

Article

Returning to the workplace – the motivations and barriers for people aged 50 years and over, Great Britain: August 2022

The characteristics and motivations associated with adults aged 50 years and over considering returning to the labour market after leaving their previous job since the start of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Experimental statistics.

Contact:
Robin Way, Johanna Pollard,
Matt Dennes and Rhian Murphy
policy.evidence.analysis@ons.
gov.uk
+44 300 0671543

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1 . Main points

This article analyses people aged 50 to 65 years who left or lost their job since the start of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and would consider returning in the future. We found that:

- those considering returning were on average younger: of those considering returning, 61% were aged 50 to 59 years; of those not considering returning, 33% were aged 50 to 59 years
- nearly a quarter (24%) of adults reported they had retired from their previous job, although only 6% of those aged 50 to 54 years reported this; stress (21%) was the most common reason for this younger age group
- those considering returning were less likely to be able to afford an unexpected but necessary expense (61%), or own their house outright (57%) than those not considering returning (77% and 78%, respectively)
- of those with a physical or mental health condition or illness, the most common reasons for considering returning to work were for the money (67%), for social company or a job they would enjoy (46%), and to improve their mental health (42%)
- those who felt they had the skills needed to get a new job were more likely to report retiring or not wanting to work anymore; those who did not were more likely to select a health reason for leaving paid work
- money was an important motivation to return for all age groups, but particularly for the younger cohort aged 50 to 54 years (69%), those who felt like they do not have the skills to get a job (68%) or who were paying off a loan or mortgage (68%)

Of adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left their previous job since the pandemic but have already returned to work:

- they were more likely to have left their previous job because of factors out of their control, for example they were made redundant (33%), left because of the coronavirus pandemic (26%), or lost their job (17%)

2 . Adults aged 50 years and over in the workforce

Since the start of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the proportion of those aged 50 years and over who are economically inactive has increased, see our [Movements out of work for those aged over 50 years since the start of the coronavirus pandemic article](#). Our new [economic inactivity research published 10 November 2022](#) also shows that increasingly more people are out of the labour force because of long-term sickness, and more recent analysis on this topic looks at [Worker movements and economic inactivity in the UK: 2018 to 2022](#).

The Over 50s Lifestyle Study (OLS) was designed to gather more information from adults aged 50 years and over to better understand their motivations for leaving work and whether they intend to return. Wave 1 was conducted between 8 and 13 February 2022, and wave 2 between 10 to 29 August 2022. We use wave 2 data to look at the reasons why those who would consider returning to work had left their job during the pandemic, in addition to what motivates them to want to return and why they have not yet returned.

Estimates in this release are based on adults aged 50 to 65 years that have left work since the start of the pandemic, not returned but would consider returning, unless otherwise stated.

3 . Reasons for leaving work during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

A much higher proportion of adults aged 50 to 59 years who have left paid work since the start of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic said they would consider returning to work in our [Over 50s Lifestyle Study \(OLS\) wave 2](#) release (72%), than in our [OLS wave 1](#) release (58%). We found that, in wave 2, those who would consider returning were on average younger; of those considering returning, 61% were aged 50 to 59 years, while of those not considering returning, 33% were aged 50 to 59 years.

Overall, adults reported a wide range of reasons for leaving paid work. Those aged 50 to 65 years who would consider returning to work commonly reported that they left:

- to retire (24%)
- for a change of lifestyle (17%)
- because of the coronavirus pandemic (17%)
- because of redundancy (17%)
- because of stress (15%)

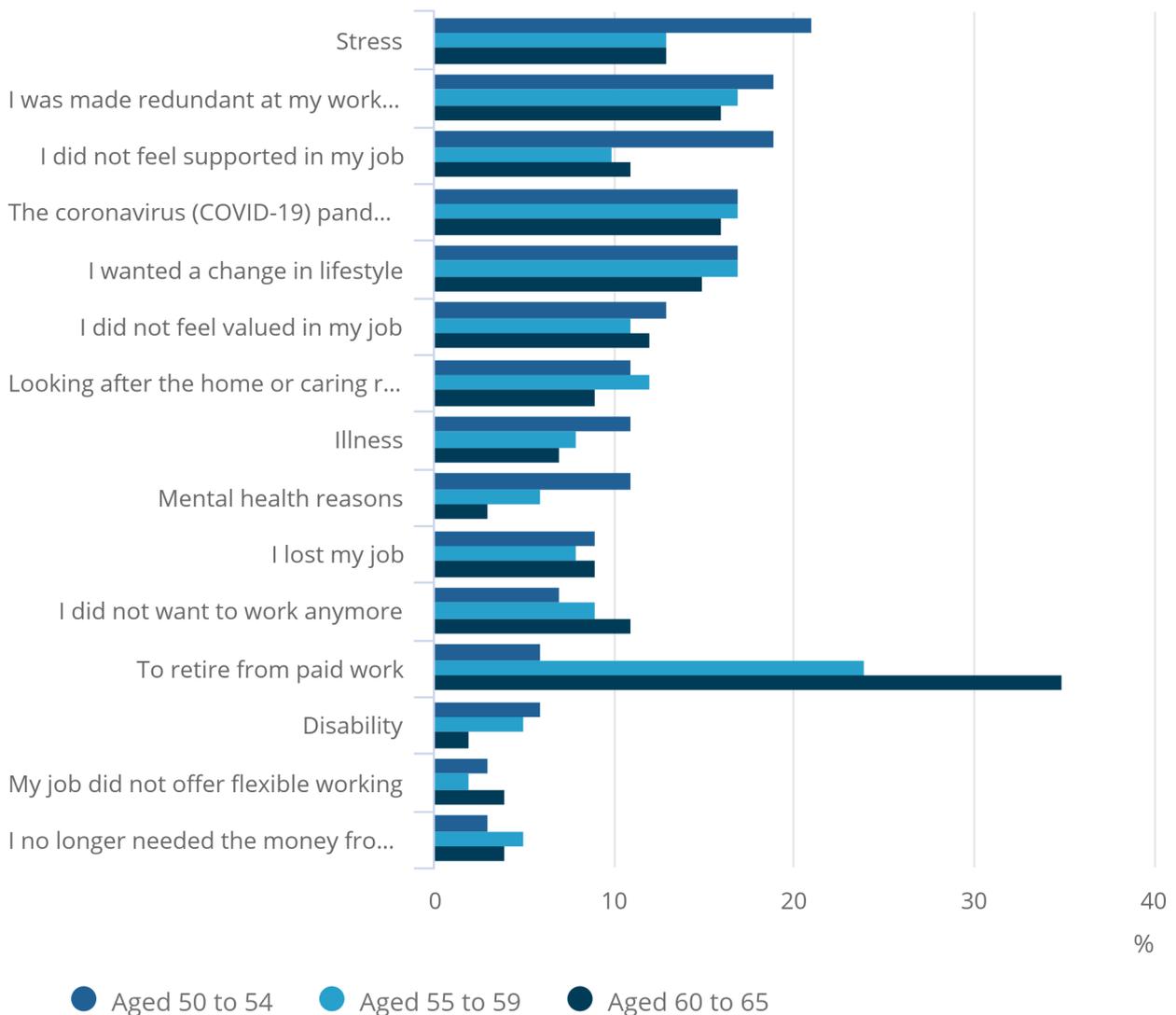
Similar to the results in our wave 2 release for those considering returning to work, reasons for leaving their previous employment differed by age.

Figure 1: Leaving their previous job to retire was more common among those aged 50 to 54 years and 60 to 64 years compared with 6% of adults aged 50 to 54 years

Proportion of adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left their previous job since the pandemic and would consider returning, by age group, Great Britain, 10 to 29 August 2022

Figure 1: Leaving their previous job to retire was more common among those aged 50 to 54 years and 60 to 64 years compared with 6% of adults aged 50 to 54 years

Proportion of adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left their previous job since the pandemic and would consider returning, by age group, Great Britain, 10 to 29 August 2022



Source: Office for National Statistics – Over 50s Lifestyle Study (OLS)

Notes:

1. Base: all adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left or lost their job since the start of the coronavirus pandemic (March 2020), have not returned, and would consider returning.
2. Respondents were able to choose more than one option.
3. We have excluded the "Other" response option from this chart.

The most common reason for the youngest cohort (aged 50 to 54 years) to leave their previous job was because of stress (21%), followed by being made redundant (19%), and not feeling supported in their job (19%).

4 . Health and wellbeing

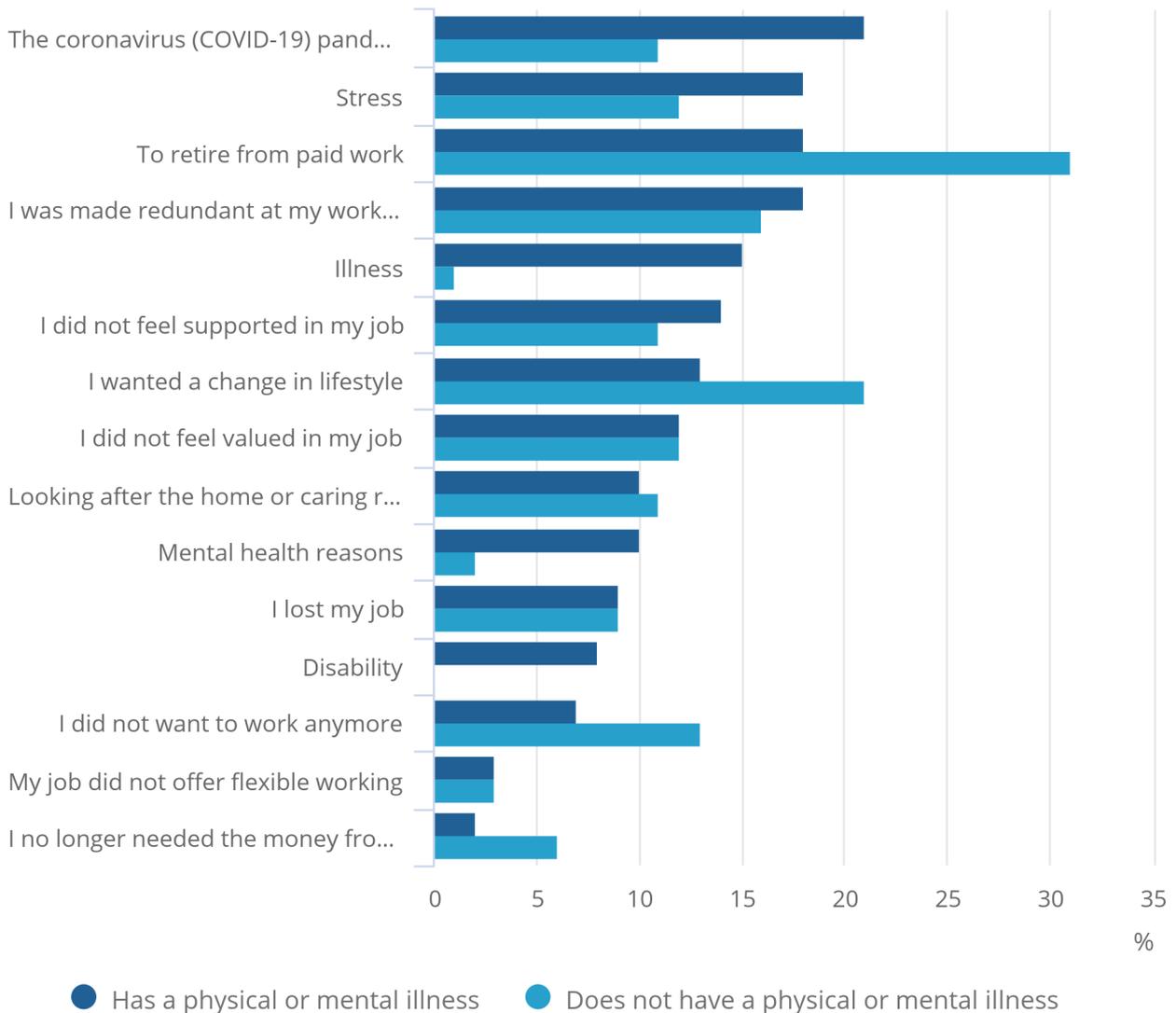
Among adults considering returning, those who reported a mental or physical health condition or illness were more likely to report the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic as a reason for leaving their previous job (21%) than those who did not (11%). Additionally, those with a mental or physical health condition or illness were less likely to report retirement as a reason to leave paid work (18%) or a change of lifestyle (13%) than those without a health condition (31% and 21%, respectively). Instead, this group were more likely to report health issues such as stress (18%), illness (15%), mental health (10%) or disability (8%) as reasons to leave paid work.

Figure 2: Those without a health condition were more likely to have left their previous job out of preference

Proportion of adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left their previous job since the pandemic and would consider returning by physical and mental health condition or illness, Great Britain, 10 to 29 August 2022

Figure 2: Those without a health condition were more likely to have left their previous job out of preference

Proportion of adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left their previous job since the pandemic and would consider returning by physical and mental health condition or illness, Great Britain, 10 to 29 August 2022



Source: Office for National Statistics – Over 50s Lifestyle Study (OLS)

Notes:

1. Base: all adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left or lost their job since the start of the coronavirus pandemic (March 2020), have not returned, and would consider returning.
2. Respondents were able to choose more than one option.
3. The response option "Disability" has been suppressed for those without a physical or mental health condition or illness because of the small sample size.
4. We have excluded the "Other" response option from this chart.

Those with a physical or mental health condition or illness were more likely to consider returning to work:

- for the money (67%, compared with 57% among those without)
- to improve their mental health (42%, compared with 30%)
- to improve their physical health (16%, compared with 12%)

Those with a physical or mental condition considered their health and job security as something that was important when looking for a new paid job. Nearly two-fifths (37%) said it was important to find a job that suits their level of health or disability and reported permanent employment as an important factor when returning (24%). This is compared with 3% and 15%, respectively, among those without physical or mental health illnesses or conditions.

Those who had returned to work were less likely to report a health condition or illness as a reason for leaving work

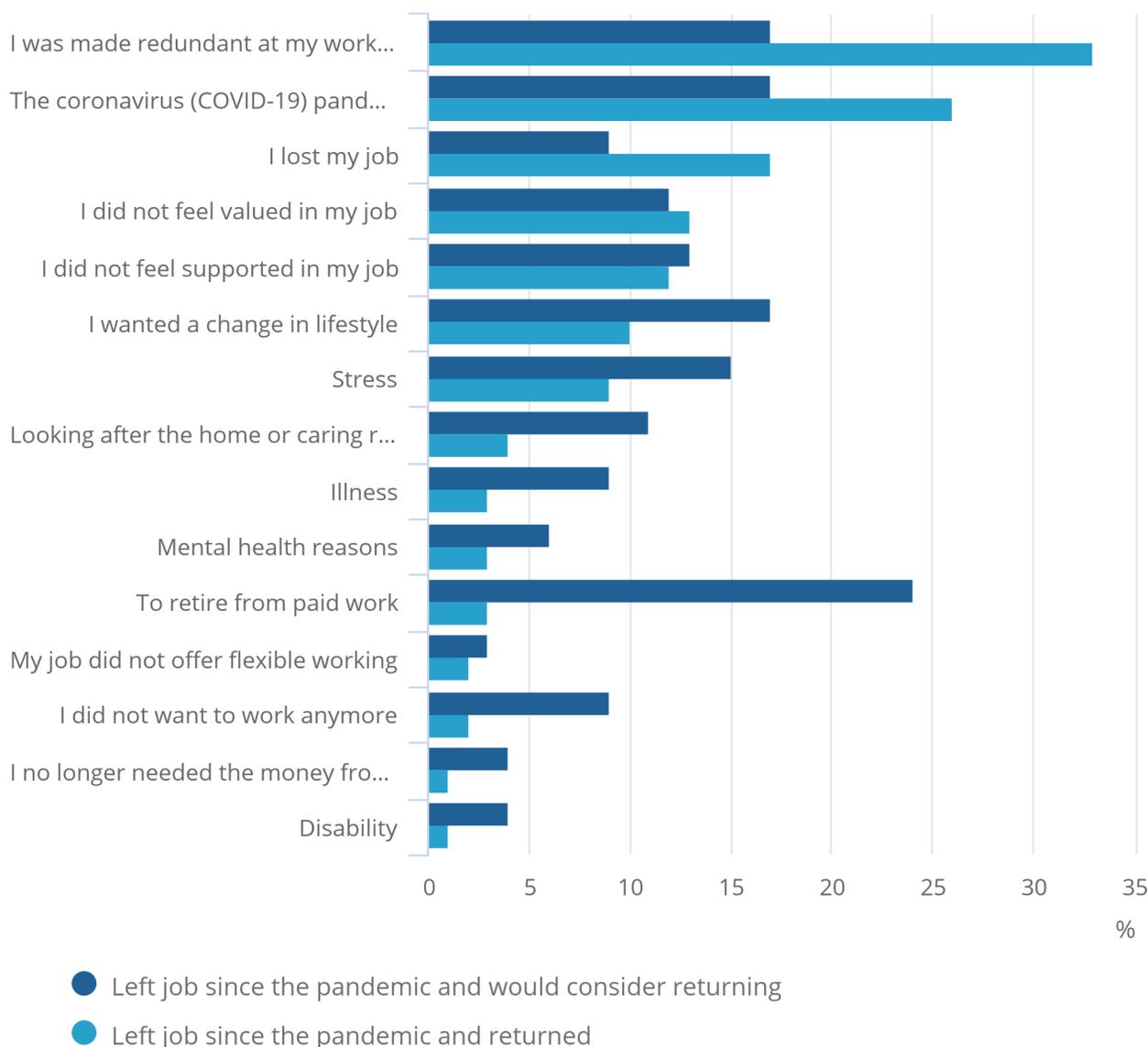
Those who have returned to work since leaving their previous job during the pandemic were overall less likely to have health conditions or an illness, with 24% reporting having a disability (compared with 36% of those considering returning but had not). Despite being less likely to report health issues as a reason for leaving, for those who had returned to work, reasons were often involuntary, with redundancy being the most common reason (33%).

Figure 3: Those who have returned to work were twice as likely to have been made redundant or lost their previous job

Proportion of adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left their previous job since the pandemic and would consider returning compared with those who have already returned, Great Britain, 10 to 29 August 2022

Figure 3: Those who have returned to work were twice as likely to have been made redundant or lost their previous job

Proportion of adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left their previous job since the pandemic and would consider returning compared with those who have already returned, Great Britain, 10 to 29 August 2022



Source: Office for National Statistics – Over 50s Lifestyle Study (OLS)

Notes:

1. Base: all adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left or lost their job since the start of the coronavirus pandemic (March 2020), have not returned, and would consider returning or have returned already.
2. Respondents were able to choose more than one option.
3. We have excluded the "Other" response option from this chart.

Among those aged 50 to 65 years who have not returned, around 2 in 10 (18%) said they were looking for paid work. This proportion decreased with age (22% for adults aged 50 to 54 years, 19% for adults aged 55 to 59 years and 15% for adults aged 60 to 65 years).

Among those who are not currently looking for paid work, the most common reasons for not returning were that:

- they had retired (31%); this increased with age (12% for aged 50 to 54 years, 34% for aged 55 to 59 years and 41% for 60 to 65 years)
- they wanted a change in lifestyle (19%); similar across the age groups (19%, 20% and 18%, respectively)
- they were looking after the home or for caring responsibilities (14%); similar across the age groups (15%, 16% and 12%, respectively)

5 . Reasons for leaving work during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic differed for each sector

Among those considering returning to work in the future:

- almost one-third (32%) would want to return to a similar job they were working in previously
- around 4 in 10 (37%) would like to move to a new occupation or sector
- around 3 in 10 (31%) did not have a preference

The coronavirus pandemic was the most common reason for leaving paid work for those considering returning and previously working in:

- arts, entertainment and recreation (46%)
- personal services, such as hairdressers (40%)
- the hospitality sector (32%)

Retirement was the most common reason for leaving paid work for those considering returning and previously working in:

- civil service and local government (49%)
- healthcare (37%)
- IT and communication (36%)

Stress was the second most common reason to leave their previous job for those working in healthcare (27%). This was the highest proportion reported across all sectors.

Figure 4: Leaving work to retire was more commonly reported in the civil service and local government, healthcare and IT and communications sectors

Reasons to leave paid work for those who have left their previous job since the pandemic and would consider returning by the sector of their previous job, Great Britain, 10 to 29 August 2022

Notes:

1. Base: all adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left or lost their job since the start of the coronavirus pandemic (March 2020), have not returned and would consider returning.
2. Respondents were able to choose more than one option.
3. Some values have been suppressed because of small sample sizes.
4. Armed Forces and Food production and agriculture sectors have been excluded because of small sample sizes.

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

The most common reason specified for leaving social care was to look after the home or for caring responsibilities (20%).

Among adults, approximately twice as many women (15%) as men (7%) left their previous job because of caring responsibilities.

Similarly, if their caring responsibilities change, twice as many women (18%) said they would consider returning to paid work (9% among men).

Adults who felt they had the skills were more likely to have chosen their exit from their previous job

Among those considering returning but had not, 82% said they felt they had the skills needed to get a new job.

Those who reported they did feel they had the necessary skills for a new job were more likely to report choosing their exit from the workforce than those who did not. For example, 26% of those who said they had the necessary skills left the workforce to retire, and 10% reported leaving because they did not want to work anymore (16% and 5%, respectively, of those who did not feel they had all the necessary skills).

Those who did not feel they had all the necessary skills for a new job were also more likely to report leaving work for several health reasons:

- 25% reported leaving because of stress (13% among those who felt they had the necessary skills)
- 25% reported leaving because of the coronavirus pandemic (compared with 15%)
- 18% reported leaving because of illness (compared with 7%)
- 14% reported leaving because of mental health reasons (compared with 5%)

These differences between those who did and did not feel they have all the necessary skills for a new job are also present when examining the reasons why they have not returned to work. Those who felt they had the skills to get a new job were more than twice as likely to say they had not returned because they had retired (35% compared with 15% of those who did not).

Those who felt they did not have the skills to get a new job were more likely to report reasons other than retirement for not returning, particularly health-related reasons, such as:

- mental health (16%)
- illness (12%)
- stress (12%)
- disability (10%)

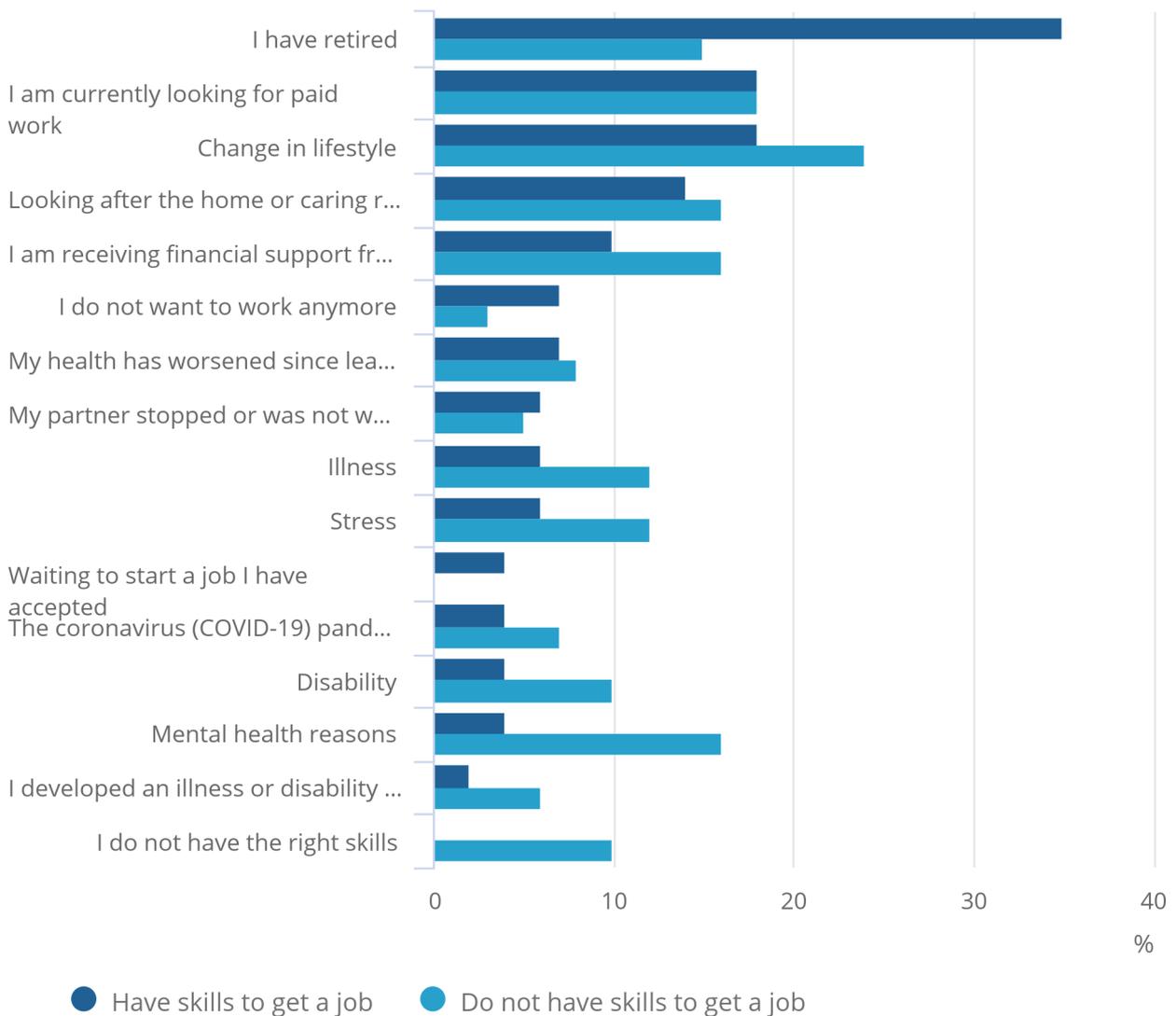
The proportions for mental health, illness and stress were all higher than the proportion of those that reported they do not have the right skills (10%).

Figure 5: Skilled adults were more likely to say that retirement was their reason for not returning to work

Proportion of adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left their previous job since the pandemic and would consider returning and their reasons for not returning by skills, Great Britain, 10 to 29 August 2022

Figure 5: Skilled adults were more likely to say that retirement was their reason for not returning to work

Proportion of adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left their previous job since the pandemic and would consider returning and their reasons for not returning by skills, Great Britain, 10 to 29 August 2022



Source: Office for National Statistics – Over 50s Lifestyle Study (OLS)

Notes:

1. Base: all adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left or lost their job since the start of the coronavirus pandemic (March 2020), have not returned, and would consider returning.
2. Respondents were able to choose more than one option.
3. We have excluded the "Other" response option from this chart.
4. "Waiting to start a job" has been suppressed because of small sample size for those without skills.
5. The response option "do not have the right skills" for those who reported having the right skills is not included as it is less than 1%.

6 . Returning to work for the money

We have reported, in our article, on the [Impact of increased cost of living on adults across Great Britain](#). We found that "money" was an important motivation to return for all groups, but particularly for the younger cohort. A higher proportion of adults aged 50 to 54 years reported returning to paid work for the money compared with their older peers (aged 50 to 54 years: 69%, aged 55 to 59 years: 62%, and aged 60 to 65 years: 59%). We also found that adults who feel they do not have the skills to get a job, and adults with a mortgage or loan to buy their property were more likely to consider returning for the money (both 68%) in comparison to those who had the skills (62%), and those who own their house outright (60%).

Figure 6: Money as a reason to consider returning was reported most by the younger cohort (aged 50 to 54 years)

Proportion of adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left their previous job since the pandemic but would consider returning for the money, Great Britain, 10 to 29 August 2022

Notes:

1. Base: all adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left or lost their job since the start of the coronavirus pandemic (March 2020), have not returned and would consider returning.

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

Among adults who told us they were considering returning to work for the money, just under one-quarter (24%) of the younger cohort (adults aged 50 to 54 years) said that they had not returned because they were currently looking for work. This was the most commonly reported reason for this age group.

For the older cohorts, retirement was the most commonly-reported reason to have not returned to work, with 28% of adults aged 55 to 59 years and 35% of adults aged 60 to 65 years reporting this (compared with 11% of those aged 50 to 54 years).

Those considering returning to work appeared less financially resilient

Those who would consider returning to work were also asked about their debt situation. Those who reported having one or more types of debt, excluding mortgages, were more likely to have lost their previous job (12%) or left their previous job because of the coronavirus pandemic (21%). This was 6% and 13%, respectively, among those with no debt.

Those who reported having no debt were also more likely to have chosen their exit from their previous paid job, with 28% reporting choosing to retire (19% among those with one or more types of debt).

We also found that the financial situation differed between those who were considering returning or not.

Figure 7: Those considering returning were less likely to be able to afford an unexpected, but necessary expense (61%) or own their house outright (57%)

Proportion of adults aged 50 to 65 years who left their previous job since the pandemic, Great Britain, 10 to 29 August 2022

Notes:

1. Base: all adults aged 50 to 65 years who have left or lost their job since the start of the coronavirus pandemic (March 2020).
2. Squatting, part-rent, part mortgage and live rent free have been excluded because of small sample sizes.

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

Housing tenure

Among those considering returning to work, those who owned their home outright were more likely to have reported leaving their previous job out of preference. Around one-third (34%) left their previous job to retire compared with 17% of those currently paying off a mortgage and 3% of those renting. Just over one in five (22%) left for a change in lifestyle compared with 11% and 9%, respectively.

By contrast, those who reported renting their home appeared more financially vulnerable, with the most commonly reported reasons being: the coronavirus pandemic (28%), compared with those currently paying off a mortgage (17%) and those who own their house outright (13%), and losing their job (19%), compared with 10% and 5%, respectively.

Those renting were also the least likely to report leaving for redundancy (11% compared with 16% of those who own their house outright, and 23% of those with a mortgage).

7 . Returning to the workplace – the motivations and barriers for people aged 50 years and over, Great Britain data

[Motivations and barriers for adults aged 50 years and over to return to the workplace, Great Britain](#) Dataset | Released 19 December 2022 Estimates from the Over 50s Lifestyle Study for Great Britain, wave 2 for those who have left, not returned but consider returning. Includes data covering reasons for leaving, reasons for not returning and reasons for considering returning.

All Over 50s Lifestyle Study datasets used in this article are available on the [Related data page](#).

8 . Glossary

Economically inactive people

People not in employment who have not been seeking work within the last four weeks and/or are unable to start work within the next two weeks.

Retired people

A retired person is defined as anyone who describes themselves as "retired" or, anyone over minimum National Insurance pension age describing themselves as "unoccupied" or "sick or injured but not intending to seek work".

Self-employed people

Self-employed people are those who define themselves as working for themselves, rather than receiving a wage or salary from an employer.

9 . Data sources and quality

Over 50s Lifestyle Study (OLS)

This release contains data and indicators from the Office for National Statistics' (ONS) Over 50s Lifestyle Study to understand the experiences of adults aged 50 to 65 years.

Where differences between groups are presented in this article, associated [confidence intervals](#) are included in the [accompanying datasets](#) to indicate their significance.

Sampling and weighting

In the period between 10 to 29 August 2022, we sampled 43,250 individuals. These were selected from those who had previously completed the Labour Market Online Survey (LMO) and were aged between 50 and 65 years. The responding sample contained 23,490 individuals, representing a 54.4% response rate.

More information on data breakdowns can be found in our [Reasons workers aged 50 years and over returned to work during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic, Great Britain dataset](#). It should be noted that a small number of respondents reported "prefer not to say" for some of the questions mentioned.

Our survey does not include adults living in care homes or other establishments, so they are not included in our analysis.

Weights were adjusted for non-response and attrition. The weights were then calibrated considering the population distributions of sex by age, region, and employment group. Population totals for age, sex, and region were based on projections for July 2022.

Disability status

To define disability in this publication, we refer to the [Government Statistical Service \(GSS\) harmonised "core" definition of disability](#): this identifies "disabled" as a person who has a physical or mental health condition or illness that has lasted or is expected to last 12 months or more that reduces their ability to carry-out day-to-day activities. The GSS harmonised questions are asked of the respondent in the survey, meaning that disability status is self-reported.

Statistical significance

This report presents a summary of results, with further data including confidence intervals for the estimates contained in the associated datasets. Where comparisons between groups are presented, 95% confidence intervals should be used to assess the [statistical significance](#) of the change.

10 . Related links

[Reasons workers aged 50 years and over left and returned to work during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic, Wave 2](#) Article | Released 27 September 2022 Motivations of those aged 50 to 65 years leaving work during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in Great Britain from March 2020, why they left and whether or not they intend to return. Main findings from wave 2 of the Over 50s Lifestyle Study.

[Half a million more people are out of the labour force because of long-term sickness](#) Article | Released 10 November 2022 Between June and August 2022, around 2.5 million people reported long-term sickness as the main reason for economic inactivity, up from around 2 million in 2019.

[Impact of coronavirus on people aged 50 to 70 years and their employment after the pandemic](#) Article | Released 14 March 2022 Qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews on the Over 50s Lifestyle Study (OLS). Looking at the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the lifestyles of people aged 50 to 70 years in Great Britain since March 2020, including their employment status, financial circumstances, and health.

[Movements out of work for those aged over 50 years since the start of the coronavirus pandemic](#) Article | Released 14 March 2022 The movement of people in the UK aged 50 to 70 years leaving the labour market during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and how this has changed for different sectors and demographic groups. Data from the Labour Force Survey.

[Living longer: impact of working from home on older workers](#) Article | Released 25 August 2021 The shift towards working from home seen during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic may help enable older workers to remain in the labour market for longer.

[Changing trend and recent shortages in the Labour Market, UK: 2016 to 2021](#) Bulletin | Released 20 December 2021 Changing trends and shortages in the labour market and how this affects different occupations and demographic groups. We look at where workers have entered or left the workforce and how this has changed in recent years. Interactive data visualisations also allow detailed exploration of different measures and changing patterns.

[Labour market overview, UK](#) Bulletin | Monthly Estimates of employment, unemployment, economic inactivity, and other employment-related statistics for the UK.

11 . Cite this article

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 19 December 2022, ONS website, article, [Returning to the workplace – the motivations and barriers for adults aged 50 years and over, Great Britain: August 2022](#)