
PROMOTING LABOUR MARKET PARTICIPATION OF LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYED PEOPLE AGED 50+ IN THE NETHERLANDS

Summary, conclusions and recommendations for actions¹

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¹ This summary relates to the final research report, which is written in Dutch: Yvonne Prince, Arie Gelderblom & Mark den Hartog (2026). Bevordering arbeidsparticipatie van langdurig werkloze 50-plussers. Rotterdam: SEOR.

S1. BACKGROUND AND CENTRAL QUESTION

Although the labour market participation of older people in the Netherlands increased between 2015 and 2023, the share of long-term unemployed among older job seekers is still clearly higher than among younger job seekers. The chance for older job seekers to return to paid work within three months is considerably lower than for younger job seekers. And while older workers are continually working longer, (long-term) unemployed older people still have difficulties obtaining new employment. This is occurring despite a tight labour market and the importance for businesses of utilizing untapped labour potential. In addition, the group of older workers will continue to grow in the coming period, meaning unemployment among older people will occur more frequently. The central question that arises is:

How can labour market participation of long-term unemployed older people in the Netherlands be further promoted?

Because existing studies have investigated this issue from several specific angles, in this study we first brought together previous insights in a structured way. We then supplemented these with recent insights from fieldwork conducted during a period of labour shortages. In such periods, older unemployed people and employers might find each other more easily.

In this study, long-term unemployment refers to being unemployed for more than one year. And we focus on older people aged 50 to retirement age (50-plus). In this way, we align with established classifications in statistics, research, and policymaking.

S2. PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Purpose

The purpose of the study is to provide a systematic overview of earlier activities aimed at increasing labour market participation among long-term unemployed older people, and the results they have achieved. In addition, new empirical insights from the current period of labour shortages are added. We subsequently translate this knowledge into recommendations for actions that may contribute to higher labour market participation among long-term unemployed older people.

Research questions

The study addresses the following underlying research questions:

- 1. Social security reforms and policy initiatives aimed at unemployed older people**
 - Which fundamental reforms to the social security system and which policy initiatives since 2013 have positively influenced the labour market position of older unemployed people?
- 2. Training**
 - What effect does training have on labour market participation of older long-term unemployed people? What is known about their use of training initiatives and the effects?
- 3. Perceptions**
 - How do unemployed older people view their unemployment and their chances of finding work, and how have they managed to return to work?
 - How do employers (both large enterprises and SMEs) in shortage occupations view unemployed older people?
 - To what extent do perceptions of and about older people play a role in the labour market?
- 4. International insights**
 - Which good policy examples exist in several European countries and Japan, and what can be learned from them?

5. Recommendations for potential actions

- Which potential actions aimed at long-term unemployed older people, employers, and policymakers can further stimulate labour market participation of long-term unemployed people?

S3. RESEARCH APPROACH

To address the research questions, the following activities were undertaken:

a) Literature and policy review

A search for, review, and analysis of relevant policy documents, national and international literature, evaluation studies, and Dutch legislation since 2013, including effects of policy measures and training schemes. Material on perceptions and age discrimination is also included. In addition, international literature on labour market measures relevant for older jobseekers in Denmark, Norway, Czechia, United Kingdom, and Japan was reviewed.

b) Surveys among unemployed individuals aged 50+ and among individuals aged 50+ who have returned to work

In autumn 2025, online surveys were conducted among (short- and long-term) unemployed people aged 50+ (371 respondents) and among 50+ individuals who - after becoming unemployed - found work after the age of 50 (261 respondents).

c) Interviews with employers in three sectors with shortage occupations

Between November 2024 and February 2025, in total 30 interviews were conducted with employers in three sectors with shortage occupations: healthcare and welfare, road transport, and the insurance sector. Small, medium-sized, and large organisations were involved in this.

d) Brainstorm session

A brainstorming session held in September 2025 explored possible actions to increase labour market participation among long-term unemployed people aged 50+.

This summary relates to the final report of the research project, which is written in Dutch.²

S4. EXISTING INSIGHTS: WHAT WORKS AND LESSONS LEARNED

We identified which changes in legislation and which measures within policy programmes for older people have influenced the labour market participation of long-term unemployed individuals aged 50+. We also examined the effects of training schemes. Because perceptions also play an important role in the ability of older jobseekers to find new employment after (long-term) unemployment, we devoted specific attention to this topic. Finally, we examined five other countries to explore what lessons they may offer for increasing the labour market participation of long-term unemployed individuals aged 50+.

S4.1 Effects of legislation and policy measures

After two major changes in Dutch legislation - the increase in the state pension age and the shortening of the unemployment benefit duration - the labour market participation of older people has risen. Since 2013, three policy programmes have been implemented that aimed to increase the labour market participation of older people. These programmes deployed a wide range of policy measures, including financial instruments, support services and guidance, training, and communication efforts aimed at influencing perceptions. The programmes concerned, all initiated by the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, are: the

² Yvonne Prince, Arie Gelderblom & Mark den Hartog (2026). *Bevordering arbeidsparticipatie van langdurig werkloze 50-plussers*. Rotterdam: SEOR.

55pluswerkt/Action Plan 50+ (2013–2016), the Action Plan ‘Perspective for People Aged 50+’ (2016–2022), and, since 2022, the Seniors Opportunities Vision (‘SeniorenKansenVisie’).

Hardly any quantitative impact studies have been conducted on these policy programmes, making it difficult to determine their effects. Based on the evaluations that are available, the following interventions appear to have had positive effects: (1) networking training specifically targeted at people aged 50+, (2) a general instrument: trial placements (‘Proefplaatsingen’)³, (3) an experiment sending letters to SMEs about wage premium reductions for older workers, and (4) career development guidance (‘Ontwikkeladvies’), which led to greater self-knowledge and self-confidence among older workers.

S4.2 Effects of training

Both international meta-studies and Dutch research show that training increases the likelihood of re-employment among long-term unemployed people or older unemployed people. Yet although long-term unemployed older people benefit relatively strongly from training compared to other unemployed groups, they are generally underrepresented among training participants.

Moreover, little research has been conducted on the influence of various implementation aspects of training.

S4.3 The role of perceptions and age discrimination

Empirical research on perceptions shows that employers often value older workers for their soft skills and reliability, yet at the same time attribute lower productivity and reduced learning capacity to them. This contributes to fewer employment prospects for older jobseekers and age discrimination. However, there are indications that, when facing recruitment challenges and shortages of qualified workers, employers increasingly focus on adjustment arrangements for older employees (such as modifying job tasks, the physical workplace and/or working hours) and on hiring older jobseekers.

When older jobseekers experience age discrimination, this can lead to reduced motivation and lower self-confidence in their job search. Favourable age-related exit arrangements and poorer health can also reduce older people’s willingness to work. In addition, the current Dutch requirement to apply for jobs may cause older unemployed people to become demotivated due to many rejections, especially when there are not enough suitable vacancies they really have a chance at.

Although there is little empirical research on effective measures to improve perceptions, insights from social-psychological theories suggest that policy measures aimed at intergenerational contact and the accumulation of positive information (for example through regular public campaigns) may help to break down stereotypes about (long-term) unemployed older people. Powerful interventions that can suddenly change an employer’s perception - such as trial placements - also increase the chances of employment for older jobseekers. And because there is no single type of ‘older unemployed person’, it makes sense, as the government already does, to provide tailor-made services.

S4.4 International insights

We examined five other countries to explore what inspiration they may offer for the Dutch context. These include Denmark, Norway and Czechia, as existing statistics characterise them by relatively low unemployment among older people and/or relatively high re-employment rates when they do become unemployed. The United Kingdom was added because it performs well in international statistics on perceptions of older people. In addition, Japan was studied because it has faced population ageing to an

³ A trial placement is a tool used by the Public Employment Service or the municipality, through which a benefit recipient works for an employer - usually for two months - while retaining their benefits. The aim is to assess whether the candidate is suitable for the position, without requiring the employer to pay wages immediately.

even greater extent than European countries but has nonetheless succeeded in increasing labour market participation among older people.

When we compare the labour market measures in the selected countries with the situation in the Netherlands, several areas emerge in which gains could be made. The international case studies confirm the positive role of training in facilitating the re-employment of (older) jobseekers. Denmark performs better than the Netherlands in terms of the financial resources invested in training and the participation of older jobseekers. In the Netherlands, as in many other countries, older jobseekers are underrepresented in training programmes. Greater financial investment in training and stimulating the participation of older jobseekers are therefore desirable. In the area of perceptions, Norway and the United Kingdom have dedicated institutions that consistently work on campaigns and older age-specific policies. Such an institution in the Netherlands could also pay off, as could periodically monitoring of its effects.

In several respects, the Netherlands is already quite advanced. The international case studies also highlighted the tightening of unemployment benefits and moderate wage growth with age as possible explanations for the relatively positive labour market position of older people. In the Netherlands, unemployment benefits have already been tightened over the past period and further reductions are being considered. And similar to the situation in especially Scandinavian countries, in the Netherlands wage growth with age is quite limited for older workers. Point of attention is that age-related ‘relief’ measures or generational-pact arrangements can make older workers more expensive.⁴ While such measures help to keep older employees employable for longer, they can also mean additional costs for employers when older unemployed people apply for jobs.

55. FINDINGS FROM FIELDWORK DURING A PERIOD OF LABOUR MARKET TIGHTNESS

For unemployed people aged 50+, their health is an important factor in whether they look for work and whether they are able to find work (quickly). Fewer than half of long-term unemployed people aged 50+ rate their own health as (very) good. Among those who assess their chances of finding work as (very) poor, almost one-third cite health problems as the reason, and around one-tenth do not wish to work until their retirement because of their health. Furthermore, better health increases the likelihood of finding work again after the age of 50. This emerges from the analysis of the survey data among unemployed people aged 50+ and those aged 50+ who have returned to work after experiencing unemployment beyond their 50th birthday.

In areas beyond health, long-term unemployed people aged 50+ also differ from (both short-term and long-term) unemployed 50+ individuals who have returned to work. These differences indicate that such factors play a role in finding employment. Education, specifically having a higher level of initial education and having recently completed – or being willing to complete – training aimed at finding work, appears to play an important role in enabling older workers to (more quickly) find employment, based on the comparison between these groups.

In addition, it helps when long-term unemployed people aged 50+ are willing to make concessions regarding the type of positions and sectors they consider, as well as (possibly temporary) regarding employment conditions such as lower salaries, temporary contracts and irregular working hours. Willingness and ability to accept irregular working hours or a longer commute may also be influenced by the poorer health of long-term unemployed older people. Furthermore, assistance with job applications, improving one’s CV or LinkedIn profile, and expanding search channels and social networks all contribute to finding work again after the age of 50. External support, a multi-person household or help from friends and family can also be

⁴ A generational pact scheme is an employment arrangement (often included in a sectoral collective labour agreement) that allows older employees to work fewer hours while retaining a large share of their salary and 100% pension accrual.

beneficial. Long-term unemployed people aged 50+ make less use of such support than those who have found work again after becoming unemployed beyond the age of 50.

The interviews with a total of 30 employers in three sectors with shortage occupations show that the chances of finding work are undeniably strong for people aged 50+ who hold the right diplomas and have relevant experience. This is, however, conditional on older jobseekers in more physically demanding occupations being sufficiently healthy ('fit for the job'). For long-term unemployed people aged 50+ without the required qualifications, labour market prospects become substantial only when employers perceive the staff shortages in intermediate vocational ('mbo-level') occupations as truly pressing; in such cases, employers adopt low-threshold recruitment practices and are willing to invest in jobseekers aged 50+. Besides labour market tightness, the degree of ageing within the current workforce and the level of investment required also play a role, which still leads employers to prefer hiring younger candidates. For specialised positions at higher professional education level or above ('hbo-level' or higher), employers generally do not believe that people aged 50+ can still fully acquire the profession. Employers further confirm that health and willingness to learn and undertake training are important for unemployed people aged 50+ to enter employment, and that salary concessions and assistance with CVs and job applications help improve their employment prospects.

In a period of labour market tightness, employers' perceptions of older workers appear to have become more positive. However, although the employers interviewed mention advantages of workers aged 50+ (life experience, strong work ethic, and high loyalty to their employer) and note disadvantages (lower physical capacity and weaker digital skills), this has not yet translated into more opportunities for long-term unemployed people aged 50+. At middle-skilled ('mbo-level') occupations, opportunities seem to be greatest; staff shortages must be genuinely pressing before employers actively start recruiting older jobseekers and are willing to invest in them. Despite the seemingly positive shift in perceptions of older workers, many unemployed people aged 50+ report experiencing age discrimination in the survey. As a result, long-term unemployed people aged 50+ search for work less frequently and less broadly and have lower confidence in their chances of returning to employment.

56. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POSSIBLE ACTIONS

The recommendations resulting from our study can be ordered thematically, along the lines of health, training, the job application process and perceptions, as well as by target group: long-term unemployed people aged 50+, policymakers and employers. Below, the recommendations are presented by target group.

We wish to emphasise that the recommendations for potential actions per target group are strongly interrelated across the themes. Long-term unemployed people aged 50+, as well as employers, are responsible for their own actions within each theme, but are at the same time dependent on the policy infrastructure that supports them. Also, long-term unemployed people aged 50+ depend on the extent to which employers actually offer them opportunities - something in which employers themselves also have an interest, particularly in today's labour market with staff shortages.

For **long-term unemployed people aged 50** and over, several actions emerged that can support their return to the labour market, with maintaining or improving (mental and physical) health being an essential precondition. To that end, it is advisable to make use of existing health programmes or to seek contact with a general practitioner. Furthermore, targeted upskilling or reskilling, job application training, and learning to present one's skills and competencies are important. Strengthening and making use of one's own network, seeking external assistance and coaching, and working on self-confidence are also beneficial. In cases of long-term unemployment, it may also help - where possible - to be flexible regarding the types of positions and sectors one considers, as well as regarding the employment conditions. This effort is especially crucial because long-term unemployment is a self-reinforcing process in which declining health, falling self-confidence, outdated knowledge and a less favourable CV position reinforce one another and further

reduce labour market prospects. This underlines the importance of a supportive policy infrastructure to help break this cycle.

The **policy** recommendations emphasise that, alongside the individual responsibility of jobseekers and employers, a well-functioning and accessible infrastructure is essential to support the re-entry of long-term unemployed people aged 50+. It is recommended that policy focuses on interventions with proven value, such as training for jobseekers aged 50+ and programmes like ‘Successful to Work’ (‘Succesvol naar Werk’) focusing on networking and job application skills, as well as on areas where persistent barriers exist - particularly regarding health and perceptions. Attention is being called to the importance of making health a discussable topic in interactions between the target group and client managers and job coaches, supporting health programmes, ensuring sufficient funding and accessible training schemes. In addition, potentially establishing an institute for older-adult policy accompanied by regular public campaigns, and systematically evaluating policies to determine what works best for this target group.

In concrete terms, this means that policy should focus on flanking health policies through the early identification of health-related barriers, and on cooperation between the Dutch social security agency (UWV), municipalities and health institutions, so that mental and physical barriers to reintegration can be addressed early on. An important point of attention here is that privacy legislation imposes restrictions on recording health-related data. Therefore, a balance is needed in which - while complying with this legislation - any issues in this area can still be adequately identified and discussed in order to provide appropriate support. Furthermore, an easy-to-navigate and accessible training infrastructure is needed, with clear information provided through the Dutch social security agency (UWV), municipalities and Work Centres (‘Werkcentra’), the use of work-based learning pathways (BBL) for re-entry, and sufficient resources for training implementation and evaluation. Finally, improving perceptions requires structural and measurable campaigns, the promotion of trial placements, and further development of a skills-based recruitment approach, so that employers are encouraged to focus on what a person can do rather than on age or formal diplomas.

The recommendations for **employers** focus primarily on the job application process and on perceptions of jobseekers aged 50+, with the core aim of ensuring that this group is given a fair chance and is not excluded at an early stage. This requires adjustments to recruitment and selection practices, such as using recruitment channels and social media that genuinely reach people aged 50+, organising low-threshold recruitment events that broaden perspectives on both sides and enable informal contact, and avoiding algorithms that automatically screen out older candidates. It is also recommended that job advertisements place greater emphasis on skills and competencies rather than on formal diplomas. Employers can furthermore make use of existing entry pathways, such as training routes like work-based learning pathways (BBL), trial placements, and secondment via (specialised) temporary employment agencies, which help reduce risks and/or costs. Thereby it is important to recognise the qualities of older workers — such as their life experience, strong work ethic and the fact that investments often pay off because their high loyalty means they tend to remain with their employer for many years. We should all be more aware that a 55-year-old can remain with an employer for as many as twelve more years.

S7. CONCLUSION

The study shows that the labour market participation of long-term unemployed people aged 50 and over is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, with no single factor being decisive on its own. Health forms a crucial foundational condition, both for the employability of jobseekers and for employers’ confidence in hiring them. Long-term unemployment can, in turn, further undermine health. Training increases the likelihood of finding work, yet job-seeking people aged 50+ participate relatively little and the available budgets are limited or schemes have been phased out. External support and coaching in the orientation and job search process, as well as in the application process, are helpful. Perceptions of people aged 50+ play an important role in employers’ hiring decisions, while structural attention to improving and monitoring these perceptions is lacking in the Netherlands.

The study therefore calls for explicit attention to health in reintegration efforts, higher and more accessible training budgets, investments in external support and coaching, employers who are more open to skills-based recruitment and trial placements, and who offer low-threshold recruitment events and entry-level positions. Also, the establishment of a dedicated expertise centre for working and job-seeking people aged 50+ is recommended, to support the development of expertise, structural campaigns, instrument development, and the monitoring of their effects. Making better use of the labour potential of people aged 50+ benefits jobseekers, employers and society as a whole.