

SMART
WORKS

Smart Works Unemployment Index 2024

The Challenge of Unemployment | The Importance
of Confidence | Equality of Interview Outcomes



Acknowledgements

Smart Works would like to thank every client who participated in this research, particularly Ashleigh, Victoria, and Sara for sharing their powerful stories with us and volunteering their time for this work.

We would also like to thank nfpResearch for their advice, support, and analysis during the data collection process, and Google for the financial contribution that helped make the 2024 Smart Works Unemployment Index possible.

Photography by Philip Panting.
Designed by Annabel Lobb.

Foreword

I knew coming into this role that women face significant barriers in gaining the skills, experience and confidence to succeed in interviews and thrive in professional roles. I have long admired what the Smart Works service achieves, unlocking confidence and potential in the thousands of women that walk through their doors each year. These are women who have faced extensive barriers on their journeys to employment – as many of us do.

Yet, when analysing the 2024 data, I was shocked to see the direction of travel in the job market, which creates increasing difficulty for our clients in securing employment. Since the inception of the Smart Works Unemployment Index three years ago, the state of the job market has deteriorated significantly. The hardships and barriers experienced by women seeking work have worsened beyond what the staff and volunteers at Smart Works could have imagined.

In 2024, we've spoken to 4,912 women about what they experienced whilst seeking work. We asked them what the process was like, what challenges they encountered, and how the job application process made them feel.

What we heard in response was disheartening: as the job market deteriorates, unemployed women are having to work harder than ever to secure work, yet they are less likely to be successful. This can impact confidence, which in turn affects interview performance.

But there are still reasons to be hopeful.

There is a new government in place, with a new political will to support unemployed people and reduce economic inactivity across the country. Data suggests 535,000 women are unemployed, whilst 5.3m are economically inactive (ONS, 2024)¹.

There are charities and organisations dedicated to improving the conditions faced by all unemployed people experiencing hardship.

And there is Smart Works.

The Smart Works service is here to help, and through our impactful dressing and coaching service, we not only play a part a part in alleviating the pressures faced by unemployed women all across the UK, but provide a model for the future. We have supported over 45,000 women to date and will reach another 10,000 in 2025.

Through this report, we tell you the stories of thousands of women we meet each year. We tell you the barriers they have faced, the impact on their lives, and how you can help make it easier for women to find work and succeed in their job interviews.

Together, we can make a change. Together, we can help women find work, gain agency, and change the trajectory of their lives.



Anna Hemmings
Chief Executive Officer

¹ ONS. (October 2024). Annual Population Survey (June 2023 - July 2024). [Online]. NOMIS. Available at: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/datasets/apsnew> [Accessed 10 January 2025].

We need you to make change

At the core of the Smart Works service is the mission to empower women in their professional pursuits. Through the discussions we have with our clients every day we have built a unique perspective of women’s unemployment, its associated challenges, and the steps we can take to combat these barriers.

The following recommendations are clear, tangible steps we can all take to help create a more accessible recruitment process for the thousands of unemployed women across the UK.

Transparency

Providing information on the role and requirements of the job makes it easier for applicants to evaluate whether it is suitable for their experience, circumstances, and needs.

- Job adverts should explicitly state the number of stages in an application process, as well as the timeline for each stage, so that candidates may assess whether they can dedicate the necessary time to their application.
- Job descriptions should state the expected working hours, the salary (or salary band), and essential versus desirable experience and skills.
- Summaries of key policies such as maternity should be accessible at the point of application, so that candidates can avoid asking at interview stage and risking bias.

Compassion

Job searching can be stressful, tiring, and demoralising. Employers should make efforts to implement measures which ease the pressure of the process.

- If using artificial intelligence in the application process, balance this with human oversight to keep the application process personable and consistent.
- Ghosting candidates is unacceptable; candidates must always be treated with kindness and respect.
- Unsuccessful applicants should receive feedback from employers to help them improve future applications, with this feedback becoming more detailed as application stages progress.
- Recruiters should implement reviews of the applicant experience to get feedback from those experiencing the recruitment process.

Reimbursement

Unemployed women report being unable to attend some interviews due to travel costs. Reducing these costs is a small way employers can lessen the burden for those seeking work.

- Offer reimbursement for interview travel costs, and explicitly state reimbursement policies on the job advert so applicants are aware.
- Employers should take reasonable steps to conduct first round interviews virtually, avoiding unnecessary travel expectations. Although, adjustments should be made where candidates cannot access relevant technology.

Regulation

In line with employers taking further steps to create a more transparent application process, policymakers should tighten regulations in this area to encourage progress.

- Employers should be required to include essential information at application stage, spanning salary, pension contributions, key policies, and experience required.
- Policymakers need to recognise the relationship between work and parenting, and review the cost and availability of childcare, wraparound care at school, and school times and term dates, moving towards a system that better fits with working patterns of parents.

Collaboration

Signposting is crucial for unemployed women, who have stressed the need for organisations to work more closely together in order to signpost those in need to relevant services.

- Where possible, charities and organisations supporting unemployed women should develop signposting guides highlighting key organisations in the sector that can provide additional support.

At Smart Works, in our capacity as an employer, we are committed to adopting any learnings that aren’t already part of our recruitment practices. We are working towards being an employer of choice and ensuring that we seek to make our workplace best in class and accessible to those who use our service. In order to enact this, Smart Works will make it a priority to:

- Conduct our annual employee policy review and highlight summaries of key company policies at the point of application.
- Implement regular reviews to get feedback from those applying to work at Smart Works.

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Executive Summary



The 2024 Smart Works Unemployment Index provides an analysis of conversations with 4,912 women supported by Smart Works in 2024, providing a unique insight into what it is to be an unemployed woman in the UK today.

Building on two years of data, the 2024 Index explores the following themes:

The Challenge of Unemployment:

- Women applied for an average of 38 jobs this year, a sharp increase from 33 in 2023 and 28 in 2022. However, fewer women are securing employment.
- 27% applied for over 50 roles unsuccessfully, compared to 21% in 2023 and 16% in 2022.
- 34% of clients dedicated more than 25 hours weekly to applying for jobs.
- Job applications have become more time-consuming, often requiring psychometric tests, presentations, and virtual assessments.
- The rise of AI-driven recruitment systems has led to confusion and inconsistent feedback, with many women rejected based on arbitrary standards. An example includes an applicant receiving conflicting automated feedback labelling her both 'too quiet' and 'too disruptive.'
- Parents and those looking to start families cited challenging interactions with employers where they felt their personal lives were scrutinised and negatively perceived. There were also differences in experience based on region and ethnicity.

The Importance of Confidence:

- 60% of women (up from 56% in 2023) felt less confident after completing the job application process, with 27% feeling much less confident.
- Concerns around confidence and feeling underqualified were more pronounced amongst younger clients and those with disabilities.

Equality of Interview Outcomes:

- 64% of clients secured a job within a month of their Smart Works appointment.
- There was a 4 percentage-point rise in clients interviewing for routine or manual roles, highlighting an increase in applications for lower-paid positions from 2023.
- Ethnic minority women and women with disabilities were identified as significantly less likely to secure work than their counterparts.
- Seeking a sense of purpose and identity was the most common reason for seeking work, with 25% of clients citing this as what 'having a job means' to them.

Methodology

The Smart Works Unemployment Index is a comparative, annual study based on 4,912 survey responses obtained between January 2 and December 23 2024. Survey respondents were unemployed and visited Smart Works centres across the UK ahead of upcoming job interview.

The Smart Works service is open to all women, including transgender women and non-binary people who feel their gender expression connects with our service and wardrobe. Those who used the Smart Works service are referred to as 'our clients' throughout the report.



The analysis conducted for this report aims to compare experiences of unemployment over time, looking back to prior iterations of the Smart Works Unemployment Index.

Smart Works was supported by independent research agency nfpResearch. nfpResearch conducted the focus groups and have verified the survey findings.

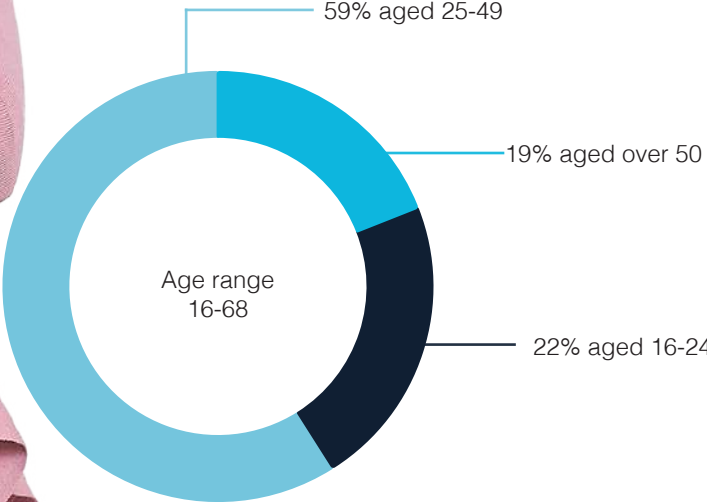
Our Clients

The findings of this study are derived from a sample of 4,912 clients who accessed the Smart Works service between January 2 and December 23 2024. This sample is based on 1,128 more responses than the 2023 study.

To access the Smart Works service, clients need to be referred by an organisation supporting them to find work such as Job Centres, refugee services, mental health charities and the prison service. All respondents were unemployed with an upcoming job interview at the time they were surveyed.

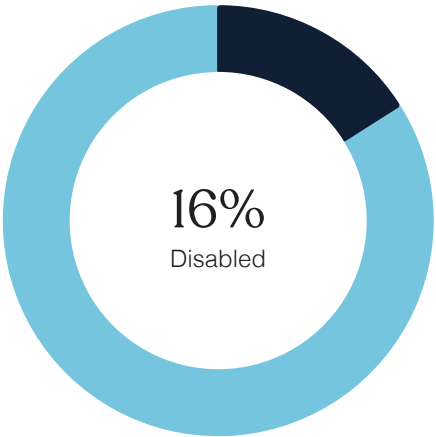


Age



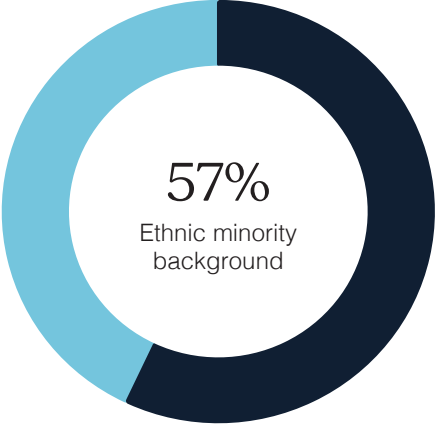
This is based upon 4,732 responses with 180 missing responses

Disability



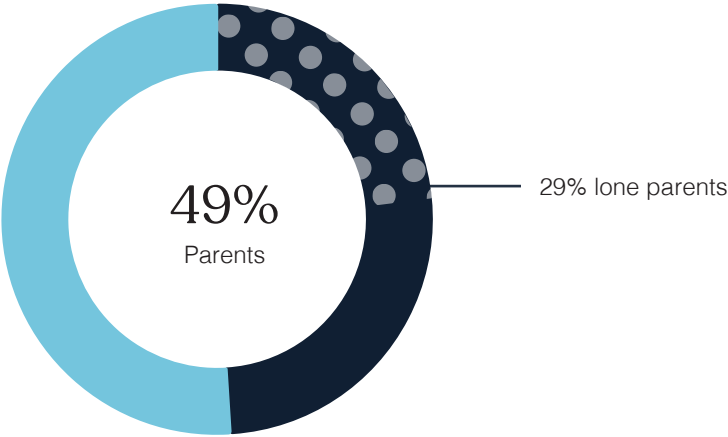
This is based upon 4,525 responses with 154 missing responses and 233 who answered, 'prefer not to say'.

Ethnicity



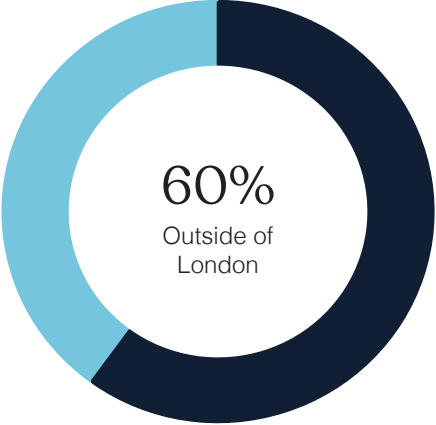
This is based upon 4,755 responses with 157 missing responses and 73 who answered, 'prefer not to say'.

Parenthood



This is based upon 4,676 responses with 187 missing responses and 49 who answered, 'prefer not to say'.

Smart Works Centre attended



This is based upon 4,912 responses with 0 missing responses.

The Challenge of Unemployment

This year, our clients reported that it is more challenging than ever to find work. With the impact of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, our year long survey reveals that clients are applying for more jobs and spending more time on applications than ever before. Despite this, the likelihood of securing employment at the end of the process has not increased.

Decreasing opportunity, increasing competition

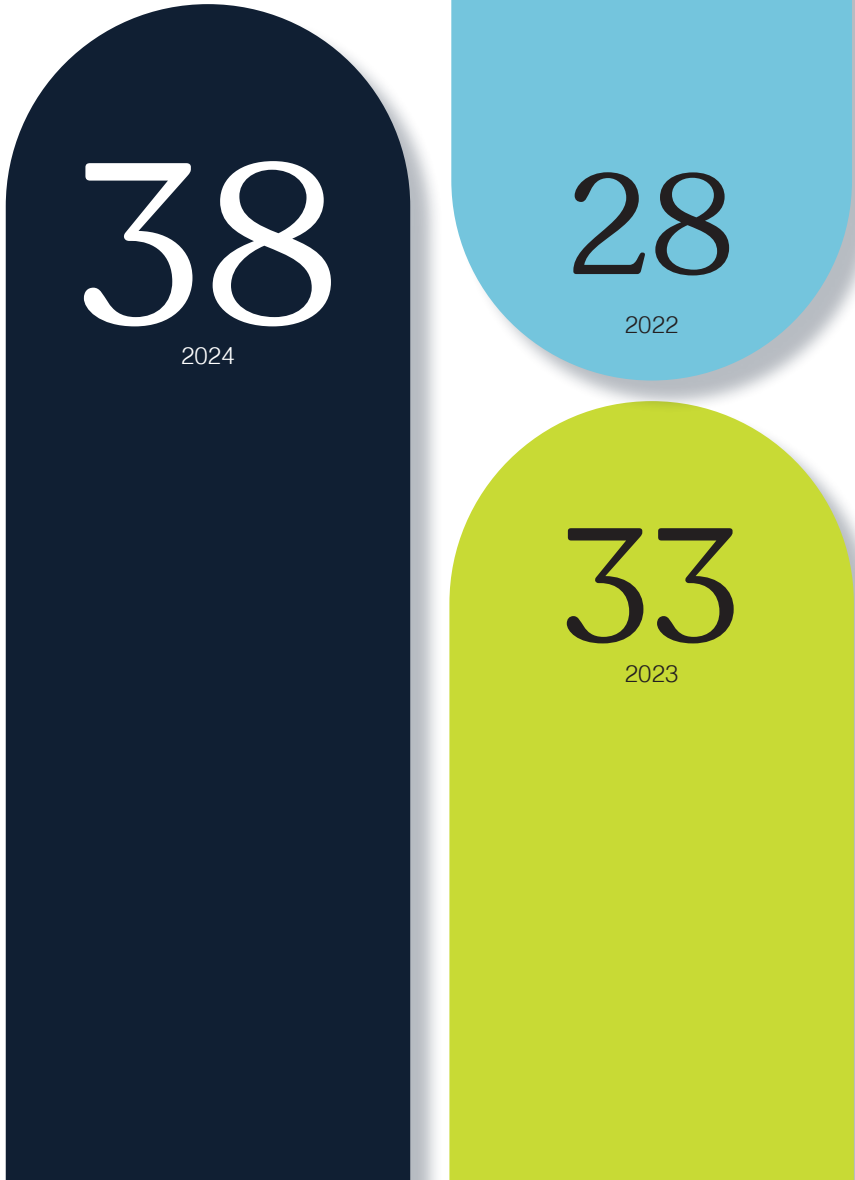
Whilst unemployed, Smart Works clients applied for an average of 38 jobs without securing a job.

Facing increasing rejections, our clients spoke of a sense of desperation that pushed them to apply for jobs that didn't meet their needs or aspirations.

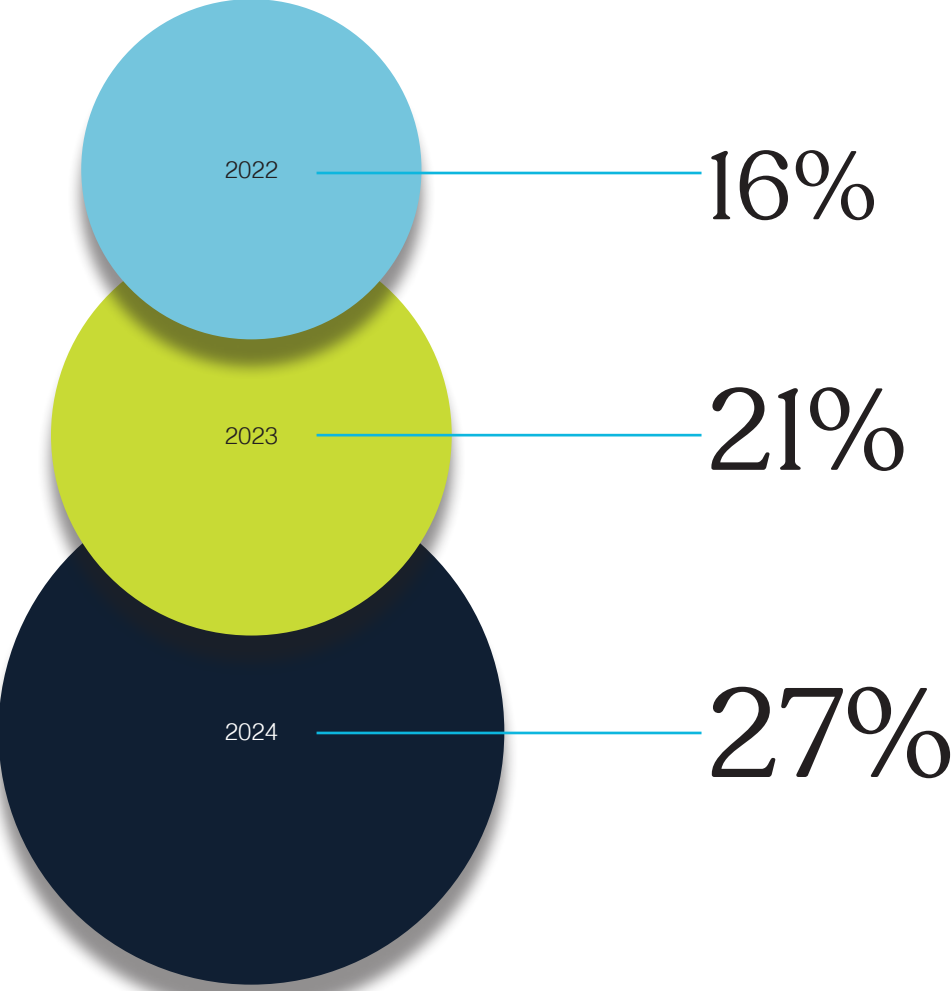
Clients discussed applying for roles at salaries lower than anticipated and making personal sacrifices in order to secure work. This ranged from giving up time with their children due to a lack of flexible working opportunities, to clients risking their safety when working in industries with unsocial working hours.

‘I don’t finish until 11pm and then I’ve got to figure out how to get myself home from work in quite a nasty part [of the city].’

Average number of jobs applied for



Applied for more than 50 jobs



The figures showing the number of jobs applied for in 2024 are based upon 4,789 responses with 123 missing responses

Multi-stage applications

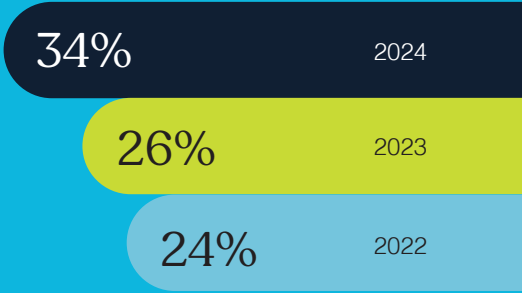
Once more, our clients spent an average of two years unemployed before their Smart Works appointment, with 22% spending over three years out of work.

This is based upon 4,781 responses with 131 missing responses

For the first time, we have seen an increase in the average number of hours clients have spent each week on job applications. In 2024, clients spent an average of 24 hours per week completing applications, compared to 23 hours per week in 2023. There was also a significantly higher proportion of clients spending over 25 hours per week on the process.

Percentage of clients who spent more than 25 hours per week applying for jobs

The figures from 2024 are based upon 4,613 responses with 299 missing responses



Clients reported navigating an array of assessments ranging from psychometric testing to presentations, in addition to completing standard applications and interviews. These assessments require additional time and effort, but clients couldn't always identify how these tests assessed skills relevant to the roles they were applying for.

‘The first thing was the online assessment, and then the psychometric test, then a virtual assessment centre with a presentation. I remember I cried as I was so overwhelmed.’

As in 2023, the average number of interviews attended by clients remains at 3 overall, accounting for a slight rise with clients in 2024 attending 2.87 interviews on average compared to 2.68 in 2023. Although, when considering the significant increase in the number of applications our clients are completing, this comparatively small rise indicates the increasingly competitive nature of the job application process.

The figures from 2024 are based upon 4,802 responses with 110 missing responses

The rise of AI

In contrast to applicants dedicating more time than ever to applications, clients have noticed employers spending less and less time reviewing them. Focus group participants suspected that an increased use of AI created new barriers at the early stages of applications before individuals are able to speak directly to a hiring manager. In recent years, the use of AI in the recruitment process has become common with 25% of UK based organisations utilising the tool for ‘human resources and talent acquisition’ (IBM, 2024)².

Clients reported being rejected from roles they felt fully qualified for, believing this was because they hadn’t met an unknown standard imposed by an AI system.

‘You could be more than qualified for the job, but if you don’t have the right keywords in your application or CV, you’re not going to get through.’

They found a lack of human contact was also prevalent, causing confusion when being rejected. Clients noted that feedback received based on psychometric tests was often automated and had not been sense checked.

‘They sent me back the feedback [on my psychometric assessment] and they were like ‘Judging by this answer, you’re too quiet to work here’ and then ‘Judging by this answer, you’re too disruptive to work here’. And I thought, ‘I’m one or the other. That makes no sense.’

² IBM. (January 2024). IBM Global AI Adoption Index 2023. [Online]. Newsroom. IBM. Available at: <https://newsroom.ibm.com/2024-01-10-Data-Suggests-Growth-in-Enterprise-Adoption-of-AI-is-Due-to-Wide> [Accessed 10 January 2025].

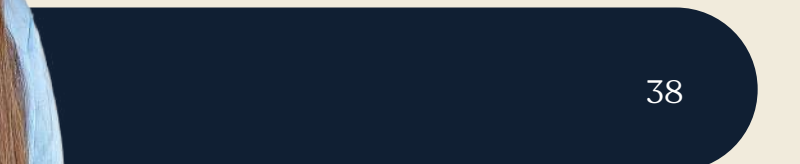
Intersecting characteristics

As is consistent year on year, there is significant variation in experiences based on the demographic characteristics of our clients. Previously, we have seen a higher number of jobs applied for from clients supported by our London centres compared to those outside of London. But this year, we have seen the gap begin to close.

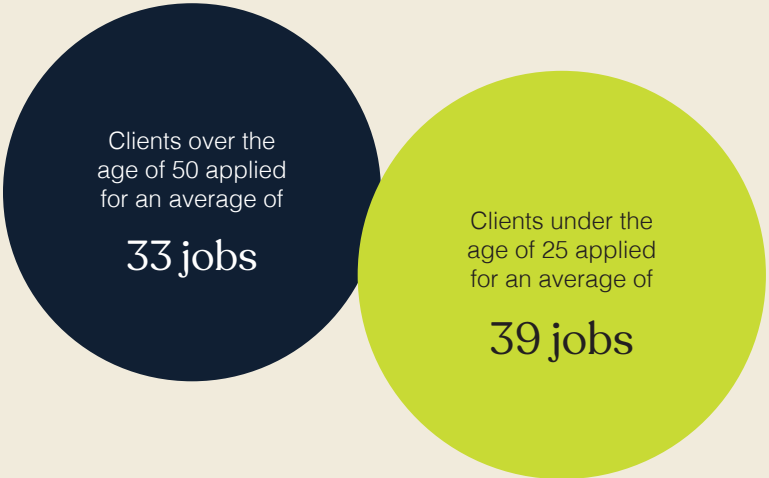
Average number of jobs applied for in 2024



Average number of jobs applied for in 2023



■ Clients in London
■ Clients outside of London



Despite applying for fewer jobs, 36% of clients over 50 spent more than 25 hours a week on their applications compared to 27% of under 25s. This indicates that older clients are finding the job application process more difficult and more demanding than younger clients, as it is ultimately taking them longer to complete fewer applications. During the focus groups, older clients described how they perceived differences in application processes more challenging to when they were applying for roles previously.

‘You can’t just put on a suit and go to an agency now. You have to do these things online and I really found it challenging.’

Focus group participants from ethnic minority backgrounds indicated they were concerned about biases coming into effect when meeting employers face-to-face at interview, which is reflected in the disparity in interview success rates between ethnic minority and white clients (see page 24). This sentiment was also shared by clients from the LGBTQ+ community, who felt that how they presented impacted how employers perceived them.

‘I felt when I got an interview there was a difference. They would have a different attitude when they saw me, and I could tell that their demeanor had changed’.

Decisions around parenthood

As in previous years, having children was raised as a barrier to entering employment. Parents participating in our focus groups felt that roles often didn’t offer the flexibility they needed, not only because they wanted to spend time with their children, but crucially because the cost of childcare would exceed their earnings if they accepted a non-flexible role.

‘I’m a single mother. It’s a huge challenge, and expenses for extra childcare are unaffordable.’

This year, a new theme has emerged during focus groups, raised by clients without children. Some explained that their experience of navigating such a competitive job market had impacted their family planning. Without being sure they were in long lasting, meaningful roles, they were reluctant to have children – even if that is what they wanted.

For clients that were keen to have children, they were cautious of verbalising this throughout the application process, avoiding employers questioning their commitment to working and finding themselves altering their responses to avoid prejudice.

‘I’m worried [the employer] will ask me, ‘What’s your five-year plan?’ I’m going to have to just lie constantly about wanting a family through the trial period. I know that it’s illegal to discriminate, but I’m just worried about it.’

Ashleigh Age 36



‘I applied for another job where I knew someone that worked there. Months later, I got the standard rejection, and my connection said ‘It’s really weird, they actually didn’t hire anybody. I think they do that quite a lot.’ And that got me thinking, how many other jobs have I applied for, interviewed for, done presentations for, and there’s actually no job?’

Ashleigh was made redundant in March 2024 from a sector she’d worked in for ten years. She’d been unemployed before but always bounced back and secured employment quickly.

But this time, things were different. The state of the job market was much worse and it took her five months to get a job.

‘Really quickly, I was having loads of interviews, I was getting to final stages, and then nothing was happening. I was a bit shocked, but I thought maybe it was a bad bunch.

I’d always had a job, or even in short periods where I haven’t, I found one quickly. I’ve always done what I needed to do. I don’t know what it was about this year that was different – I applied for over 100 jobs and had maybe 10 interviews.

Recruiters I spoke to would tell me ways to ‘hack the system’. It was all about trying to hack the AI algorithm and get keywords in there, just to get through and speak to a human being. I’d get rejected without having even spoken to anybody. It didn’t feel very human.

I spent a lot of time questioning whether I was doing something wrong. Whether it was my age, or to do with the colour of my skin, or because I’m a woman...

I go into any process assuming I’ll be judged for my character, personality, and skills, but when you’re getting so many knockbacks, you start to question, what is it about me that isn’t right?

I had the experience and the knowledge. You start to overthink, am I a little bit too old for this? Did they worry that I’m just going to get a job and go on maternity leave? I am one of those women that if I was financially stable,

me and my partner would love to start a family, but we’re completely priced out of it. And you learn very quickly not to ask direct questions about it, because they won’t hire you if they think having a family is what you want.

There were periods where I would wake up in the morning and the first thing I would do was check my emails. If I was lucky, it’d be a box full of rejections. If I wasn’t lucky, I’d just never hear from them.

There was one application which was going well. I had a group interview which went so well, and I got invited for a second interview to meet the founder. She loved me, was so enthusiastic, and talked about how convenient it was that I didn’t currently have a job, because it meant I could get started right away. And then... nothing. I emailed, they said they’d be in touch, but I never heard from them again. That one really affected me.

Even to this day, I wonder, do they realise that they never got back to me? Their whole process was about wanting to get to know the ‘real’ me, how it was a positive, collaborative environment and they want the right people. But they couldn’t even tell their interviewees whether it was a yes or a no.

I applied for another job where I knew someone that worked there. Months later, I got the standard rejection, and my connection said ‘It’s really weird, they actually didn’t hire anybody. I think they do that quite a lot.’ And that got me thinking, how many other jobs have I applied for, interviewed for, done presentations for, and there’s actually no job?

I did about four presentations, and I think at least one of them was just fishing for market information. They would ask you to make presentations before they’d even spoken to you over the phone, and then you’d never hear from them again.

I don’t think employers cared. I’ve had interviews before for previous roles where I felt a bit more in control, a bit more confident. But it didn’t feel like that at all, it felt like they knew that for every job they had hundreds of applicants they could cherry pick from. They could do whatever they wanted, and it didn’t matter, because they knew how much people needed work.

Thanks to a friend’s support, I was able to land my current job and I am so grateful I reached out for their help. Transitioning from a career I’d dedicated over 10 years to wasn’t easy, but it led me to an amazing new opportunity.

I am so thankful for the help I received and for the company I now work for, taking a chance on me.



The Importance of Confidence

Qualification and confidence

Our clients' views on how qualified they feel for the roles they are applying for have remained consistent with our reporting from 2023.



The figures from 2024 are based upon 4,496 responses with 416 missing responses.

‘Rejection after rejection, after no replies, your confidence is just totally rock bottom.’

With most clients saying they felt exactly qualified for the role they had an upcoming interview for, this suggests that clients are not necessarily seeking opportunities beyond their skill level but are having to spend excessive amounts of time and energy competing for roles they feel they are right for.

Whilst being rejected from more jobs than ever before, our clients felt less confident after going through the process of applying for work than in 2023.

60% of clients felt less confident

after completing the job application process (up from 56% in 2023). 27% felt much less confident.

The figures from 2024 are based upon 4,531 responses with 381 missing responses

Specifically, automated rejections and feedback that would often come from early recruitment tests were perceived as harsh and reductive. Clients shared in focus groups that simply being told they had failed, with no knowledge of what had been received well in an application, made them question their self-worth.

Intersectional differences in confidence

Diminished confidence was more pronounced amongst women with disabilities, who were 9 percentage-points more likely to have their confidence knocked by the job application process.

Additionally, clients in the 16-24 age range felt the most underqualified for the roles they were applying for. Although this trend is to be expected with younger clients having had less time to gain work experience, our focus groups revealed this to be a point of major frustration for them - they felt that employers were reluctant to take a chance on them if older candidates had applied. Being perceived as underqualified by employers created a cycle of rejection that made them reluctant to make applications.



Victoria Age 21



‘It’s just really tough out there... It’s quite brutal. You just keep getting knocked back and knocked back, and you get on your feet, and then then you get slapped down again.’

Like many other soon-to-be graduates, Victoria began looking for work in her final few months of university, planning ahead for her next chapter. With three years of further education and employability training under her belt, she started the process feeling good about her prospects – but her confidence soon took a hit.

‘You start out thinking that it’ll be fine, that you’re a university student so you’ll be able to get a job. Then you get rejected for the first time, and it’s sad... but it’s fine, you have backups!

Then it goes on, and on, and on... and the hope just slowly starts seeping away.

I must have applied for around 100 jobs, and I think I only got five interviews. It was quite depressing to say the least, and it definitely knocked my confidence. You think to yourself, ‘What might be wrong?’

I started doing courses to improve my employability skills, and they would all say ‘Don’t worry, they’re just trying to make sure that you’re the right fit and your personality is right for the job’. But it gets to the point where you worry – ‘Do I just have a bad personality? Am I completely unlikeable, and that’s why no one is hiring me?’

Lack of experience was also a big thing for me. You can’t really get a proper job until you’re 18, so I don’t know what I was

expected to do. A few jobs would even say ‘we don’t care about experience, it’s a trainee role’, and then you’d get rejected, because someone with 5 years’ experience would apply, and they’d get the job.

I did some volunteering and at one point that was probably the most valuable thing on my CV. I applied for a job at a charity, and they sent feedback to everyone afterwards saying, ‘Lots of applicants put volunteering experience down for this job, however we don’t think experience is necessary, so this wasn’t something we looked at for this role.’

That’s probably the worst I felt after getting rejected – the one time I had experience for something, it was overlooked. It was very depressing. I had to take a little break from job searching after that, because I’d just been doing it constantly day in and day out.’

To get support on her employment journey, Victoria got in touch with Jobs & Business Glasgow, who provided her with an advisor to help with the job search. Once she had secured an interview, she was referred to Smart Works to use the Interview Dressing and Preparation service. It was at her appointment that she found her confidence slowly start to be restored.

‘It was absolutely amazing. I felt like people weren’t just interacting with me because it’s their job – they actually wanted me to succeed. Over the past year, I’d felt like I couldn’t, but the volunteers were telling me ‘No, you can succeed, we know you can, and we will support you.’

Afterwards, I felt so confident. I felt unstoppable.

I got the job, and since then, my confidence has gone way up. It’s kind of something I’ve always struggled with,

but this is the best my confidence and my mental health has ever been. And it’s from getting this job, but I think it began at Smart Works, because that was such a good day. Since then, I’ve just been going up and up and up.

Being unemployed was probably one of the lowest times of my life, because I just kept getting knocked back. You sort of don’t feel anything, any emotions. The way that you speak, the voice you think in completely changes.... I’m quite expressive normally, but I just became sort of blank.

You feel like a failure, that you’re not going down the correct path. And I know now that others were in the same boat, but I would have loved to have someone to connect to and relate to, because you do feel alone.

Finding Smart Works made me think, ‘This organisation is helping people like me, which means that there *are* other people like me. It’s not just me, alone in my house, really upset because I can’t get a job. There are other people like me, and people who want to help us, and show us that we’re not failures.”



Equality of Interview Outcomes

Which jobs did our clients apply for?

Each year we categorise the roles our clients are interviewing for to assess the most popular industries and positions they are seeking. Our findings remained in line with those from 2023, with roles in Health & Social Care being the most popular.



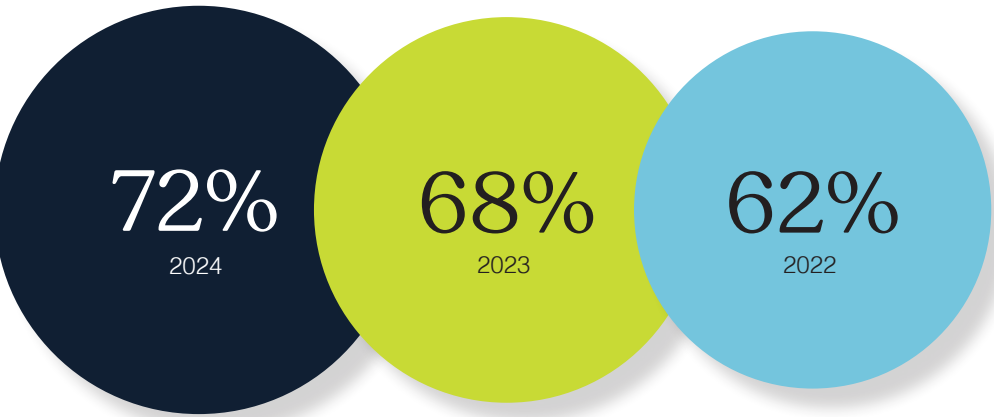
This is based upon 4,467 responses with 445 missing or non-applicable responses.

In line with the findings referenced throughout this report, we also saw notable demographic variation when looking at the industries our clients applied for.

- Ethnic minority clients were 8 percentage-points more likely than white clients to apply for roles in Health & Social Care (23% compared to 15%).
- Parents were 7 percentage-points more likely to apply for Health & Social Care roles than non-parents (23% compared to 16%).

In each iteration of the Index, we use the 3-category version of the NS-SEC measure of social class by occupation to indicate the nature of the roles our clients apply for. Positions categorised as ‘professional’ are generally the most senior and highest paid, routine and manual professions sit at the opposite end of the scale, and intermediate positions are in the middle. We have seen a 4% increase in interviews for routine or manual jobs from 2023, and 10% increase from 2022.

Percentage of clients interviewing for routine or manual jobs



This is based upon 4,442 responses with 470 missing or non-applicable responses.

This increase indicates that clients are applying for lower paid work than before, and will consequently see less remuneration despite their increased time and effort spent on job applications.

‘I think that all salaries should be included on the job description, at least a salary bracket.’

The meaning of having a job



This is based upon 4,002 responses with 910 missing or non-applicable responses.

A sense of purpose and identity

Having a job continues to be about more than just income. Gaining a sense of purpose and identity through work remains the primary motivator, with 25% of clients listing this as what having a job means to them.

Financial security

Although less of a dominant theme, financial security as a motivator for seeking work was prominent. Clients continued to cite the cost-of-living crisis as a factor pushing them into getting any job they could, rather than focusing on building a career which was meaningful to them and right for their needs.

‘Universal Credit isn't very much; I couldn't really survive off it. And that makes getting a job this terrifying, stressful thing... it makes people get into jobs that they're not going to enjoy, which sounds like a minor issue, but I think that's the welfare and happiness of the nation.’

Women with disabilities were significantly more likely to be concerned about financial security, with 25% citing this as their primary motivation for seeking work compared to 18% of those without. Meanwhile, clients aged 25 and under were significantly more likely than older clients to cite ambitions of independence and achieving goals, both at 13%, when asked why they were seeking work.

Who got the job?

64%

Of the clients in our sample that replied to our follow up request by December 23 2024, 64% got a job within a month of their Interview Dressing and Preparation appointment at Smart Works.

This is based upon 3,307 responses with 1,065 clients non-contactable after their interview.

In 2022, 66% of clients involved in the study went on to secure work within a month, with this dropping to 65% in 2023.

We attribute this lack of change, despite clients applying to more jobs than ever before, in part to an increasingly competitive job market. Although clients are dedicating more time to the job search and applying to more jobs, they are not receiving sufficient feedback to improve on their applications.

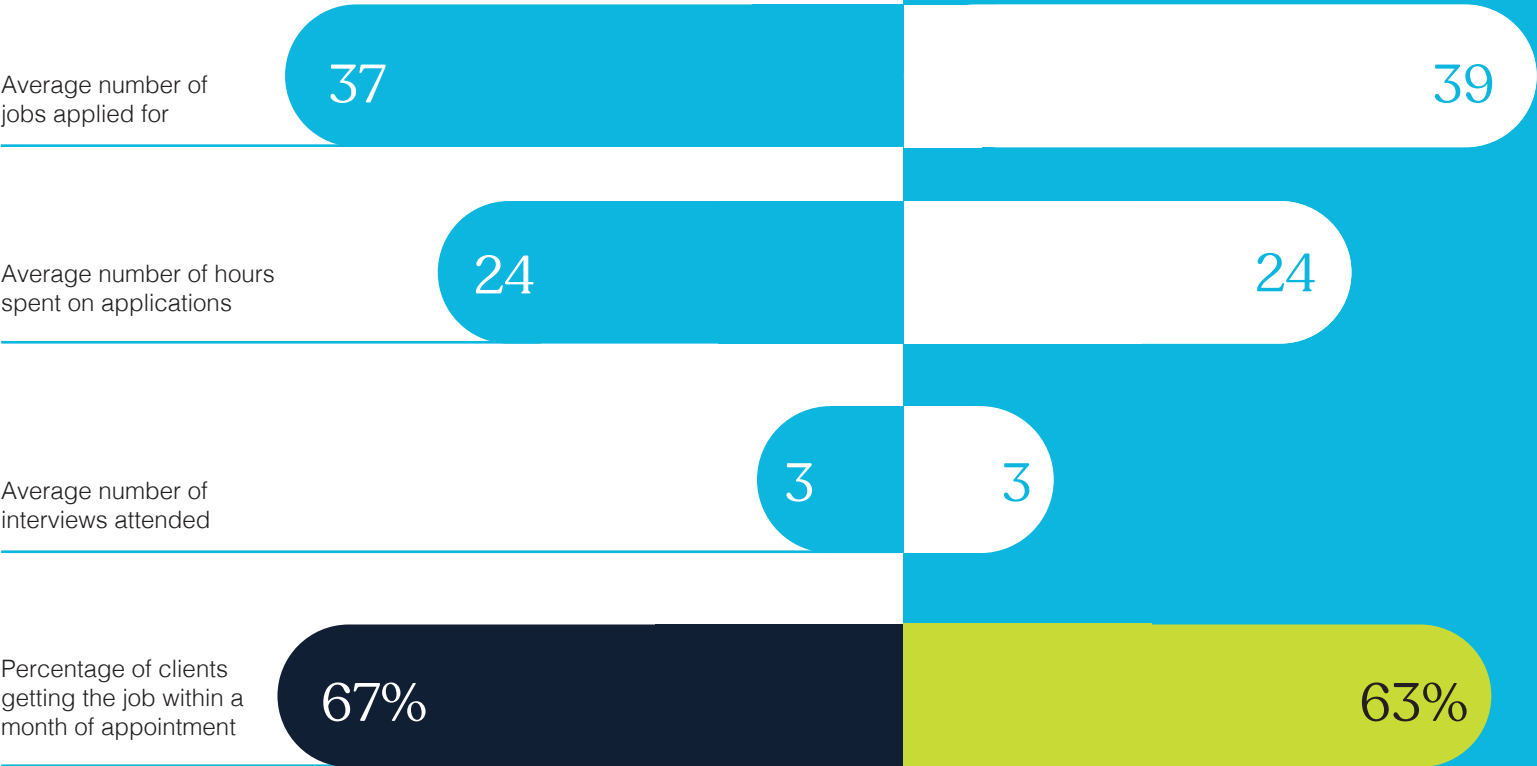
‘I wasn't even told no, I just wasn't contacted ever again. I think a lot of potential employers need to really look at how they treat candidates and rejig the whole system. It's broken.’

The rate at which our clients secure work is also notably inconsistent amongst different demographics, and it is important to report the significant differences in accessing employment. Mirroring our findings in 2023, we saw no significant differences between ethnicities in the initial stages of the job search. Ethnic minority and white clients spent the same amount of time applying for the same number of jobs, and attended the same number of interviews. However, ethnic minority applicants were less likely to get the job after the interview stage.

This trend is validated by the experiences with employer bias discussed by ethnic minority clients in focus groups.

White clients

Ethnic minority clients



For the first time since the report's initial publication, in 2024 we found women with disabilities were less likely to get a job than those without.

Percentage of clients who got the job within a month of Smart Works appointment



Clients with disabilities who participated in our focus groups reported being rejected from jobs, or even having to turn down roles they were enthusiastic about, due to physical requirements ranging from long hours of standing, to a lack of remote working options.

‘[I was offered a job and] I said, ‘I'm very interested, but is there a wheelchair or something? After 16 hours, I will really collapse with arthritis... I thought, ‘Wow, this is an opportunity this person is offering me, but I really can't take it.’

Sara Age 34



‘Having a job would mean just finding myself again. I believe right now I’m a bit lost, I have totally lost my identity. I am the mother of my child, I am not myself anymore.’

Throughout her life, Sara built a career as a full-time Special Educational Needs teacher, a role she is incredibly passionate about. A few years ago, she fell ill whilst pregnant with her son, taking her maternity leave early when she was hospitalised. Having worked in her organisation for five years, Sara was looking forward to returning to work, but she was shocked when her employer couldn’t provide the flexibility she needed.

Like many of the women in this study, Sara’s career is a core part of her identity. However, her role as a mother has led to barriers in her job search, and she has struggled to find the right job. Today, Sara is working hard to secure employment, trying to find her sense of identity once again.

‘When I tried to negotiate my return to work, my employer decided I can’t go back part time... I had to either go back full time or drop to Assistant Teacher and do that part time. I had to leave my job because there was no option for me. It was a sad thing, because I loved my students, and I loved my job.’

Since then, I’ve been trying to figure out who I am, because it’s quite difficult to know. Now, I’m known as the mother of my child. Not as me, Sara, who used to be a very social, productive person, working full time. Now, I’m going through a divorce, my son is special needs as well, and I can’t find myself properly.

I have been unemployed for two years. I was looking for jobs and it was quite difficult because I need a bit of flexibility for my son, and as soon as you request flexibility, it’s a word that no one wants to hear, even HR. I would get asked personal questions about my family

plans that I didn’t think they should be asking in an interview, because men don’t get asked.

And I wanted to be honest with them. I can do my eight, nine hours, I just need flexibility. All I’m asking is for them to have trust – I have great references, just give me an opportunity. But I cannot find that flexibility in my sector.

You get smaller and smaller with every ‘No’ you get. You feel like you’re not enough for the society we live in. I went to college, to university, worked for years as a teacher, then in the end I just hear ‘No’. You just feel yourself getting smaller.

Being a woman, looking for work... it’s like, if you have a family, or if you have a child, there’s too many questions about you. ‘What will you do with your child?’ ‘What happens when your child is sick?’

When I used to be a teacher, I gave more than what I could for my own students. And I didn’t care about the salary. That’s what I did in my company, because I loved my job, I did it for my students, because I like them to have everything they need.

I think companies need to give more opportunities, more chances to people, to women too, because we don’t feel that we have the same that other people do.

But I couldn’t find a job that let me go back to work. So now, I’m trying to change career, start a social enterprise, because I want to help other families who have had the same experience as me, who have special needs kids. I’m at the beginning, but it’s my goal.

Having a job would mean just finding myself again. I believe right now I’m a bit lost, I have totally lost my identity.

I am the mother of my child, I am not myself anymore.

I don’t even have my own bag anymore. When I go out it’s filled with things for my son – his wipes, his toothbrush, his snacks. But if someone asks me if I have lipstick, I don’t have it.

Even when I get phone calls, it’s ‘Are you the mother of...?’ No one calls me by my name anymore. But if I go back to work... I don’t know how to explain it, but I can find myself again. It’s just going to be myself. Sara.

With a job, it’s not just the job, but all the things that come with it. All the plusses.’



Impact of our service

Smart Works is dedicated to empowering all women who need help getting into work. Since 2013, over 45,000 women have walked through our doors, seeking support on their employment journeys. Through our conversations with each of these women, we know that the coaching, clothing, and confidence provided by our service is nothing short of transformational. It is this confidence that unlocks their potential, enabling them to get the job and transform their lives.

The focus groups we conducted for this study revealed that clients feel overwhelmingly positive about the support they receive from Smart Works, reporting they felt pampered, cared for, and came away feeling more confident.

In the last financial year:



‘Charities like Smart Works play a crucial role in empowering women with the confidence and practical tools they need to secure work, make the most of their talents and change the lives of their families for the better.

As a government, we are working hard to drive up opportunity for women in every corner of the nation, through our landmark Get Britain Working plan. Smart Works has blazed a trail in changing people’s lives, and we look forward to continuing our work with them in the future.’

Work and Pensions Secretary, Liz Kendall MP

The Smart Works Manifesto

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

We treat every client as an individual and give them the safe space they need, listening without judgement.

We are powered by volunteers, united by a mission to help all women realise their potential.

We work together to support our clients with the clothing and coaching they need to get the job and transform their lives.

We believe in fashion as a force for good. We know that when a woman looks and feels great about who she is, she can change her life. We are proud of the joy and magic our service brings to the women we serve.

We are guided by data to deliver simple, profound and tangible results, constantly innovating to tackle the challenge of women's unemployment.

We know our service is deceptively simple. It only works because of the care and thought we invest in our clients' journey with us.

Join us and help transform a woman's life.

About Smart Works

Smart Works is a dynamic, high profile and fast-growing UK charity that uses the power of high quality clothing and one-to-one coaching to help unemployed women fulfil their potential, get the job and transform their lives. The tangible impact is profound. In the last financial year, Smart Works supported over 8,000 women; 63% secured a job within one month of their appointment.

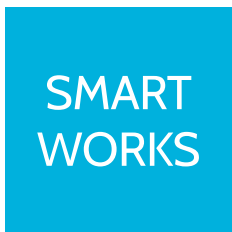
At an appointment with Smart Works, each client receives a bespoke dressing consultation with two stylists to find a beautiful and high-quality interview outfit that will fill her with confidence. This is free of charge and the clothes are hers to keep. This is followed by a one-to-one coaching session with an expert interview coach where every client receives valuable interview preparation, unlocking her potential and enabling her to succeed at interview. All coaching and dressing is carried out by trained and skilled volunteers, and all the pieces in our wardrobe are donated by retailers and individuals, making our model efficient and effective.

Since 2013, we have supported over 45,000 women across centres in Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, London,

Manchester, Newcastle and Reading. In 2025, we will open a new centre in Bristol, an evidenced area of need, and by April we will be supporting 10,000 women across the UK each year.

We can't do this without you – any donations or other support you can offer would be gratefully received.





2024 Smart Works Unemployment Index
www.smartworks.org.uk | [@smartworkscharity](https://www.instagram.com/smartworkscharity)
Charity No: 1080609