

The Gendered Reality of Job-Seeking

The Smart Works Index 2025



Acknowledgements

Smart Works would like to thank every client who contributed to this research. We are especially grateful to Stephanie, Shantelle and Andrea, who shared their powerful stories and gave their time so generously.

Foreword

Every year, the Smart Works Unemployment Index gives us a clearer picture of what women are up against when they try to re-enter work. This year's findings are the starker yet. Women are applying for more roles, reporting feeling less confident from the application process, and receiving less feedback than ever before. On average, women apply to 42 jobs before visiting Smart Works.

Despite this worsening job market, we continue to reach over 10,000 women every year and our job success rate has risen again, to 68%. This is not a coincidence. It is proof that when women receive personalised, human support at the right moment, the outcome changes.

What stands out most in this Index is not the scale of the challenge, but the determination of the women behind every data point. They keep trying, even as confidence erodes. They keep adapting, even when the rules shift. They keep showing up, even when recruitment practices shut them out too quickly and too often.

But talent should not have to work this hard to be seen. The evidence is clear: women are ready to work. The question is whether hiring processes are ready to consider them.

Smart Works exists to close that gap. As the need rises, so must our ability to respond. This Index is both a call for change and a reminder of what is possible when women are met with belief, support and the tools they need to move forward.



Anna Hemmings
Chief Executive Officer,
Smart Works

The Smart Works Unemployment Index is one of our most important tools for understanding the barriers women face and the role our charity must play in meeting rising need. The 2025 findings are sobering: the labour market is tightening, inequalities are deepening, and the confidence cost of unemployment is growing year by year.

Yet across this challenging landscape runs a thread of hope - the clear evidence that targeted, human support changes outcomes. In a year where women applied for more jobs with fewer returns, Smart Works increased its job success rate. This is a testament to the strength of our model and the dedication of our volunteers, staff, and partners.

As we begin to deliver our 2025-2030 strategy, this Index reinforces why our mission matters. We must reach more women, raise our voice with confidence, and ensure Smart Works is known nationally as the leading service for unemployed women. At the same time, we must strengthen our foundations so we can grow sustainably and remain rooted in the lived experience of the women we support.

None of this is possible without the generosity of our partners. Your belief in women, in their talent, their ambition and their potential - powers every success story in this report.

With your support, we can help build a future where every woman has the opportunity to thrive, and where the job market recognises the ability and determination we see every day.



Julietta Dexter
Chair of the Board of Trustees,
Smart Works

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Executive Summary

Now in its fourth year, the Smart Works Unemployment Index provides one of the most detailed, human-centred insights into the realities of women looking for work across the UK. Drawing on quantitative data from over 4,600 clients and national focus group findings, this year's Index reveals three defining trends shaping women's job-seeking experiences in 2025.

Behind every data point is a woman who is trying, often harder than ever, to secure stability, dignity and sustainable work.

1. Effort is rising, but opportunity is not.

Women are applying widely and persistently, yet hiring practices can overlook the lived experiences of many women, resulting in a less diverse and more restricted talent pool of candidates. On average, women apply to 42 jobs before visiting Smart Works. 30% of women apply for more than 50 roles. Processes are increasingly automated, complex and unresponsive, with many receiving no feedback at all.

2. Existing inequalities persist across the job search experience.

Disabled women report some of the steepest declines in confidence during the job search process, reflecting how recruitment systems often fail to accommodate different needs and circumstances.

Women from ethnic minority backgrounds apply for more roles on average but see lower job success outcomes, despite comparable levels of effort.

Parents and women aged 50+ continue to encounter structural barriers within recruitment processes, particularly where flexibility, clarity and accessible pathways are lacking.

3. Confidence is being eroded by the job search process.

63% of women say they feel less confident as a result of trying to find work, reporting that the application process has left them "a bit less confident than usual" or "much less confident than usual."

Women describe a job search shaped by silence, unclear expectations and repeated rejection, which steadily undermines confidence over time.

These findings represent only the women we are able to see.

For every woman who comes through our doors, there are thousands more navigating the job market alone, without access to tailored support, without a single human conversation, and without the confidence boost that changes outcomes. The realities documented in this Index are not the full scale of the problem; they are a window into a wider landscape of untapped potential and unseen struggle.

These trends converge into three core themes explored throughout this year's Index:

1. The mechanics of exclusion
2. How identity predicts outcome
3. The human cost of prolonged job searching

Amid these challenges, one finding remains consistent: when women receive the right support, they succeed. In 2025, 68% of women who accessed Smart Works secured a job - a result that runs counter to national labour market trends, where vacancy levels have fallen, employment growth has slowed, and long-term unemployment is rising. By contrast, Smart Works clients continue to secure work at high rates, demonstrating how effective targeted, human-centred support can be, even as opportunities tighten.

This Index highlights hiring approaches that are shutting women out, and with that, creating long-term consequences for their financial security, wellbeing and opportunity. Smart Works' success rate is evidence that women are ready to work.

Recruitment practices challenge women long before they enter work

The emotional and financial toll of unemployment is not an inevitable part of job searching. It is a consequence of a system which:

- Demands too much
- Gives too little
- Hides human contact
- Rejects without explanation
- Punishes gaps and caring responsibilities
- Makes women feel unseen
- Amplifies inequality

The question is whether hiring systems are setting women up to succeed. Based on this year's findings, the answer is not yet.



Index in Numbers



42

average number of jobs
women applied for before
visiting Smart Works

41%

of Smart Works
clients have been
out of work for
over 12 months

63%

of women feel
less confident as
a result of the job
search process

68%

of Smart Works
clients secure
employment

These graphs, and all other graphs in this report,
are illustrative. Spacing is not to scale.

Older women (50+) report **higher levels of confidence loss** during job searching

Women with disabilities have their confidence **most negatively affected** by the job application process

Women from ethnic minority backgrounds apply for more jobs on average but experience **lower job success outcomes**

Parents experience **longer job searches** and face greater barriers where flexibility is limited



Methodology

Data coverage

This Index draws on quantitative and qualitative data collected from women who used Smart Works services during 2025. The dataset includes nearly 4700 clients with substantially complete data. The final dataset was restricted to cases with at most one non-response to our service feedback survey providing one of the largest and most detailed samples of unemployed women in the UK of the year.

Sample and inclusion

The analysis is based primarily on women attending Interview Preparation (first dressing and coaching) appointments, which generate the most complete records and allow for year-on-year comparison. Where data coverage differs from previous Index editions, this is noted.

All women included in the dataset were unemployed and preparing for a job interview at the time of their appointment.

Definition of “job success”

“Job success” refers to securing employment after accessing Smart Works services, as reported at the time of publication. The denominator for each calculation is stated clearly throughout to ensure transparency and consistency.

Quantitative data collection

Clients completed a standardised questionnaire, digitally or on paper, during their appointment. The 2025 questionnaire was aligned with previous Index iterations to support trend analysis. Responses were anonymised, duplicate or incomplete records removed.

Qualitative data collection

Independent facilitators from nfpResearch conducted four focus groups in September and October 2025 with 21 Smart Works clients. Participants represented a wide range of backgrounds, ages, ethnicities and regions. A structured discussion guide ensured consistency, and quotations reflect themes raised by multiple participants.

Three case studies; Stephanie, Shantelle and Andrea - were selected to illustrate patterns that appear across the wider dataset.

Analysis approach

A mixed-methods approach was used:

Descriptive statistical analysis to identify patterns, trends and demographic differences. Thematic qualitative analysis to capture the lived experience behind those trends. Year-on-year comparisons are made only where the underlying samples are comparable. Trends that appear across several measures or persist over multiple years are highlighted as significant.

Ethics and confidentiality

All client data is anonymised with consent for their responses to be used for research. Case studies appear with explicit consent and additional protections where appropriate. Smart Works adheres to data protection and ethical research standards.

Why this matters

This methodology captures not only whether women secure work, but the effort required to pursue it. It offers a human-centred view of women’s job seeking at scale, insight which is not available through traditional labour market statistics.





Our Clients

Women come to Smart Works through a trusted network of referral partners, including Job Centres, training providers, women's charities, refugee organisations, mental health services, prisons, and community groups. Every woman represented in this Index was unemployed and preparing for a job interview at the time of her appointment.

Demand for our support continues to rise. In the last calendar year Smart Works supported over 10,600 women, a 46% increase on the number we supported in 2023. This growth reflects both the pressures within the job market and the trust placed in our service nationwide.

Our clients represent a wide range of experiences and identities: young people entering work for the first time, women balancing caring responsibilities and employment, women returning after time out of the labour market, disabled women and older women. All are united in their determination to work and have encountered systemic challenges which have prevented them from doing so.

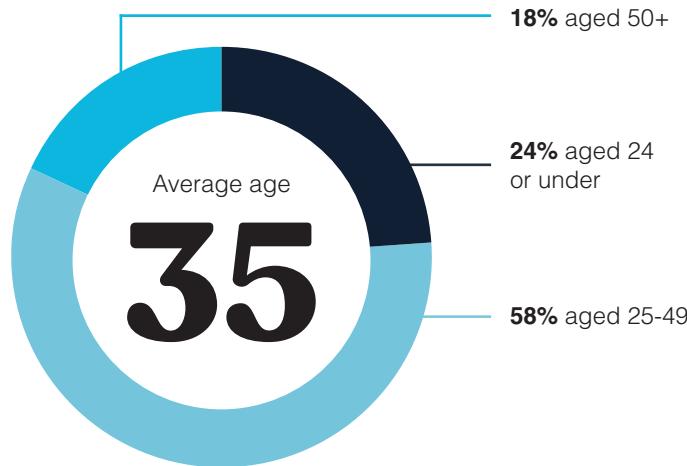
A couple of trends stand out:

1. Over half of the women we support come from ethnic minority backgrounds
2. Nearly 1 in 5 women we support have a disability, and this group experiences the sharpest confidence loss as a result of their job search experience

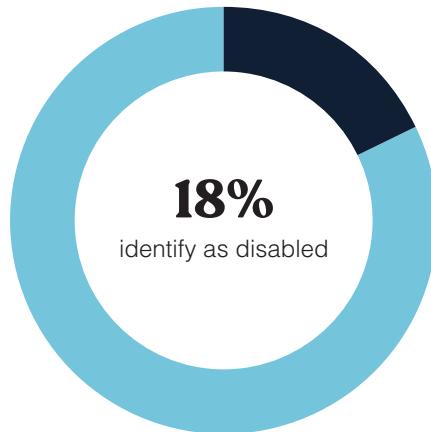
Together, these patterns show that the women who are already marginalised by structural inequality are those who most benefit from Smart Works support.



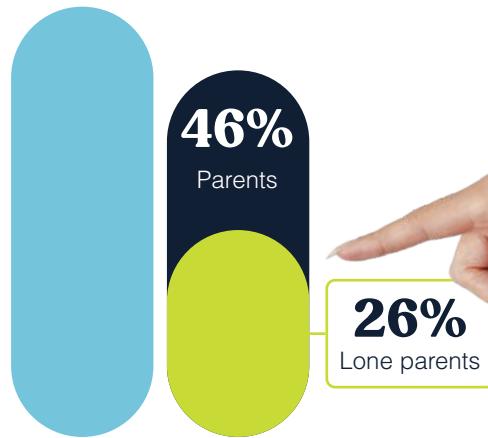
Age



Disability



Parenthood

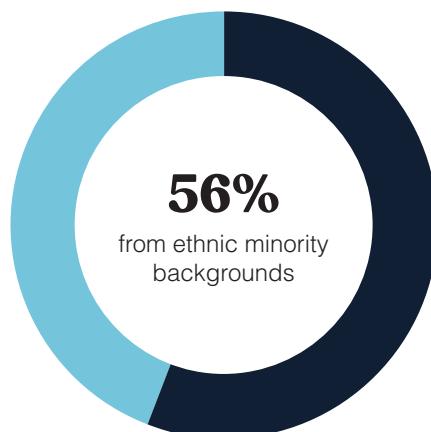


What jobs our clients apply for



Job levels remain concentrated in Routine and Manual roles (47%), with significant representation in Professional and Intermediate roles. This is where the demand is and where the system must be most fair.

Ethnicity



Smart Works centre attended



Portrait of the Unemployment Landscape

A labour market under strain

Economic instability, rising living costs, demographic pressures and the rapid adoption of AI and new technologies in the hiring process create a job market where effort alone is no longer enough.

Fewer jobs, more competition

Across the UK, the labour market has cooled. The latest official statistics indicate that the female unemployment rate in the UK was 4.6% in August to October 2025, rising by 0.6% compared to the same three-month period in 2024 (ONS Labour Force Survey, Dec 2025). There were estimated to be 800,000 unemployed women in the UK in August to October 2025. Over the same period, there were 725,000 vacancies in the UK (ONS Vacancies and Jobs, Dec 2025) representing an annual drop of 12%. This means that for each vacancy there are now 2.5 unemployed people, the highest level (excluding the pandemic) since May to July 2015.

For jobseekers, this translates into more applications, fewer opportunities, slower outcomes and more rejection - a reality consistent with the experience of Smart Works clients.

Beyond the headline figures

The statistics of female unemployment only tell part of the story. In the 12 months to June 2025, there were 986,000 economically inactive women in the UK who said they wanted a job (ONS Annual Population Survey, Oct 2025). This means they faced barriers in their life which prevented them from seeking and taking on work. When asked about the reasons for being economically inactive, the most common response given by 32% of women stated this was because they are looking after the family and home. This compares with just 9% of men, this response being only the fourth most common. This reveals a stark gender inequality in the barriers faced by men and women in the job market, with patriarchal norms dictating women take on the unpaid and undervalued work of looking after the home.

In addition, women's full economic potential is further constrained by their over-representation in part-time employment. Women are more than twice as likely as men to work part time, with 37% of women working in part-time roles compared with 14% of men in the 12 months to June 2025 (ONS Annual Population Survey, Oct 2025). This concentration in part-time work, combined with disproportionate responsibility for unpaid labour, places many women at a sustained economic disadvantage.

This portrait of women's unemployment in the UK today, aligns with Smart Works data which indicates that parents face the longest periods of unemployment and as a consequence, the sharpest decline in confidence in their job search.

Technology is reshaping hiring – but not always fairly

AI-driven screening tools now filter a significant share of UK job applications (CIPD/ONS AI in Hiring Overview, 2024-25). According to CIPD research, the number of organisations who use AI in recruitment has more than doubled since 2022 with 1 in 3 application processes now using the technology. Evidence shows these systems can replicate gender, age and ethnicity biases (UK Government CDEI Review, 2023). Online-only recruitment disadvantages women with limited digital access, caring commitments or health conditions. For many, this means never reaching a human reader at all, a frustration echoed repeatedly in our focus groups.

Furthermore, technology makes it easier for companies to employ unscrupulous recruitment practices which waste candidates' time. 'Ghost' jobs are becoming increasingly common with a recent study indicating this could be as high as 34% of vacancies across popular UK job boards. These are positions advertised as a means for the hiring teams to build a talent pipeline for future jobs or acquire data to sell on, rather than recruit to a genuine post. This practice increases the likelihood that the official picture of employment opportunity is inaccurately represented, while jobseekers expend time and emotional capital on processes without opportunity, all the while contributing to an erosion of their confidence.

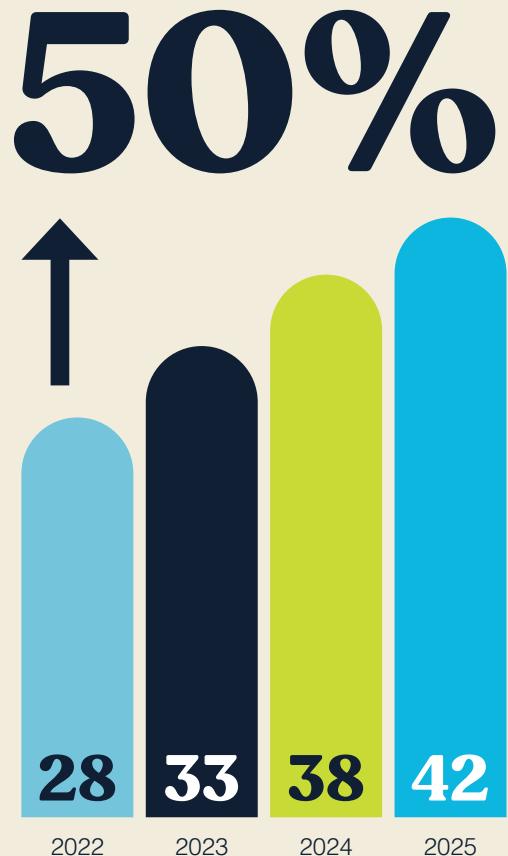
What this means for the Index

Viewed alongside national trends, Smart Works findings are not anomalies; they are early warnings of an employment search market which is becoming more competitive, more automated and less inclusive. Our four-year dataset shows consistent movement in the same direction: more applications, fewer interviews, and rising confidence loss.

This landscape sets the context for the findings that follow - and the urgent need for change.

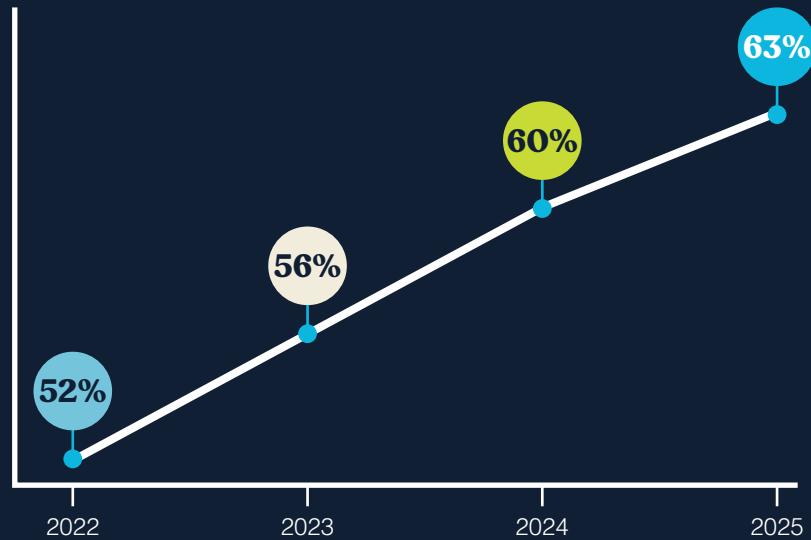
Average applications

Since 2022, the average number of applications before a client visits Smart Works has risen by



Confidence loss

% of women whose confidence dropped while applying



Average hours applying per week



Mechanics of Exclusion

The process of job seeking is demanding more than ever. Across thousands of women in our national dataset, one pattern is clear: women are investing significant time and effort into applications, yet the recruitment system is not designed with their circumstances in mind. For women who are already unemployed, the mechanics of modern hiring create barriers which make it harder for their potential to be visible.

1. Job hunting has become full-time, unpaid labour

Women apply for an average of 42 roles before visiting Smart Works, and one in three spend over 25 hours a week on applications. Job searching requires tailoring CVs, drafting cover letters, completing online tests and navigating multiple platforms. Many women also described applying for roles that were later cancelled, withdrawn or revealed to be “evergreen” advertisements, labour that could never result in an interview.

“I was treating it like a full-time job. Every day was applications, rewriting CVs, writing cover letters, filling out forms.”

This burden is not felt equally. Studies evidence how the weight of unpaid labour falls disproportionately (ONS 2016 Women shoulder the responsibility of unpaid work), with women doing up to 60% more than men. Therefore within the current employment search system, this already reduces the time women can allocate to job searching, affecting their ability to achieve employment outcomes as quickly.

2. Automated systems reject women before a human ever sees them

Many women report receiving immediate or near-instant rejections, strongly suggesting automated screening. Algorithmic filters tend to prioritise continuous employment, sector-specific experience and keyword-optimised CVs. For women with career gaps, caring responsibilities, health conditions or varied work histories, such systems can shut them out at the earliest stage.

“

“You just get these instant rejections and you think, there’s no way a human has even seen that.”

3. Job descriptions are increasingly inflated and unrealistic

“They call it entry level, but then they want years of experience. It doesn’t make sense.”

Women told us that entry-level roles frequently demand several years of experience or skill sets far beyond what the job genuinely requires. This disproportionately affects women. Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) research shows that when job descriptions list long or inflated requirements, women are significantly less likely to apply, as they self-select out earlier than men. Inflated criteria therefore narrows the field of applicants and introduces unintentional bias into the process before applications have even begun.

4. Inconsistent processes undermine trust

Once applications are submitted, the inconsistencies continue. Women describe shifting deadlines, portals failing to register submissions, cancelled roles, multi-stage interviews with no outcome and tasks requested at the final stage with no explanation afterwards. With an estimated three interviews resulting from 42 applications, the gap between effort and opportunity is widening.

5. Silence and lack of feedback compound exclusion

The absence of feedback is one of the most damaging features of the current system. Without any indication of where they fell short, women are expected to improve without guidance. Over time, repeated silence becomes its own barrier, sending the message that progress is arbitrary and that their effort is expendable.

Taken together, these mechanics create a system that consumes women’s time while offering little clarity, fairness or progression, a landscape where women do everything asked of them, yet opportunity remains out of reach.

“

“You put all that effort in and then the job just disappears.”

“

“Most of the time, you don’t hear anything back at all. It’s just silence.”



Around
1 in 3
women apply for 50+ roles



Solutions

The hiring process should help employers find talent, not unintentionally filter it out.

Our data and client insights show that the following simple adjustments can make recruitment more effective, efficient and inclusive - particularly for women who are out of work and doing everything they can to re-enter the labour market.

1. Design a clear, respectful application process

Create an application journey that values candidates' time and effort. Make it simple, relevant and transparent.

- Remove application steps which duplicate actions and information
- Ensure assessments are relevant and proportionate to the role
- Set out the stages for the application process with guidance on timelines from the outset
- Communicate changes to the application process and status promptly

A clear process reduces unnecessary effort and helps candidates make informed decisions about their suitability for an application.

2. Build in meaningful human connection

Timely, human interaction at key points in the hiring process, including at its conclusion, helps candidates perform at their best and reduces unnecessary loss of confidence. This can look like:

- a short introductory call or personalised message to clarify expectations
- accessible points of contact during the process
- thoughtful follow-up at the outcome stage, providing clear closure and acknowledging the candidate's time and interest

Even brief human moments help reduce drop-off, build trust and support confidence throughout the journey.

3. Review how automation is used

In a fast paced recruiting environment, automation is here to stay. However, it is important that automation is used to support, not replace, good hiring judgement. Suggestions include:

- periodic checks that digital screening tools do not disadvantage candidates with non-linear careers or gaps related to care or health
- incorporating a space within the automation process which allows for contextual review of candidates where their suitability may not be immediately visible

These actions are practical, scalable and achievable for organisations of all sizes, strengthening hiring outcomes for employers and candidates alike.

Stephanie

Age 24



“No matter how hard I tried, I felt invisible – just a young, neurodivergent woman from a working-class background, competing in a male-dominated industry that barely saw me.”

I'm originally from the Northwest of England. I've always had a creative background, starting with Fine Art at Kendal College, and I knew from around the age of 12 that I wanted to be an architect. To pursue that dream, I moved to London for my undergraduate degree, hoping there would be more opportunities than back home.

The timing wasn't ideal. COVID hit at the end of my first year and continued into my second, completely changing my education. Everything went remote, and as someone neurodivergent, I found online learning isolating. Studio work - the part of my course that thrives on collaboration and discussion, was almost impossible to replicate online. My motivation and mental health suffered. By my third year, I decided to take a break to focus on my wellbeing before returning to fully engage with my studies. When I came back, I felt more grounded, and I started building industry connections, including mock interviews and a week's experience at a London practice.

Even as I finished my degree, I knew how tough the job market was. Entry-level architectural roles often require more experience than a new graduate can realistically have. Many practices were only hiring students ready for the next stage of qualification, leaving little room for someone like me starting out. Post-COVID recruitment also felt extremely competitive, with most applications processed digitally or filtered by software, leaving little opportunity for personal engagement.

I treated job hunting like a full-time job, spending 40+ hours a week sending applications, tailoring CVs and cover letters, and checking for opportunities.

“

Smart Works helped me understand that rejection was not about my ability or worth.



While still completing my degree, I applied widely - architecture practices, retail, hospitality – anything to stabilise my finances and pay rent. I treated job hunting like a full-time job, spending 40+ hours a week on applications, tailoring CVs and cover letters. I must have applied to over 60 architecture practices and many more outside the field, yet most responses were automated emails. Only six or seven interviews came from all that effort.

Some opportunities were misleading. For many architecture roles, listings didn't even provide the company name or clear location. The gap between what I'd achieved - my degree, portfolio, skills and the lack of recognition was stark. I felt invisible. Imposter syndrome and self-doubt became constant companions, especially after leaving a food industry job I'd taken for financial stability but which affected my mental health.

Architecture also carries subtle expectations about appearance, presentation, and background. There's bias favouring confident, well-connected, often male candidates from privileged backgrounds. Those from different cultural or financial environments can feel judged quietly but powerfully. Breaks in education or career for health or financial reasons compound that bias, something I experienced firsthand.

Financial pressures were immense: tuition fees of over £9,000 a year, loans around £11,000, and the prospect of nearly £100,000 debt. That stress, combined with a competitive job market and repeated rejections, affected my mental health. Yet my passion for architecture kept me going.

Support from Universal Credit and Smart Works was a turning point. UC gave financial stability and referred me to talking therapies, and Smart Works helped me translate my experience into professional confidence. From the first moment, they treated me as a professional. They helped me prepare my CV, portfolio and interview approach, and the dressing session was transformative. I left feeling like an industry professional again.

Digital recruitment, unrealistic experience requirements and subtle biases make it incredibly hard for early-career candidates to be seen. Employers must recognise that talent is broader than CV keywords.

Smart Works helped me understand that rejection was not about my ability or worth. The job market was broken – over-automated, opaque and biased and that perspective lifted a huge weight. With renewed confidence, I began talking to people face to face, and that human connection ultimately led to an architecture opportunity. I have now started my role, back on track in the field I always wanted to join.

Identity Predicts Outcome

The barriers candidates face when job seeking are not universal. They fall more heavily on some groups than others, revealing clear patterns rather than random chance. In fact, they fall hardest on women who are already at a disadvantage.

72%

72% of disabled women say job applications damaged their confidence — the highest of any group.

18% vs 14%

Parents are more likely to feel overqualified for the roles they apply for 18% vs 14% for non parents

70% vs 62%

Women aged 50+ feel most demoralised: 70% report confidence loss, compared with 62% of under-50s.



Women from ethnic minorities apply for more jobs (43 vs 41 for white women) but have lower job success (66% vs 70%).

These inequalities are not new but current hiring practices can amplify them. Rising competition, AI-driven screening, limited flexibility and inconsistent recruitment processes disproportionately affect:

- disabled women
- parents and carers
- women from ethnic minority backgrounds
- older women
- women from lower-income or working-class backgrounds

Disability: a structurally hostile job market

Disabled women are often judged by how well they can manage the process, rather than their ability to do the job.

The data shows:

- **72% of disabled clients felt less confident after job applications (vs 61% non-disabled).**
- **41% felt much less confident** - the highest of all groups.
- **33% feel underqualified (vs 26% non-disabled)**, often due to inflexible or unrealistic job specifications.
- **Job success is six percentage points lower for disabled women.**

Recruitment systems rarely accommodate fluctuating health conditions, different communication or processing needs, or the time required for reasonable adjustments.

“The job itself wouldn’t be the problem. It’s everything around applying that makes it hard.”

Parents: a labour market where care is penalised

- **Parents apply for 36 jobs on average (vs 47 for non-parents).**
- **50% of parents have been unemployed for over a year (vs 33% non-parents).**
- **Job success is three percentage points lower for parents.**
- **Parents and lone parents face the highest level of long-term unemployment: 27% of parents are unemployed for over 3 years, vs 12% of non-parents**

The challenges created by the current employment market and recruitment practices make it more likely for parents to be unemployed for the longest period. 27% are unemployed for more than three years compared with an average of 12% for non-parents, and 50% are unemployed for more than a year compared with an average of 33% for non-parents.

The issue is not lack of effort but a more constrained scope of jobs available to suit their requirements. Scarcity in the roles with the necessary flexibility to be able to balance work with their caring responsibilities can play a part. Many roles still offer rigid hours, unpredictable shift patterns or unclear expectations. For parents, especially lone parents, this removes them from consideration before they even apply. For these women flexibility is an entry requirement, not a ‘nice to have’.

“Childcare costs mean some jobs just aren’t possible.”

Solutions

This results in parents applying for fewer roles and being more likely to target jobs below their qualification level with 18% of parents reporting they feel over qualified for their next roles compared with 14% of non-parents. Despite this, parents still have a lower job success rate than non-parents (66% vs 69%). This points to career sacrifice driven by the need for flexibility, alongside continued disadvantage.

Ethnicity: high effort, lower reward

Women from ethnic minority backgrounds represented 56% of the women supported by Smart Works in 2025 making them the largest group by ethnicity. Our data highlights how bias can enter at every stage of recruitment from name, accent and networks to perceptions of "fit." These barriers compound, meaning women from ethnic minority backgrounds often work harder for fewer returns.

“You start wondering if things like your background are affecting how you’re seen.”

- **Clients from minority ethnic backgrounds apply for 43 jobs on average (vs 41 for white clients).**
- **Success rates are lower: 66% vs 70%.**
- **Confidence loss is lower for women from minority ethnic backgrounds (58% vs 70%) - a reflection of resilience, not an easier experience.**

Age: older women pushed to the margins

Age bias is deeply embedded and rarely acknowledged.

- **Older women (50+) apply for fewer jobs (39) but experience the deepest confidence crash with 70% feeling less confident after applying for jobs.**
- **They feel more qualified: comparing those 50 and over to those under 50: 20% feel overqualified, vs 14%.**

For many, mid-life brings career pivots driven by caring responsibilities, health changes or financial pressures. These women bring transferable skills, leadership, people skills, resilience but recruitment systems often prioritise linear CVs or recent sector experience. This disproportionately excludes older candidates seeking to re-enter or redirect.

“When you get to interview, you can feel a shift sometimes.”

Despite legislation, the job market does not treat all women equally. In 2025, identity, not effort, predicts outcome.

Different women experience the job market differently. Not because of ambition or effort, but because some recruitment practices work better for some groups than others.

These practical steps help ensure that talent is recognised fairly and consistently.

1. Design flexibility into roles and the interview process from the outset

Parents, carers and disabled women apply for fewer roles and face longer unemployment in part because they feel there are fewer positions available that would consider accommodating their needs for flexibility or adjustments. Advertising flexible working options where possible widens the talent pool and improves retention of candidates during the application process.

Transparency around workplace or interview adjustments supports disabled candidates and strengthens trust. It also reduces drop-off from candidates who assume support will not be available.

2. Adopt a skills-first mindset

Women with career breaks, health conditions or non-linear paths are often screened out before their capability is understood. To avoid their suitability being overlooked, hiring managers can introduce a number of measures.

- Use criteria grids to identify essential and desirable skills and if possible indicate those which can be gained within a transferable context
- Design a recruitment process which gives candidates an opportunity to demonstrate their transferable skills and does not automatically exclude candidates with breaks in between jobs
- Train hiring managers in inclusive shortlisting

3. Sense-check shortlisting patterns

Low-lift reviews (e.g., anonymised or batch shortlisting) help identify where good candidates may be unintentionally overlooked.

These actions enhance fairness without adding complexity, helping employers access a broader range of skilled

Shantelle

Age 43



“I’ve applied for over 150 jobs in two years. Yet every rejection reminds me the odds are stacked against people like me.”

I live in North Yorkshire. For the past two years, I've been searching for work. During that time, I've had a few short-term roles, but nothing lasting. It's been frustrating and exhausting. I feel like I've failed in some ways, owning a home, managing bills, accommodating my health needs and paying for alternative therapies that are not provided by the NHS - but my contributions have stalled.

I'm Black, disabled, and large, and navigating the job market often feels impossible.

When I was employed, I approached applications methodically. I tracked every role I applied for, stopping only after 150 applications in six months. Each one took time - half a day, sometimes a full day, because I tailored my CV and cover letter. I am very meticulous. If I'm applying for a job, I'll go through the job description line by line, make sure my CV matches, tweak my cover letter, and then submit.

Despite all this effort, responses were inconsistent. Agencies often ghosted me, especially when my applications didn't generate profit. Feedback was usually generic: "Thank you, but we're not moving forward." Even after interviews, positive feedback didn't translate into offers. You feel good about yourself for a moment, but then there's nothing actionable. You're left wondering what went wrong.

The challenges are compounded by structural barriers. Rapid technological change means many candidates must constantly upskill, yet university and training provision often lag industry standards.

Post-COVID, hybrid working has become the norm, but many roles require in-office attendance three days a week, which is not always feasible. For me, with diabetes, thyroid problems, and musculoskeletal issues, long commutes and extended office hours are physically painful. Remote work can be effective, but employers must genuinely trust and accommodate employees' needs. I've always delivered, no matter where I am, but many companies don't account for that.

“
Employers must see people like me not as liabilities, but as capable, talented individuals whose experiences enrich the workplace.

Navigating these challenges has required resilience. I've learned to be selective about which roles I apply for, balancing realistic requirements against my capabilities. Being meticulous is my way of staying in control, but every rejection still hits hard.

Smart Works helped me understand how to present myself, navigate bias, and gave me the confidence to keep going. Employers must see people like me not as liabilities, but as capable, talented individuals whose experiences enrich the workplace.



The Human Cost

Unemployment is no longer just an economic issue; it has become an emotional and financial crisis for many women. The same recruitment practices that require women to do more work for fewer returns also carry real and measurable consequences for confidence, stability and wellbeing.

“You keep going because you have to but every time you’re knocked back, you lose a bit more of yourself.”

Women described not only a challenging job market, but the emotional and financial strain created by it. Confidence, stability and hope are depleted at the very moment women need them most. This is not an individual failing but the human impact of structural disadvantage.

The emotional toll

Across our data and all four focus groups, women described the same pattern: the longer the job search continues, the more confidence declines. In the 2025 dataset, 63% of women report feeling less confident due to the job search process rising to 70% among women aged 50+ and 72% among disabled women.

“After months of this, I didn’t recognise myself anymore.”

The damage is cumulative. Each application represents hope; each silence or rejection erodes self-belief. Several women spoke about feeling overwhelmed by the emotional strain, with one describing how the pressure pushed her to a point of crisis.

This is not a resilience issue. It is evidence of recruitment practices that unintentionally create emotional strain for those seeking work.

The financial toll

Women told us that unemployment is also financially punishing, especially during a cost-of-living crisis. Across the focus groups, participants described:

- cutting back on essentials
- losing savings
- mounting debt
- struggling to pay bills
- going without food or heating
- being unable to afford childcare, transport or broadband

“Every rejection wasn’t just emotional, it was financial. I couldn’t afford to keep applying.”

Financial strain intensifies emotional pressure, and emotional strain, in turn, makes the job search harder. The two interact, creating a mindset that becomes increasingly difficult to overcome.

The cost of searching for work

Women described job hunting as unpaid labour which requires additional financial investment. Participating in recruitment processes often means unemployed women are expected to pay for travel to interviews, childcare and broadband access to complete online tests. This is on top of unpaid time spent preparing presentations, tasks or attending work trials.

These costs accumulate over months, creating a material barrier to continuing the search.

Underemployment

78% of Smart Works clients applied for either routine manual or intermediate roles. Women told us this was not a lack of ambition but a form of self-protection and survival.

“You end up taking what you can, not what you deserve.”

Over time, women described adjusting the roles they applied for in response to repeated barriers and setbacks. This is not diminished ambition, but a pragmatic response to a process that does not always recognise or reward their potential.

The psychological loop

Across focus groups, women described the same effort - rejection - self-blame cycle:

- Try harder
- Face more rejection
- Internalise that rejection
- Confidence falls
- Performance declines
- The process becomes harder

“You start thinking you’re the problem. Not the system.”

Structural barriers become internalised as personal failure, a hallmark of an inequitable system.

Solutions

Long-term unemployment changes everything

41%

of Smart Works clients have been out of work for over a year

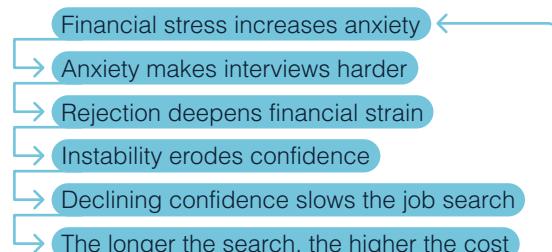
Women in this position described losing routine, social connection, confidence, hope and identity.

“The longer I was out of work, the more invisible I became.”

Several women described life “shrinking” - opportunities thinning, confidence weakening and routines collapsing. For some, the emotional toll became overwhelming.

Emotional and financial pressure feed each other

Women described a reinforcing loop:



“It breaks you down slowly.”

The employment search approach appears to break women long before they enter work. The emotional and financial cost of unemployment is not inevitable. It is the consequence of a system that:

- Demands too much
- Gives too little
- Hides human contact
- Rejects without explanation
- Punishes gaps and caring responsibilities
- Makes women feel unseen
- Amplifies existing inequalities

For many women, unemployment is not only a period without income, it is a period of growing financial pressure, declining confidence and sustained emotional strain.

Employers can help reduce this burden while improving the candidate experience.

1. Keep assessments focused and manageable

Tasks, presentations and tests can demand hours of unpaid work. Short, job-relevant exercises help ensure that candidates' effort aligns with what employers genuinely need. They also reduce the risk of candidates ruling themselves out because a lack of confidence leads them to believe they don't have the skills for an assessment that doesn't truly reflect the role's real requirements.

2. Reduce unnecessary costs for candidates

Avoiding last-minute travel and perhaps childcare arrangements, high printing requirements or specialist software helps ensure candidates aren't excluded due to financial constraints.

If possible, conduct first stage interviews virtually and offer to cover travel costs to in-person interviews for candidates who have been successful in being shortlisted.

3. Recognise the emotional impact of prolonged job searching

Empathy does not require extra resource, simply acknowledging candidates' effort and keeping communication human-centred strengthens employer reputation and increases engagement.

Even brief feedback helps candidates recover confidence and maintain momentum. For candidates who have been unemployed for long periods, this can make a significant difference.

These steps support wellbeing, improve performance in interviews, and help employers present a positive, inclusive brand - all while reducing the hidden cost of job seeking.

Andrea

Age 60



“I didn’t realise the biggest reinvention would come at 60.”



What I didn't expect was how brutal and isolating the process would become. I was applying every single day, sometimes twenty applications in one go. I'd spend hours rewriting cover letters, tweaking key words, trying to stand out in a sea of rejections.

Being at home a lot wasn't good for my mental health, and job hunting on top of that was a real challenge. It wasn't weeks of unemployment - it was months. In the end, it was close to 20 months of applying, searching, scrolling, getting my hopes up and being knocked back again. Some days I felt positive; other days it took everything just to fill out one application.

The way job hunting works now has completely changed. It used to be simple: a CV, a phone call, or the local paper on a Thursday. Now it's endless websites, repeated listings, algorithms, and being dragged off in the wrong direction if you click on the wrong thing.

“
I was competing not just with people, but with algorithms.

I turned 60 last week. I've had a long and varied career. For most of my life, I worked in the leisure industry - running nightclubs, bars, pubs and live venues. Back then, work came through people knowing you: someone would ring me, or I'd call around and ask if anything was coming up. I worked hard, especially as a woman in that industry, and for a long time it suited me. My whole working life has been about reinvention. In my late forties, I made a big pivot and joined the police. Joining the Met gave me brilliant experience, especially in licensing and modern slavery. But policing wasn't quite what I hoped it would be.

Eventually, I came back to what I knew best: people. I started looking for part-time or flexible roles, anything where I could bring my experience into a new chapter. When I left my previous role, I expected it might take a little time to find something new.

I remember applying for a job I was more than qualified for, and within twenty minutes the rejection came through. There was no way a person had even read my application. That's when I realised I was competing not just with people, but with algorithms. I still used my real experience, but I had to learn to use AI to put my words together more clearly.

Even with decades of experience, I couldn't get a job in a supermarket. It didn't make sense. You'd think employers would value older workers more - reliability, stability, commitment - but it didn't feel like that at all.

Blind applications helped. When they strip out your age, gender, background, everything, you feel like you're being judged on your skills alone. But the minute you get to interview, it's no longer blind. People still make assumptions.

Every rejection chipped away at me. I started to question everything - my skills, my worth, whether I'd ever get another chance.

By the time I came to Smart Works, I was running on empty. The first thing they did was make me feel seen. Not as someone unemployed, but as someone with something to offer. The outfit was lovely, but it was the conversation that changed me. Through coaching, I regained my self-belief and focus.

Within weeks, I secured a new role. I'm thriving again, but I'm under no illusion about the system I survived. Without Smart Works, I might have given up.

“

By the time I came to Smart Works, I was running on empty. The first thing they did was make me feel seen.



The Smart Works Effect

When women get the right support, they succeed.

Despite the toughest labour market since this Index began, Smart Works clients continue to secure jobs at consistently high levels. At a time when the hiring practices are demanding more and offering less, our model proves something essential:

Support works.

Human connection works.

Being seen works.

In 2025, our job success rate rose from 63% to 68% even as women applied for more jobs, faced more rejection, and spent more hours searching than ever before. This is not happening despite the challenges of the job market.

It is happening because the Smart Works model gives women what prevailing recruitment practices do not.



52,480

women supported since launch

97%

of clients tell us that their appointment has increased their chances of getting a job

68%

job success rate
(up from 63% last year)

Diverse reach:

- **56% from ethnic minority backgrounds**
- **18% disabled**
- **46% parents**
- **Clients aged 16 to 60+, across the UK**

These results demonstrate a simple truth: women are not failing, more that the existing system is not designed to give women the best chance of succeeding.

But with the right support, women can overcome the barriers the system puts in their way.

Why the Smart Works model works

Where the system is automated, Smart Works is human.

Where the process is rigid, Smart Works is tailored.

Where confidence collapses, Smart Works rebuilds it.

Our quantitative and qualitative data show that clients struggle most when recruitment is impersonal, automated and inconsistent. These characteristics of a hiring process lead to a decline in confidence. The Smart Works model directly addresses the consequences of such hiring practices.

1. Human contact

Real conversation, empathy and guidance, everything the online process removes.

2. Tailored support

Coaching that reflects each woman's strengths, circumstances and goals.

3. Confidence building

Evidence from 94% of clients shows the transformative impact of being seen and believed in.

4. Skills translation

Helping women articulate transferable skills in a way which means they are not overlooked by automated systems.

5. Interview preparation

Mock interviews, personalised feedback and practical guidance that the system does not provide.

6. Visible empowerment

Professional clothing that reflects competence, credibility and self-belief.

7. Emotional resilience

Support that helps women absorb rejection, regain motivation and keep going.

8. Professional presentation

Equipping women with the tools, verbal, non-verbal and visual to present their best selves at interview.

9. Client value

“

Smart Works helped me understand how to present myself, navigate bias, and gave me the confidence to keep going.

“

Smart Works helped me see that rejection wasn't about my ability. The job market was over-automated and opaque.

These stories reflect a national pattern: when women receive personalised support, outcomes change. Human, emotional and practical tools address the challenges presented by today's job search environment - be that workload, flaws in recruitment practices, logistical barriers, and cost.

Smart Works shows what is possible when these barriers are removed. This is the missing piece in employment support for women.



Why Smart Works Needs Support Now

In a fair labour market, Smart Works would not need to exist.

But in 2025, as competition intensifies and women's confidence collapses, our service is not just relevant, it is essential. Women are doing everything the system asks of them. They are showing up, trying again after every rejection, and still being shut out. Smart Works is the difference between a woman giving up and a woman getting the job. Despite the worsening job market, 68% of Smart Works clients secure employment. This is not luck. It is the impact of targeted preparation, expert coaching and a moment of human connection at exactly the right time.

Demand for our support has never been higher and over time we have evolved our services to improve the support we offer women at every stage of their journey into work. In addition to interview preparation appointments, in 2025 Smart Works offered over 4500 career coaching appointments to women who had not yet secured any job interviews and 2300 appointments to women who had got the job. To meet the growing demand Smart Works must:

- ✓ reach more women, in more communities
- ✓ train and support more volunteers
- ✓ invest in our wardrobe and coaching teams
- ✓ expand our centres, so distance is never a barrier
- ✓ strengthen our voice, so the system changes too

We can only do this with partners who believe in women's potential as strongly as we do.

Partner with us. Donate. Stand with women.

[**Click here to support our mission.**](#)



Smart Works
exists because
fairness does not.

With your partnership,
we can help build
a future where it does.

About Smart Works

Smart Works is a UK-wide charity that exists to help women realise their potential, secure employment and transform their lives.

Founded in 2013, we were created to address a simple but persistent truth: too many women face the job market with talent and determination, but without the tools, networks or confidence that open doors.

We support all women, including transgender women and non-binary people whose gender expression aligns with our service. Whether she is preparing for her first interview, returning to work after time out, or navigating a change later in life, Smart Works is here to ensure that every woman has access to trusted, personalised support.

Over the past decade, Smart Works has grown into a national service rooted in local communities. With 11 centres across the UK and over 45,000 women supported since launch, we are a charity powered by volunteers, partnerships, and the belief that confidence changes everything. Our footprint has expanded significantly in recent years, with new centres opening in London and Scotland, and in 2025, Smart Works launched a centre in Bristol.

Smart Works is built on a simple, enduring mission: to ensure that every woman has the confidence, clothing, and coaching she needs to succeed at interview and begin a new chapter.

Our newly launched 2025-2030 strategy sets out five priorities that will shape our next chapter: reaching more women, strengthening our foundations, evolving our offer, raising our voice, and becoming the leading national service for unemployed women. As this Index shows, the need is growing but so too is our capacity to meet it.

Smart Works is local in feel, national in reach, and powered by the voices and stories of the women we support. Everything we do is shaped by one belief: when women are seen, supported and equipped, they can change their lives.





Birmingham

Bristol

Greater Manchester | Stockport

Greater Manchester | Manchester City Centre

Leeds

London | Croydon

London | Ladbroke Grove

London | Islington

North East | Newcastle

Reading

Scotland | Edinburgh

[Click here to find the contact details for each of our centres](#)

The Smart Works Manifesto

We are Smart Works, a community committed to supporting and empowering women in their professional journeys.

We treat every client as an individual, offering a safe, respectful space where she is listened to without judgement.

We are powered by volunteers, united by the belief that every woman has potential, talent and value.

We work together to provide the practical tools, coaching, and support women need to succeed at interview and move forward with confidence.

We believe clothing can be a catalyst for confidence and self-expression.

When a woman feels equipped and supported, she can step into opportunity on her own terms. We are proud of the uplift and encouragement our service provides.

We are guided by data and insight to deliver meaningful, measurable outcomes, continually evolving to meet the changing realities of women's employment.

We know our model is deceptively simple but its impact is built on care, expertise and deep respect for every client's story.

Join us, and help a woman take the next step toward the future she deserves.



The Gendered Reality of Job-Seeking | The Smart Works Index 2025

www.smartworks.org.uk | @smartworkscharity

Charity No: 1080609