



SENIOR TALENT

Ageism and the Struggle of the Senior Marketer

Senior marketing roles have been in decline since 2022, senior salaries are down on average, and it now takes candidates twice as long to land a new role — we look at why, and what the data says age-diverse teams are missing out on.

Senior marketing roles have been on the decline since 2022, and candidates are taking twice as long to find new ones. We wanted to know why — so we looked at the data, the research, and our own experience of hiring for this market.

THE DOWNTURN

Senior Marketers Are Struggling to Find Roles — Why?

Two things kicked off the downturn in senior marketing hiring in the UK: the end of the global COVID hiring peak, and the Liz Truss mini-budget here at home. 2022 was the pivot point — hiring companies chose to focus budget on mid-to-junior marketing roles with directly attributable ROI, and left strategic marketing on the back burner. We know that isn't true of every business, but the statistics back up the pattern.

+8.7%

growth in mid-market digital marketing roles over the period

-3%

average decline in senior marketing salaries over the same period

-12%

decline in senior roles advertised in the US over the period

That US decline suggests organisations are restructuring their marketing functions around less experienced, less costly marketers. It's compounded by US companies relocating to lower-cost regions, which has hit traditional marketing centres like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles hard.

The job hunt has more than doubled

Average time for a senior marketer to secure a new role

2021

3.2 months

2024

7.8 months

Source: Example Recruitment research

The Impact Across Industries

The reduction in senior marketing roles hasn't landed evenly. Technology companies — traditionally viewed as youth-oriented — show the most pronounced bias against older marketing professionals: a study of Fortune 500 tech companies found 78% of marketing leadership positions were filled by people under 45, against 52% in traditional manufacturing.

Tech hands marketing leadership to the under-45s

Who fills marketing leadership positions, by age

Fortune 500 tech companies

78%

22%

Traditional manufacturing

52%

48%

■ Under 45 ■ 45 and over

"45 and over" is the remainder after under-45s.

Consumer goods presents a mixed picture — some organisations value experienced marketers who understand long-term brand building, others chase digital-first approaches that favour younger professionals. Financial services has kept relatively stable demand for senior marketing talent, particularly where regulatory knowledge and relationship management take years to build. Media and advertising has seen perhaps the most dramatic shift of all, with traditional agencies cutting senior staff as digitally focused agencies grow a younger workforce — reflecting real changes in media consumption and ad technology, but also representing a real loss of institutional knowledge and strategic capability.



When we started out, we were given the opportunity to hire for a number of US startups. Enthusiastic though they were, the direction we were given was — “this university, this company, this age.” With companies often made up entirely of people under the age of 35, where is the opportunity for experience when potential is all they want?

— EXAMPLE

“Tech startups are often the biggest culprits, hiring “people like us” with often coded language. The result? Groupthink.”

TWO MARKETS

Age Discrimination: UK vs US

The UK's more explicit age discrimination protections have pushed bias into subtler forms, while the US market shows more direct age-related hiring preferences, particularly in tech and startups. Brexit keeps having an effect too — multinational companies have been consolidating their European marketing operations in other EU countries, and because they tend to relocate whole marketing teams rather than individual positions, senior marketing roles are disproportionately hit.

Salary expectations differ between the markets as well. UK senior marketing professionals have generally accepted lower compensation in exchange for job security and benefits, while US professionals hold out for higher salaries but face more employment volatility. That plays out differently once someone loses a role, too: UK professionals are more likely to accept underemployment, while US professionals more often move into consulting or entrepreneurship.

UK: subtler forms of bias

vs

US: more direct age preferences

UK: lower pay for job security

vs

US: higher pay, more volatility

UK: underemployment

vs

US: consulting or entrepreneurship

~1,200

age discrimination cases heard by UK employment tribunals each year

8%

of those cases come from marketing and advertising

CODED LANGUAGE

How Ads Are Skewed Towards the Young

Research from the American Marketing Association's Boston chapter found 78% of older workers have witnessed or experienced age discrimination at work, with marketing showing particularly high rates thanks to industry stereotypes about innovation and digital fluency. The study identified coded language — “digital native,” “high energy,” “culture fit” — as a common way job postings screen out older candidates while staying legally compliant. Postings using that language got 40% fewer applications from candidates over 45, which suggests the intent lands exactly as meant.

“Digital native”

“High energy”

“Culture fit”

78%

of older workers have witnessed or experienced age discrimination at work

-40%

fewer applications from over-45s to postings using coded “age” language

41%

of hiring managers admit appearance influenced their view of older candidates

Interview processes show pronounced bias too — physical appearance influences hiring decisions, and a 2024 survey found 41% of hiring managers admitted as much, citing

assumptions about energy levels, technological competence and cultural fit. The emphasis on “digital native” requirements is a particularly problematic form of this, since it assumes technological competence is tied to age rather than training. Research shows older workers may need different learning approaches for new tools, but they often reach equal or superior proficiency once trained, especially on the strategic side of marketing technology.

CULTURAL RELEVANCE

Marketing to Generation Z — and Wrong Assumptions

The industry's obsession with cultural relevance has created another barrier for older professionals, built on the assumption that age determines cultural awareness and the ability to connect with diverse audiences. That bias shows up as a hiring preference for younger marketers presumed to “get” millennial and Gen Z consumers — despite effective marketing actually depending on research, empathy and strategic thinking rather than demographic similarity. If anything, that professional skill — separating personal preference from market reality — often improves with experience.

The industry's focus on youth culture also overlooks the purchasing power it's ignoring: consumers over 50 control roughly 70% of disposable income in developed markets, yet marketing teams that lack age diversity often struggle to reach that segment effectively. That's a blind spot with a direct line to business performance.

~70%

of disposable income in developed markets is controlled by consumers over 50 — the segment age-homogeneous marketing teams often struggle to reach.

Roughly 70% Over-50s

30% Everyone else

““Dynamic digital natives” is one way of saying “we don't want anyone over the age of 45 applying for this role” — whether you mean it or not.”

There's precedent here: the phrase “digital native” has already been used in a court case where a senior marketer successfully defended themselves against age discrimination when applying for a role. Many of us are stuck in a loop of using common language without seriously weighing its effect on candidates.

WHAT BIAS COSTS

The Organisational Cost

Academic research shows age discrimination in hiring carries real costs for organisations, which cuts against the common assumption that avoiding older workers is economically sensible. Age-diverse teams consistently outperform homogeneous younger ones in marketing contexts — particularly in strategic planning, risk assessment and long-term brand building. McKinley Marketing Partners found marketing teams with 20+ years of age diversity produced 23% more successful campaigns than teams spanning under 10 years.

23% **more successful campaigns** from marketing teams spanning 20+ years of age diversity than from teams spanning under 10 years.

There's a knowledge cost too. Experienced professionals carry a deep understanding of market cycles, consumer behaviour and brand evolution that isn't easily replaced by hiring younger — organisations that systematically exclude older workers tend to repeat strategic mistakes and miss long-term trends. Customer relationship management suffers as well: teams with broader age representation are more effective at reaching diverse customer segments, particularly in B2B, where decision-makers themselves span multiple generations.

- More successful campaigns — teams spanning 20+ years of age diversity produced 23% more successful campaigns than teams with under 10 years' range (McKinley Marketing Partners)
- Institutional knowledge — understanding of market cycles, consumer behaviour and brand evolution that can't be replaced simply by hiring younger
- Fewer repeated mistakes — organisations that exclude older workers tend to repeat strategic errors and miss long-term trends
- Better reach into high-spending older customers — over-50s control roughly 70% of disposable income in developed markets
- Stronger B2B relationships — broader age representation on the team helps reach decision-makers who themselves span multiple generations

IN THE ROOM

Interview Performance and Visual Bias

The psychological impact of ageism runs well beyond the headline employment statistics. Research from the University of California, Irvine, with AARP, looked at hiring patterns at a national restaurant chain that used two application routes: in-person applications with immediate interviews, and online applications followed by skills testing and then a face-to-face interview. Where age was immediately visible — the in-person route — older applicants received job offers at a rate 68% lower than younger candidates going through the same process.

More troubling still: older candidates who applied online and demonstrated equal or superior competency through skills testing still faced real discrimination once they reached the face-to-face stage, receiving offers at a rate 40% lower than younger applicants with similar test scores. That points to visual age cues triggering bias that overrides objective evidence of competence — a particularly significant finding for marketing, an industry that leans heavily on presentation skills, client interaction and personal branding, and where “cultural fit” and “energy level” assessments can act as legally-compliant proxies for age discrimination.

When age is visible, offers drop

How much lower older applicants' offer rate was than younger applicants'

In-person route, age visible
from the start

68% lower

Online route, equal test scores,
then face-to-face

40% lower

Source: University of California, Irvine, with AARP.

GOING INDEPENDENT

The Rise of the Post-50 Freelancer

Freelancing has stopped being a fallback for experienced marketing professionals and become, for many, a preferred and more lucrative path. There are now 57 million Americans freelancing, up from 53 million in 2014, and close to 40% of freelance workers are over 55. The push factors are what you'd expect — age discrimination in traditional hiring, corporate downsizing, industry consolidation eliminating senior roles. But the pull factors matter just as much: 43% of older freelancers say they chose independent work to become their own boss, and 42% were motivated by pursuing passion projects that had been sidelined during their corporate careers.

Marketing suits this transition particularly well, since the skills freelance consulting needs — strategic thinking, client relationship management, deep industry knowledge — tend to improve with experience rather than diminish. Older marketing freelancers bring professional networks built over decades, research grounding from pre-digital careers, and the composure that comes from weathering multiple market cycles. Financial outcomes often beat their previous corporate pay too, particularly when they lean on that experience and network — in the UK, experienced marketing consultants often charge rates comparable to or above the £500+ a day typical for senior project management contractors.

57m

Americans now work as freelancers, up from 53m in 2014

~40%

of freelance workers are over 55

FOUNDERS

The Rise of the Older Entrepreneur

The stereotype of the young founder doesn't hold up. A landmark study by researchers from MIT, Northwestern, Wharton and the US Census Bureau found the average age of entrepreneurs at the point they founded their companies is 42 — rising to 43 for high-tech startup founders, and 45 for founders of the fastest-growing unicorn companies. The success rates back this up: a 50-year-old founder is twice as likely to build a thriving business that reaches an IPO or a successful acquisition than a 30-year-old founder, and that advantage keeps increasing up to around age 60.

The typical founder is in their forties

Average age at the point of founding

All founders

42 yrs

High-tech startup founders

43 yrs

Fastest-growing unicorn founders

45 yrs

Source: MIT, Northwestern, Wharton and the US Census Bureau.

2x

A 50-year-old founder is **twice as likely to reach an IPO or successful acquisition** as a 30-year-old founder.

In marketing specifically, decades of accumulated domain knowledge lets experienced professionals spot opportunities and avoid the pitfalls that often trap younger entrepreneurs. Eric Yuan founded Zoom at 41, after seeing the limits of existing video conferencing during his time at WebEx; Reed Hastings started Netflix at 37, drawing on his understanding of both technology and consumer behaviour. Industry experience and strategic insight, in both cases, mattered more than youth and energy.

CLIENTS

Client Relationship Management

Marketing's heavy client-facing element creates its own opening for age bias — the assumption that younger candidates connect better with clients or represent a brand more effectively. But research on professional services relationships shows trust, competence and reliability drive client satisfaction, not age or appearance. Many marketing decisions are made by senior executives who may actually prefer working with experienced consultants and account managers, and B2B relationships often benefit from age and experience matching between the service provider and the client decision-maker. The industry's emphasis on presentation skills and professional appearance can favour experienced professionals just as much — the confidence, communication skills and executive presence that come from years of client interaction.

AGE-DIVERSE TEAMS

The Art of Team Building

The research is fairly conclusive: hiring companies are using coded language, consciously or not, to find younger, cheaper employees. The economic environment has felt depressed for around three years now, the pattern has barely shifted, and senior marketers in particular are struggling to secure new roles, with the average time to find a new position doubling over the period.

And yet the data is just as clear that the more age-diverse a team, the better it performs — more experience, more strategic thought, more direction and mentoring. Think of the great football teams of the past: even the ones built on “youth” are really a blend of experience and potential. Hollowing out senior roles has left teams solely focused on delivering KPIs, without the mentoring senior marketers bring, or the experience of having weathered multiple recessions and crises. That's the real art of team building — not hiring to culture fit, not hiring to a budget, not sourcing people who've hit certain metrics, but building a unit that performs better together.

“We're living longer, and we'll have to start working longer. That means the talent pool is getting older. Ignore it at your peril.”

We're all living longer, on average, and healthier with it — look at how much older 1980s footballers look on their Panini stickers compared with players the same age today. Bring that into the marketing profession and there are more marketers available over 45 than ever before. It's time to use them.

THE UPSIDE

Where Experience Still Wins

- Freelance and consulting work — nearly 40% of freelancers are now over 55, many earning more than they did in a corporate role, with experienced UK marketing consultants commanding rates comparable to or above the £500+ a day typical for senior contractors
- Founding a company — the average founder is 42 at the point of founding (43 for high-tech, 45 for unicorn-scale companies), and a 50-year-old founder is twice as likely to reach an IPO or successful acquisition than a 30-year-old
- Client relationships — trust, competence and reliability, not age, are what drive client satisfaction, and B2B buyers often prefer working with people who match their own seniority

- Adapting to new technology — older marketers achieve equal or superior proficiency once trained on new tools, particularly in strategic applications of marketing technology

FINAL WORD

The Final Word, Finally...

We always talk about cycles in the economy and in recruitment. They used to be quicker and sharper, but this particular cycle has gone on far too long. Since the post-COVID / Liz Truss slump, we've seen a dip in senior marketing salaries and a rise in the availability of the talent pool — which means longer job searches, and marketing teams that are younger, less experienced, and more tightly focused around short-term KPIs. It's only natural for businesses to pull up the drawbridge and focus on survival. But that ignores the value senior marketers bring beyond what's immediately tangible: the experience of having done this before, of having gone through multiple crises, of having reorganised teams, of seeing beyond today and tomorrow to the wider strategic picture.

Cycles do come around, eventually, and it will benefit the wider economy to bring senior marketers back into the fold. To get there, the industry needs to get over its obsession with youth — the requirements for “dynamism,” “digital natives” and “tech savviness” need to be put in the bin, or rather, the assumption that those attributes belong only to the young does. There is no evidence whatsoever that marketers over 45 are less technically savvy, and plenty of evidence they're the quickest to adapt and have, in the round, “seen it all before.” We've built a world of consultants and freelancers who all come at a short-term cost to businesses — and that's a choice, not a necessity.



Example Recruitment — marketing-led headhunters for SaaS and FinTech startups and scaleups in New York and London.
Read the live report and get in touch at theexample.co/reports/ageism-and-the-struggle-of-the-senior-marketer