Nearly half of UK adults have experienced workplace discrimination

12 months ago

New [research](#) suggests that many workplaces are a potential hotbed of discriminatory behaviour, with peoples' age, appearance and gender often being used against them in work settings.

A survey of 4,000 UK adults, commissioned by HR software provider Ciphr, found that nearly half (45%) have experienced unfair discrimination while at work or when job hunting.

Of those, nearly two-fifths (38%) say they have been discriminated against at work. And a similar number (39%) believe they've been turned down for a job they were qualified for, due to discrimination of some kind during the recruitment process.

The findings show that workplace discrimination appears to be more common for people at the beginning of their working careers and for people from ethnic minorities (excluding white minorities).

Over three-quarters (76%) of survey respondents from Black, Black British, Caribbean or African ethnic groups, and two-thirds (65%) of those from Asian or Asian British ethnic groups, say they have suffered discriminatory experiences at work or faced hiring bias (compared to the survey average of 45%).

Gen Z and younger Millennials also appear significantly more likely to perceive and call out workplace discrimination, and other types of biases or unequal treatment that may have become normalised over time, than their Gen X and Boomer counterparts. Two in three (65%) 18- to 34-year-olds say they have experienced discriminatory attitudes and behaviours at work or as a job applicant, compared to around two-fifths (45%) of people aged 35 to 54 years, and less than a third (31%) of the over 55s.

Ageism most common form of workplace bias

Ciphr's [workplace discrimination study](#) also sheds more light on the most prevalent types of discrimination that most people come up against.

On average, nearly one in five (19%) adults living in the UK have faced ageism at some point in their careers; either at their current workplace, a previous workplace or a prospective one. Among those who reported experiencing age discrimination, nearly one in six (17%) men and one in seven (14%) women believe they've been treated unfavourably by recruiters based on their age.

The next most common types of workplace discrimination reported were appearance discrimination (cited by one in eight, or 13%, of those surveyed) and gender discrimination (12%).

Gender bias does impact noticeably more women than men, however – especially when it comes to getting a new job. One in 10 surveyed women, compared to around one in 20 (5.2%) surveyed men, feel that they've lost out on some roles they've applied for because of their sex or gender. This rate is even higher for non-binary people, with over one in four (27%) affected by gender bias when job hunting.

Parent or carer discrimination – receiving unfair or prejudicial treatment on the job or as a job applicant because of one's parenting or caring responsibilities – is also widespread. Based on Ciphr's data, around one in nine (11%) people feel that they've been discriminated against in this way. But that rate triples for so-called 'sandwich carers' – those who are caring for a dependent child or children as well as older or disabled relatives – with nearly a third (30%) of people in this group affected.

Race or ethnicity discrimination is the fifth most common form of workplace discrimination encountered, reported by one in 11 (9.3%) of all respondents.

Among people from ethnic minorities (excluding white minorities), race or ethnicity discrimination is the leading form of workplace discrimination that they have experienced (reported by 34% of ethnic minority respondents).

Nearly two-fifths (39%) of Black, Black British, Caribbean or African respondents, and nearly a third (31%) of Asian or Asian British respondents, reported experiencing some form of negative racism or discrimination based on their ethnicity in their careers (this compares to 5.2% of white respondents).

Other forms of workplace bias, experienced by around one in 13 people living in the UK, includes accent discrimination and disability discrimination (8.8% and 8.2% respectively). This is closely followed by religion or belief discrimination (6.1%) and sexual orientation discrimination (5.8%).

A further one in 20 (5.3%) workers also reported feeling discriminated against at work because they don't have any parental or other caring responsibilities.

Share of UK adults who reported discriminatory experiences at work or when job hunting:

- Age discrimination: 19% of survey respondents
- Appearance discrimination: 13%
- Gender discrimination: 12%
- Parenting / carer discrimination: 11%

- Another type of discrimination: 10%
- Race or ethnicity discrimination: 9.3%
- Accent discrimination: 8.8%
- Disability discrimination: 8.2%
- Religion or belief discrimination: 6.1%
- Sexual orientation discrimination: 5.8%
- Non-parent discrimination (at work)*: 5.3%
- Criminal record discrimination (during recruitment): 2.8%

Workplaces with the most discrimination

Two-thirds (or 2,630) of the people who participated in Ciphr's workplace discrimination survey are currently employed or self-employed. Analysis of the results for these workers specifically, based on their reported experiences, revealed which types of work or industries appear to have the highest rates of discrimination.

It's important to note that while organisations can be held accountable, under 'vicarious liability', for the discriminatory or unfavourable actions of their employees, individuals are ultimately responsible for how they conduct themselves and everything they say.

The people among the most likely to report feeling discriminated against at their current or previous place of work, or by a prospective employer, include those working in hospitality and event management (75% of surveyed workers in these jobs), business, consulting and management (66%), the media (62%), and creative arts and design (61%).

Notably, over half (53%) of the recruiters and HR professionals surveyed – people who are often seen as standard bearers for good policies and initiatives designed to promote diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) – have been on the receiving end of unfair or discriminatory treatment themselves.

Share of workers by industry who have experienced discrimination at work or when job hunting:

- Information research and analysis: 79% of surveyed workers
- Hospitality and events management: 75%
- Business, consulting and management: 66%
- Media and internet: 62%
- Creative arts and design: 61%
- Energy and utilities: 59%
- Charity and voluntary work: 59%
- Performing arts: 58%
- Information technology: 57%
- Leisure, sport and tourism: 55%
- Recruitment and HR: 53%
- Sales: 53%
- Accountancy, banking and finance: 47%
- Engineering and manufacturing: 47%

- Law enforcement and security: 47%
- Social care: 47%

Age discrimination is by far the most common form of workplace discrimination experienced by workers across most industries in the UK, but there are some exceptions. For example, one in five (20%) hospitality and events management professionals feel they have been discriminated against at work, or had their job application rejected, due to their physical appearance. One in six (17%) people working in the legal sector reported the same.

A fifth (19%) of insurance and pensions workers, and one in 11 (9.1%) people in publishing and journalism, say they've been a target of accent-based discrimination. And one in six (16%) energy and utilities professionals have faced race or ethnicity discrimination.

What can employers do?

Claire Williams, chief people and operations officer at Ciphr, says: "Any form of discrimination, harassment, bullying, intimidation, and intolerance in the workplace is unacceptable and can have a huge negative impact on people's lives. It can take a considerable toll on their mental and physical health, and their self-esteem, and be incredibly stressful to cope with. It can also derail careers, with unfair dismissals or people not being given equal opportunities to progress and be paid fairly.

"The results from Ciphr's survey are a stark reminder that there's still much work to be done to tackle ageism, racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, religious bigotry, and the many other harmful types of discrimination experienced in UK workplaces, and around the world, today."

Given that 45% of the UK population – equating to millions of workers across all demographics – are said to have experienced some form of workplace discrimination, employers are being urged to take more action.

Ciphr's head of diversity, Ann Allcock, says: "In the context of current global conversations about, and shifts in commitment to DEIB in some quarters, Ciphr's findings shine a timely light on the continuing reality of discrimination and underline why we need to double down on our efforts to fully understand what drives that discrimination, and exactly what form it takes. And make it a priority to eliminate it.

"Employers simply can't afford to continue taking the hit from the negative consequences of discrimination, in terms of impact on employee engagement, productivity and wasted talent. They need to fully use their people data and focus their efforts on tailored actions and training to both prevent discrimination and address it robustly where it does occur.

"The ever-present reality of discrimination surfaced by Ciphr's survey also draws attention to the risks (legal challenges, missed talent opportunities and exclusionary workplaces) of any rowing back on DEIB. It's not about 'woke' – what's needed is a recommitment to what diversity, equity and inclusion stands for – valuing difference, fairness and belonging – principles that are hard for anyone to argue against."

Some of the actions that organisations can take to protect their employees from workplace discrimination include:

- Introduce dedicated [diversity training](#) to educate leaders and staff on key principles, on the different types of discrimination (as well as bias, stereotyping and prejudice), and on the law
- Carry out a bespoke survey to understand how staff really experience the workplace culture and identify any issues that need to be tackled immediately
- Use diversity monitoring to understand workforce demographics. This will also help highlight recruitment outcomes (and internal promotion trends) that could signal discriminatory processes or discriminatory behaviours
- Introduce best practice policies and procedures that commit to anti-discrimination and address how discriminatory acts will be dealt with. Ensure employees know how they can raise or report discrimination-related issues or obtain guidance or support
- Develop mindsets of responsibility, enquiry and speaking up – set expectations for all employees, implemented from the top down, around acceptable behaviours and everyday practice

Ciphr's Workplace Discrimination in the UK report, examining the incidence and prevalence of discrimination at work, is available at www.ciphr.com/infographics/workplace-discrimination-statistics. The study includes the results from a nationally representative survey of 4,000 UK adults (18+), conducted by OnePoll on behalf of Ciphr, in August and November 2024.

Ciphr is the go-to HR and payroll software and solutions partner for medium and large organisations in the UK. Its integrated HR, payroll, benefits, learning and recruitment software, services and content provide invaluable insights to HR teams to inform their people strategy and grow and develop their organisations. Based in Reading, Ciphr is on a mission to amplify the voice and value of HR through intelligent people data solutions that help HR be heard – in the boardroom and across the business.

Ciphr eLearning, powered by Marshalls, boasts a comprehensive range of off-the-shelf [diversity and inclusion training](#), designed to empower organisations with the necessary knowledge and tools to successfully build a speak-up culture that is transparent, positive and supportive. Bespoke, facilitated diversity training and consultancy are also available.