



Food and retail
sector overview

Evolving Together

Flourishing in the
age-diverse workforce



Food and retail

As we look to the future, there is a clear opportunity to ensure roles in food, farming and retail remain attractive.

Food and farming

With the UN predicting that 60% more food will be needed worldwide by 2050¹²⁹ to feed our growing population, demographic shifts will inevitably have a significant impact on the food sector, at every stage from farm to fork. Not least, an older population will shape consumer preferences and impact what food is grown and produced in all parts of the world.

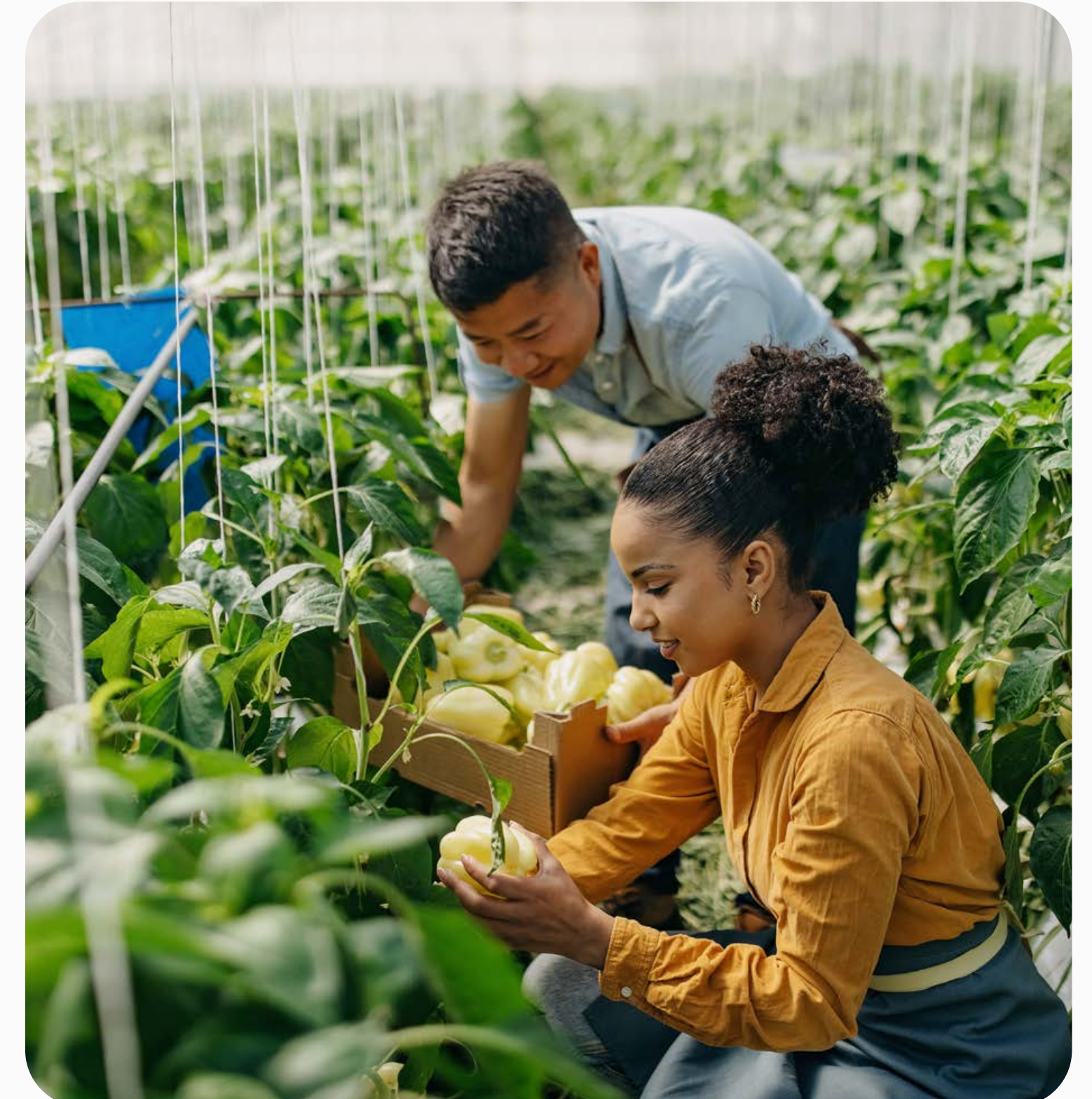
Different stages of the food production cycle will have different considerations. Already, the agriculture sector is experiencing an ageing workforce. In England, for example, more than a third of farmers are over 65, and a further third (32%) are between 55 and 64¹³⁰. In the US, census data suggests the average age of farm producers rose to 57.5 years in the five years to 2017¹³¹.

The same trend is seen in Japan, where by 2022 the average age of farmers was 68.4¹³². In Europe, the average age went from 49.2 in 2004 to 51.4 a decade later¹³³. While countries can continue to import food rather than grow it themselves, there is an opportunity for them to be looking now at the implications of their reliance on agricultural labour abroad for food security and the environment as well.

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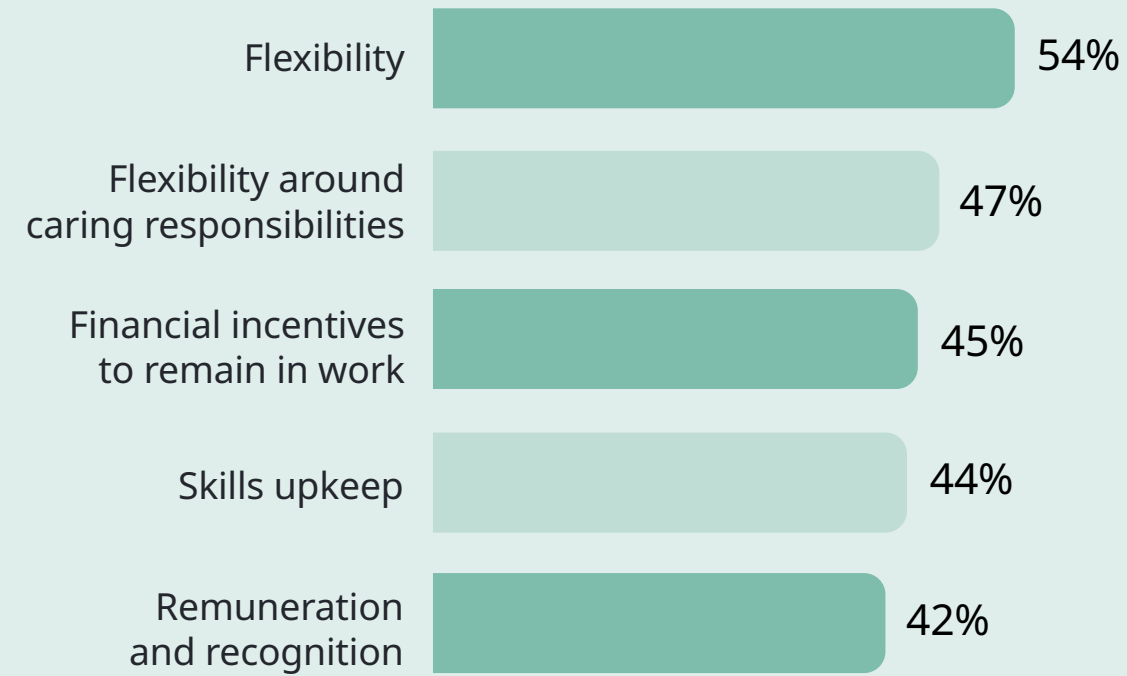
Elsewhere in the food sector, there are sustained questions about skills gaps and a shrinking workforce. In Australia, experts have projected the sector's workforce is facing a shortfall of 172,000 workers¹³⁴, while ONS data suggests the food manufacturing sector in the UK lost 4,000 jobs between 2022 and 2023¹³⁵.

Amid the demographic changes, technology has the potential to radically transform food production, whether in terms of smart farming tools like crop robots to AI being used in factories to support food safety.



Food and farming: priorities for success in a future age-diverse workforce*

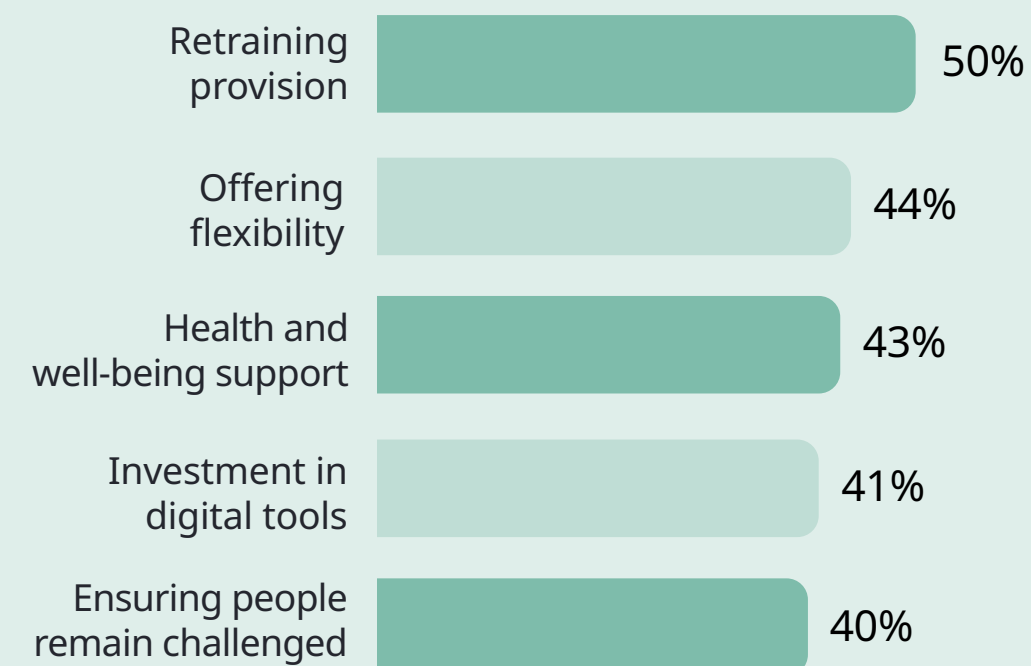
Priorities for individual career development



Priorities for government and societal action



Priorities for businesses to succeed



* Full question and answer lists can be found in the methodology section



Retail

For the retail sector, the immediate consideration presented by demographic shifts is how to cater for older consumers. But there are implications for the workforce as well, with the potential to positively impact workforce participation amongst workers looking for flexibility further on in their careers.

As a sector, retail skews younger than others, often because jobs are low-skilled or flexible. At present, many frontline retail roles are physically demanding and therefore could be less desirable to a more mature workforce, although technology could change that in due course.

ONS data drawn from the 2021 census recorded that a quarter of jobs in the sector in England and Wales were held by people aged 16 to 29¹³⁶. In the US, the median age of a retail worker was 40 in 2019, and a fifth of workers in frontline retail roles were under 24¹³⁷.

Many of the advantages that recommend the sector to new entrants to the workforce could also be desirable to older worker

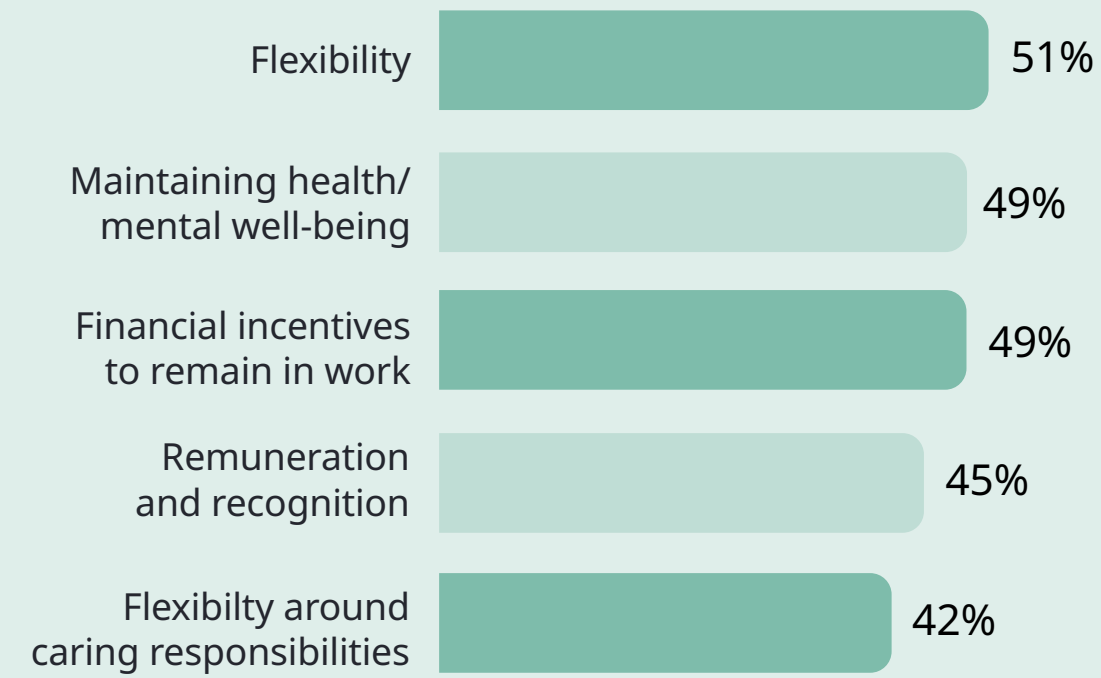
The opportunity for retail may therefore come not from the incumbent workforce ageing out of the sector, as is the case in other industries, but from tackling ageism and ensuring opportunities are available for older workers as the pool of younger workers shrinks. Many of the advantages that recommend the sector to new entrants to the workforce – not least ability to work part-time – could also be desirable to older workers.



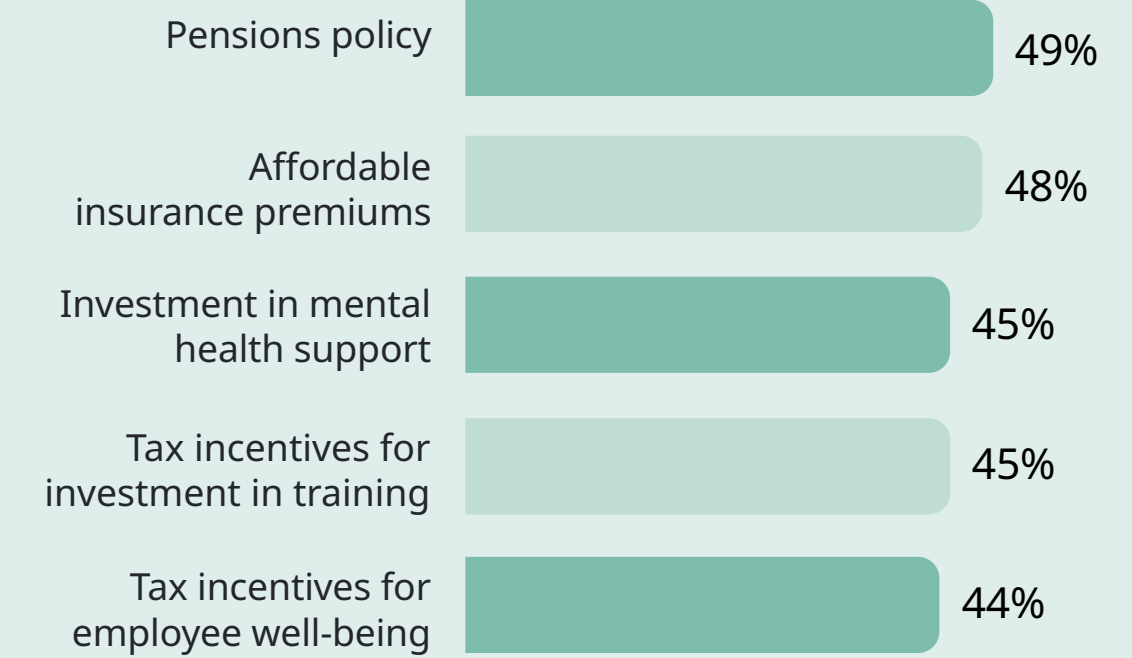


Retail: priorities for success in a future age-diverse workforce*

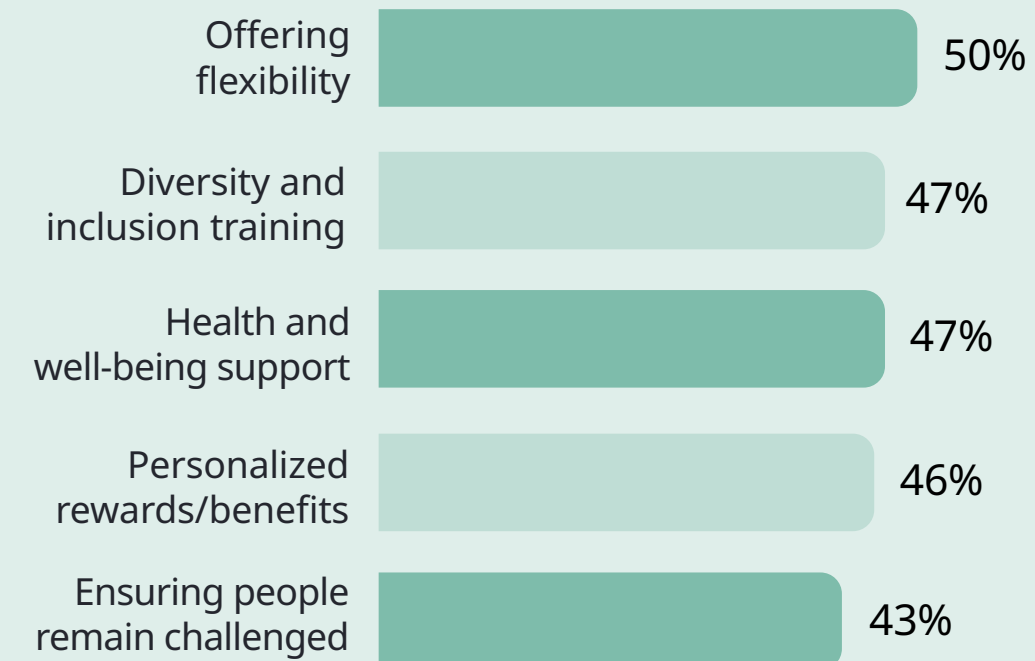
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Priorities for action

Flexibility coming high on the priority list is indicative of food being a sector that may have unsociable working hours or require shift work. The same is true for retail, particularly for those working in online retail as opposed to shops with traditional opening hours. Likewise, the desire from food and farming for organizations to invest in retraining and career opportunities and for policymakers to incentivize this highlights the opportunity for greater emphasis on career progression. This is something that may traditionally have been less of a focus for people in what were expected to be transient roles. Ensuring that people in these industries have the chance to sustain a career in the long-term, conceivably over decades, will be vital in ensuring there is a ready workforce in the future.

In food and farming, there is appetite for investment in digital tools to support people of all ages to carry out their roles. This highlights the potential for older workers to contribute their experience alongside technology that can perhaps take on more physical or manual responsibilities. In retail, health and well-being maintenance scores highly, along with a desire for affordable insurance premiums for older workers in manual roles, highlighting the physicality of these roles and the prospect of helping older workers remain in retail careers. Again, there is a clear opportunity for employers and governments to invest in delivery of healthcare and similar services to support the food and retail economies in the decades to come.

Please access the **full report** to view the references referred to in this pdf.



Todd Redwood, Managing Director, Global Food and Retail, BSI

“To some degree, food and retail might historically have been seen as sectors better suited to younger workers at the start of their careers looking to build up experience in the working world. In reality, both have always supported meaningful lifelong career journeys for many.”

“As we look to the future and a reality in which more generations are working together at one time, there is a clear opportunity to ensure roles in food, farming and retail remain attractive and desirable. The research points to the fact that healthcare and well-being support will be critical. Equally, investment in skills development and training will only grow in importance.”

“Both sectors are central to the global economy. Now is the moment to consider how we can collaborate across society to ensure the people and businesses in food, farming and retail can flourish in the decades ahead.”



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