they had no option but to try and do their own thing and create some sort of income."* Many younger people also aspire to being his/her own boss. According to the FSB, almost two thirds of young people dream of starting their own business, but only 16% manage to make the leap.

Setting up a business is not easy and it's becoming increasingly less so. The Financial Times recently reported that the number of UK entrepreneurs voluntarily shutting down their viable businesses has hit the highest rate since the pandemic. Despite this, while some midlife career changers transition into consultancy, a growing number are launching their own ventures. These silverpreneurs now account for 42% of the UK's self-employed workforce, and are behind 1 in 7 new businesses. Many are built on the founder's expertise and experience, often in sectors such as consulting, retail, or the creative industries, where startup costs are lower and networks matter more than formal structures. Crucially, they're not just starting businesses, they're sustaining them. We were told that around 70% of businesses founded by people aged 50+ are still operating after five years, compared to just 28% for younger founders. As one participant put it: *"We need to get more people setting up businesses in their 40s and 50s. Most people don't want a full-time job"*

Support for older entrepreneurs is growing. For example, 55/Redefined partners with companies like Barclays and Amazon to create flexible work and startup opportunities for over-50s. Barclays' Eagle Labs accelerator network, backed by government funding, provides mentoring and access to tech hubs that are open to founders of all ages, including those entering entrepreneurship later in life. In Scotland, the **SJ Noble Trust** has quietly backed hundreds of first-time business owners, many of them older, with small interest-free loans, creating over 800 jobs across rural communities.

Community-based models are also helping reduce the isolation that some older entrepreneurs experience. The peer-led network **Silverpreneurs Unite** and social enterprise platforms like **Enterprise Nation** and the **Start Up School for Seniors** all provide tailored training, mentoring, and online support for over-50s looking to build or grow their own ventures.

As the nature of work continues to evolve, expect more people in midlife to consider self-employment as a flexible and fulfilling alternative. Recognising and backing this shift through tailored support, better access to finance, and visible role models will help turn lived experience into enterprise, and later life into a new chapter of opportunity.

# **Looking Ahead:** The Value of an Intergenerational Workforce

The real challenge isn't just demographic, it's cultural. The old model of work - rigid, linear, and age-dependent - is no longer fit for purpose.

> ***We must adapt to longer, more varied, and less predictable careers."***

Until we stop treating experience and potential as opposites, we will continue to overlook the talent that already exists within our workforce. Of course flexibility is a two way street. As individuals, we must adapt to longer, more varied, and less predictable careers. That could mean accepting that at some point older leaders should step back and accept oversight from someone more youthful. By embracing the insight and experience of older workers alongside the energy and creativity of younger generations, organisations can build stronger, more resilient teams. Governments must recognise that a truly intergenerational workforce is not just a moral imperative or demographic necessity. It is a competitive advantage.

*Report compiled by* **Future Agenda** *with support from* **Katherine Brown**, **Jacqui Ravenhall** *and* **Romila Maharaj**.



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**About Future Agenda**

Future Agenda is an open source think tank and advisory firm. We help organisations, large and small, to explore emerging opportunities, identify new growth platforms and develop game-changing innovations. Founded in 2010, Future Agenda has pioneered an open foresight approach that brings together senior leaders across business, academia, NFP and government. The aim is to connect the informed and influential, to challenge assumptions and build a more comprehensive view about the future that will help deliver positive, lasting impact.

For more information and to have access to all our insights, please visit
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