



Age at work focus group guide



This guide outlines how to conduct focus groups and provides a discussion guide for your focus groups. The aim of these focus groups is to learn how to attract and retain older people.

As the Government's Business Champion for Older Workers, we're calling for one million more older people in work by 2022. Our population is ageing and people are living longer. By 2022, 14.5 million more jobs will be created but only 7 million younger workers will enter the workforce. To ensure the health of our economy and society, the UK needs to significantly improve older workers' participation in the labour market.

But employment in its current state is not working for many people over 50; some choose to retire early, but many others are forced out through redundancy, health issues or a need to balance caring responsibilities.

Listening to older employees through focus groups will help you retain and recruit older workers. You can capture attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way which would not be feasible using other methods such as interviews or surveys.

How to conduct focus groups

1 | Understanding the research context and defining the research question



Understanding the issue is the first step. Age at work is a relatively recent issue, and the research into it is not extensive. However, we do know that the population is ageing, and that longer working lives must become the norm. Despite this, older people face barriers to work, such as redundancy, health issues or caring responsibilities, and the current arrangements of employment in the UK are not working for those over 50.

We also know that there are two groups of people over 50 who are disproportionately losing out: people in lower–middle income households, and women. People over 50 in lower-middle income households are less likely to be in work than those in higher income households.¹

Older women face other barriers: combined gender and age discrimination, lower likelihood of having formal qualifications and education, more likely to be carers, and they experience the menopause – a health issue which is largely ignored. Older women are also less economically independent and empowered; the gender pay gap is largest amongst those over 40.

But there are still gaps in our knowledge. The aim of these focus groups is to understand the barriers to work for older people in more depth. What would encourage them to stay in **your** organisation for longer?

2 | Planning the focus groups

Finding the right participants

Participants for these focus groups should be aged 50+ and working in your own organisation. Ideally the group should be as representative of the diversity of your older workforce as possible, so that you can hear a diverse range of viewpoints. Include women and men of different ages above 50 and from different backgrounds and jobs.

Focus groups are more effective when the participants do not know each other too well, and when no one from HR or a senior level is in the room (unless the group is focused on senior people). Participants need to feel safe and secure in order to express their opinions freely, and for you to capture the most truthful data.

Recruiting the participants

People may be more inclined to take part if it is during their working hours rather than personal time, if there are refreshments, and if they feel the focus group will make a real difference. Advertise the focus groups by using posters, flyers and a brief about the research project. Advertise through the internal intranet/communication system, department leads / line managers, and through the staff networks.

Keep a record of those interested in attending, including their job title, email address, gender, age and other identity characteristics, so that the final group(s) will be as diverse as possible.

Deciding how many groups and participants

One focus group is not enough to identify common themes. Depending on who the population is and what your objectives are, and if you have enough time and resource to conduct and analyse the research, three to four focus groups would be ideal.

To allow exploration of topics related to particular groups of people, such as the menopause or racial discrimination, consider having separate groups such as:

- Women and men
- Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME) people
- People aged 50-60 and people aged 61+
- People in blue collar roles and people in white collar roles.

A group of 6-10 people would be small enough to give everyone the opportunity to express their thoughts, but large enough to provide a diversity of opinions.

Practicalities: where, when and how long for

As the research is focused on employees, it would be most convenient to hold the focus group in a private room in the workplace. Ensure it is bright, airy, accessible and has refreshments. If some participants have to travel further than usual to come to the focus group, ensure their travel costs are reimbursed.

Avoid Fridays and Mondays since you may inadvertently exclude part time workers. Lunchtimes or mornings tend to work best. Remember to let line-managers know when the focus groups will be taking place so that they can prepare cover for their employees in advance.

The ideal amount of time for a focus group is between 45 to 90 minutes, and you should give yourself extra time before and after to set up and clear away the room. Beyond that, participants may find it harder to focus so the session will be less productive, and it becomes an imposition on participant time.

3 | Conducting the focus groups

The role of the facilitator

The reliability of the findings depends on the facilitator's skills, so using an experienced facilitator is essential. Their role is to generate different ideas and opinions from as many different people as possible.

The facilitator should start by introducing themselves and asking everyone else to introduce themselves too. They should: explain why the research is being carried out and how it will be used; ask for permission to record the session so that it can be transcribed; explain rules of confidentiality and anonymity.

An effective facilitator...

- **Creates an inclusive environment** which is non-judgmental, non-threatening, welcoming and safe. They're able to build rapport with participants from the beginning, which enables honest and reliable data.

- **Is objective** and does not have their ego tied to the outcome of the study. They're aware of their own preconceptions and assumptions, and set out only to conduct thorough research.
- **Maintains an empathetic but neutral** face and tone of voice, enabling all respondents to feel they can be open and honest, no matter how unusual their responses.
- **Has excellent questioning skills.** They avoid leading or biased questions, and they ask open-ended and clear questions, using simple language. They only ask one question at a time, and they ask follow-up questions if participants get stuck or if they'd like to explore further, for example, 'can you tell me more about that?'
- **Has excellent listening skills** and is able to listen to both verbal and non-verbal responses. They can identify whether the response is from the front of mind, or from deeper thinking.
- **Reads the room:** they can inspire and create energy in a dull group, and handle an overly energetic group. They can identify when individuals are seeking approval, notice and handle both withdrawn and dominant individuals, and notice when someone wants to speak before they have raised a hand.
- **Is an 'invisible leader':** they lead the conversation and remain 'in charge' without dominating the room.
- **Handles diverse opinions** without allowing themselves or other participants to be confrontational or threatening. They anticipate and cope with a lack of consensus, without losing group affinity.
- **Is flexible** with the order of questions in order to follow the thinking of the group and allow for spontaneity.

The facilitator should end the session by thanking the participants for their time and contributions, outlining what the next steps will be and how their views will help to transform the workplace.

4 | Interpreting and analysing the data



When setting out to analyse the data, remember to be objective and remove all ego and personal viewpoints from the process. The steps below will help you to analyse your responses and identify the key findings.

Step 1: Carefully read through your transcript and your notes (which may include non-verbal findings such as body language and tone of voice), get to know the data, and try to understand the meanings behind the responses.

Step 2: Start to identify trends by writing concepts or ideas in the margins. Include both consensus responses and conflicting responses, and both negative and positive findings in your analysis.

Step 3: Clarify the trends identified from the whole transcript and categorise by theme. It is ok if some responses relate to more than one theme.

Step 4: Identify the key findings most relevant to the research aim (attracting and retaining older people).

Focus group guide

This discussion guide is ordered thematically and is written for a semi-structured focus group. This allows for some flexibility in the order of questioning. You do not need to be asked every single question in each theme if you feel you're running out of time. Choose the most relevant to your organisation and employees.

When asking questions, always keep in mind the aim of the research: how can we attract and recruit older people? Some question prompts are in *italic*.

Introduction (5 minutes)

- Welcome the group and introduce yourself.
- Provide a brief background to the overall study, and explain that the aim of the focus groups is to explore some of the key findings from previous research in greater depth.
- Explain that you are interested in everyone's viewpoint and that there are no right or wrong answers.
- Clarify that all discussions will remain confidential, and that no individual will be identified in our report.
- Inform the group you'll be audio recording the discussions, as this will be used when you analyse the results. The only person who will hear the tape will be the facilitator and it will be deleted once transcribed.
- Start the introductions. Ask participants to tell the group their first name, what they do in this organisation, and whether they work full-time or part-time / how long they've worked here for. The facilitator starts first.

Discussion guide

Attraction

What does work mean to you? *Why?*

What are the best parts of work?

What are the worst parts of work?

Why did you decide to work here?

What would improve your working life? *What could your employer do to make work better? Why?*

Work / life balance

Have your priorities changed throughout different life stages, or stayed the same?

What are your other responsibilities outside of work? *Carers, running household, other interests, business ventures, volunteering*

Are there any challenges to balancing your life outside of work with work?

To the flexible workers, has flexible working / part time working / working from home helped with your work / life balance? How?

Are there any negative side effects to working flexibly or part time? *Does flexible working fit into the culture of your workplace?*

Culture and discrimination

How would you describe the culture at your work?

What are the people like?

How included do you feel in your team?

Is there a bias against older people / for younger people? Can you tell me more?

Have you experienced discrimination because of your age?

Ambition

How do you feel about your career to date?

When you started working, were your ambitions different to what they are now, or have they stayed the same? What has caused change?

Training and development

Would you like to improve your skills or knowledge?

Have you been offered training opportunities by your employer?

Have you taken up training opportunities?

What do think about the training?

What impact has training had on you?

Can you tell me about development conversations with your line manager? *Do you have them? What are they like? Would you like to have them / more of them?*

In your opinion, how important is it to continue progressing and learning?

Do you ever feel you get overlooked because of your age?

Technology (for employees who use it in their workplace)

How do you feel about using technology and IT in your work?

Do you enjoy using technology, including the internet and social media, at work or in your personal life?

(To those who find it difficult) How do your colleagues react? *How helpful are they?*

Would you like to learn more? *Would you like training?*

Do you ever feel that your colleagues underestimate your technology skills? Why?

Future

What do you hope for from the rest of your working life?

How long do you expect to continue working for?

Aside from having enough money, what else would stop you from working for an organisation as you get older? *Why? [Examples: health, caring responsibility, becoming self-employed, not enjoying work.] Do you expect any of that to happen?*

What would encourage you to keep working, even if you could afford to stop? *What could your employer do?*

Think about your ideal world, what would your work and life outside of work be like?

For female-only focus groups

Health and menopause

For those who have experienced the menopause, what impact did it have on you at work?

Do you feel you can be open with your line manager / colleagues about the symptoms?

What could your employer do to help you deal with the symptoms better?

Sources

¹ The Resolution Foundation. 2015. Unfinished Business. Available at:
http://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2014/08/Unfinished_Business_FINAL_3.pdf