

Hidden Workers: Part-Time Potential

If employers helped overcome key hurdles,
most part-time workers would work many more hours

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Executive summary	4
Heterogeneity among the hidden	5
Who are part-time workers?	6
Barriers to full-time employment	9
Segments of part-time workers	12
Takeaways	19
Methodology	20

Executive summary

As employers continue to encounter major skills shortages, many qualified and willing workers remain unemployed or underemployed. These “hidden workers,” ignored by employers for a variety of reasons, represent a potential source of much-needed labor. In our initial report, *Hidden Workers: Untapped Talent*, we recognized the diverse nature of this group. In this follow-up, we focus on *part-time* hidden workers.

To examine the obstacles part-time workers must navigate in finding employment, we surveyed nearly 9,000 part-time and full-time hidden workers in Germany, the U.K., and the U.S. in 2020. In this report, we look at the sample of roughly 1,500 part-time workers who indicated that, if their circumstances were different, they would prefer to work more hours.

Part-time hidden workers are disproportionately represented by older people and women. But much like hidden workers generally, the group is heterogeneous. We identified six main categories of part-time hidden workers, each facing unique challenges and in need of different approaches by employers in the hiring process: caregivers, people facing health challenges, people with disabilities and/or mental health challenges, people with other personal or family obligations, the partly retired, and those working part time for economic reasons.

Though each of these subsets of workers faces a distinct set of hurdles, they broadly require two key forms of support from their employers: increased flexibility and robust communication.

Flexibility—in terms of both remote work and hours worked—enables workers with varied and changing external responsibilities to take on additional duties at work. Whether a worker is unable to find full-time positions in their area or must care for the health of themselves or their family, flexibility is a necessary condition for taking on more work.

Clear communication—beginning with well-defined job descriptions and extending to day-to-day interactions with colleagues—drives greater clarity and a deeper sense of engagement among workers. Understanding workers is foundational to helping part-time workers adapt to their individual challenges and to recognizing those who want to expand their responsibilities.

Governments certainly can and ought to implement policies to help part-time workers who wish to take on more hours do so, but the main onus is on businesses to make more hours available to part-time employees. That will enable employers to utilize workers they already have with company-specific experience, bolstering their income and reducing the odds that they will voluntarily leave their positions.¹

Heterogeneity among the hidden

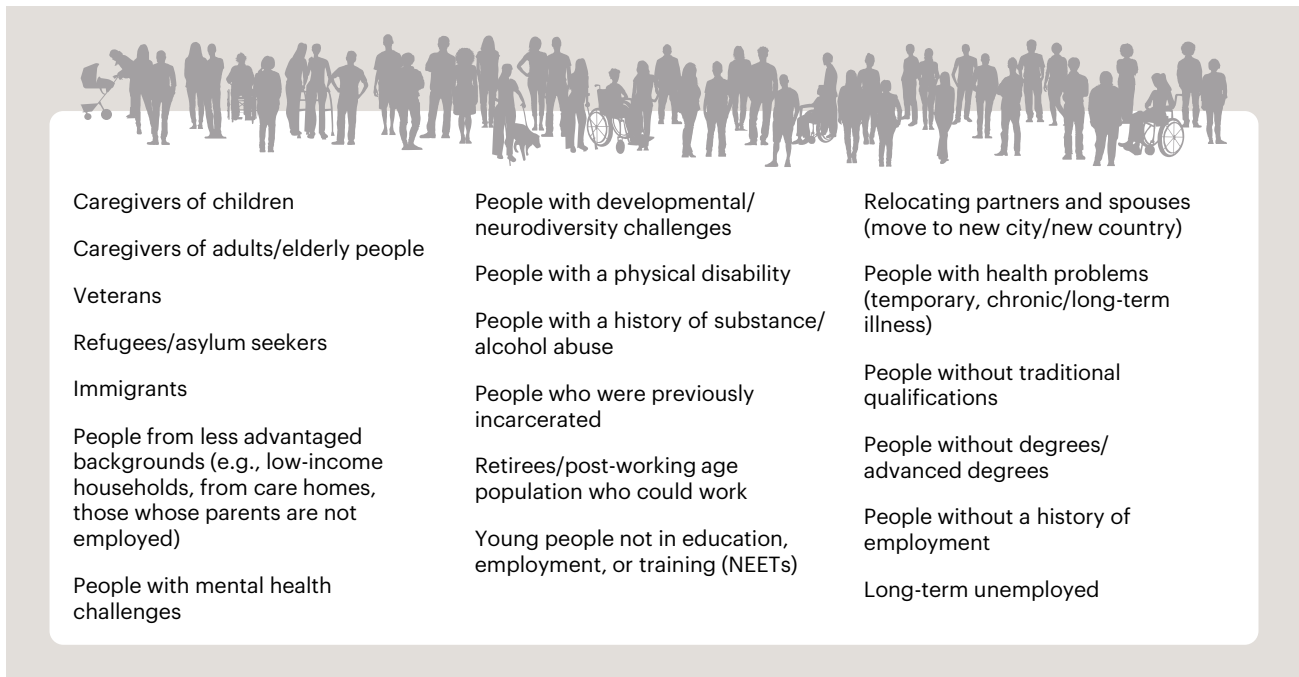
Employers complain that they cannot find the talent they need, even though millions of willing and able workers struggle to find employment. In our flagship report, *Hidden Workers: Untapped Talent*,² we identified employer hiring practices as a significant reason for this mismatch. They include the plethora of criteria used by employers in their job postings and rigid applicant tracking systems. When combined, the ranking and filtering variables used by employers erect barriers to entry into and mobility within the workforce. These practices evolved because they helped employers speed their hiring processes by radically reducing the number of applicants that receive active consideration. However, over time, that quest for efficiency has caused large numbers of capable candidates to be excluded from the decision set. In the attempt to identify “perfect” candidates, employers reject many applicants who are capable of doing a job but their applications don’t check “all the boxes” in a job posting. Those practices have the effect of creating a large pool of hidden workers.

Our research shows that companies that were able to tap into this pool of workers were far less likely to face skill shortages than companies that did not actively

seek to hire hidden workers. Employers that successfully attracted a wider pool of workers recognized that hidden workers did not represent a monolithic group. These were people who wanted to work and were either still actively looking for work or had given up after repeated rejections. The research confirms that these workers were out of work for various reasons, each with distinct motivations and challenges. (See Figure 1.) Employers seeking to bring these workers back into the workforce need to develop a customized approach, targeting segments of hidden workers best suited to their business model.

For this first in a series of follow-up reports, we turn our attention to the specific needs of part-time hidden workers, who comprised 17% of our overall sample of hidden workers. To identify and understand issues they face when it comes to finding employment, we surveyed nearly 9,000 part-time and full-time hidden workers in Germany, the U.K., and the U.S. in May and June 2020. (For more details, see Methodology on page 20.) Here, we highlight various segments of part-time workers and identify strategies for employers seeking to attract those workers—either for part-time work or to convert them into full-time workers.

Figure 1: Varied paths to becoming a hidden worker



Who are part-time workers?

Individuals have a multitude of reasons for working part time. Some do so by choice, others out of necessity. Oftentimes, companies rely on part-time work to keep operations running. Many part-time workers are happy with their situation and do not seek full-time employment.

In November 2022, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data, 15% of part time workers were working part-time for economic reasons—that is, working part time because they were unable to find a full-time job.³ Across European countries, the proportion is higher. On average, around one-third of those working part time would prefer to be full time.⁴

Many part-time workers would prefer to work full time but cannot for personal reasons. In our survey of hidden workers, we narrowed our scope of part-time workers to those who were currently working part time, but who reported that they would work more hours if their circumstances were different.

Part-time hidden workers are disproportionately female. In November 2022, around half of the U.S. civilian full-time labor force (51%) was women.³ In our survey, 72% of the part-time workers were women, compared to fewer than half (43%) of the full-time workers sample. Part-time workers also tend to be older. In 2021, 65% of employed workers were 35 or older.⁵ Similarly, 60% of part-time workers in our sample were over age 40, while 75% of full-time hidden workers were under age 40. (See Figure 2.) Looking at the cross-section of age and gender in our sample, we found that 53% of male part-time workers were over age 55, while 60% of female part-time workers were

between the ages of 30 to 54—prime caregiving years for either children or elderly relatives.

Full-time hidden workers in our survey were more likely to report being the primary caregiver for someone in their household (60% of full-time workers compared to 44% of part-time workers). Among part-time workers with primary caregiving responsibilities, the vast majority were women. Nearly all (91%) part-time employees caring for children under 18 were women, and 61% of part-time employees caring for parents or an elderly family member were women.

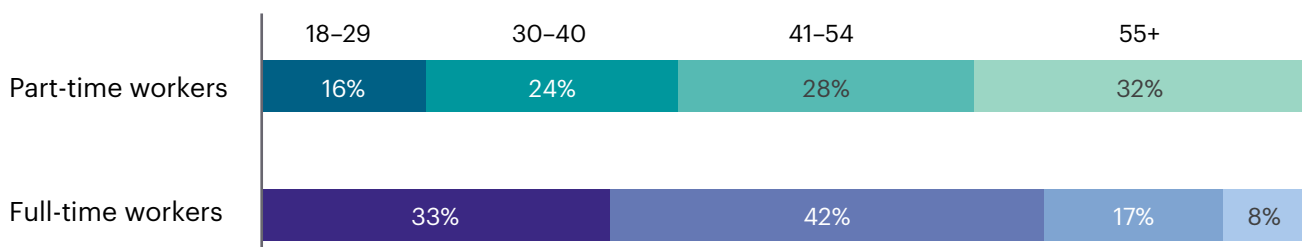
Understandably, full-time workers had significantly higher annual salaries than their part-time counterparts. For example, in the U.S., roughly two-thirds (66%) of part-time workers made less than \$40,000 a year, compared to 36% of full-time workers. At the other end of the spectrum, 23% of full-time workers reported making more than \$100,000 a year, compared to just 8% of part-time workers. (See Figure 3 on page 7.)

Part-time workers often enter the workforce to supplement their household's income. In fact, only one-third of part-time workers in our sample reported being the only person financially supporting their household, while 50% reported sharing financial responsibility with another member of their household. (See Figure 4 on page 7.)

Part-time hidden workers engage in a variety of occupations. The most common roles for part-time workers in our survey were in services and sales (30%) or clerical support (21%). (See Figure 5 on page 8.)

Figure 2: **Surveyed part-time workers tended to be older than their full-time counterparts**

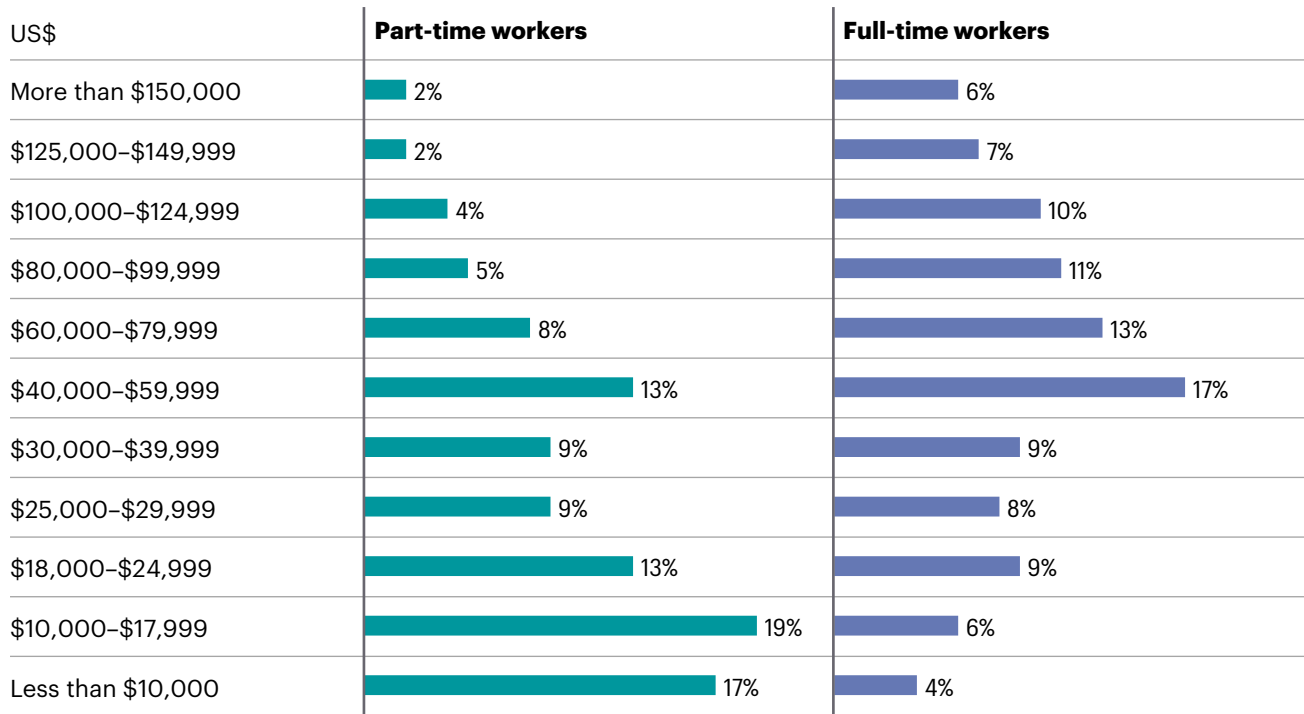
How old are you?



Source: “Hidden Worker – Worker Survey,” Accenture and Harvard Business School’s Project on Managing the Future of Work, May-June 2020.

Figure 3: Full-time workers had significantly higher annual salaries than part-time workers

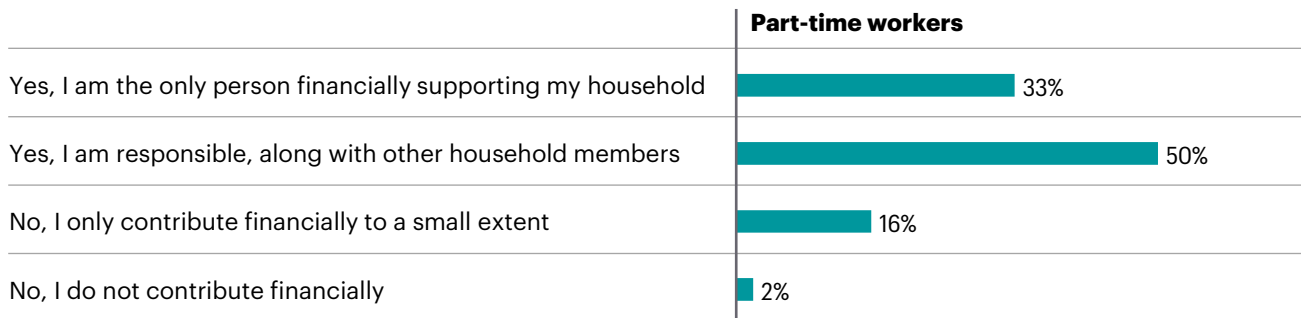
What is your current salary in U.S. dollars? If currently unemployed/not working, what was your last salary?



Source: “Hidden Worker – Worker Survey,” Accenture and Harvard Business School’s Project on Managing the Future of Work, May-June 2020.

Figure 4: Part-time workers made critical contributions to household incomes

Are you responsible for supporting your household financially?

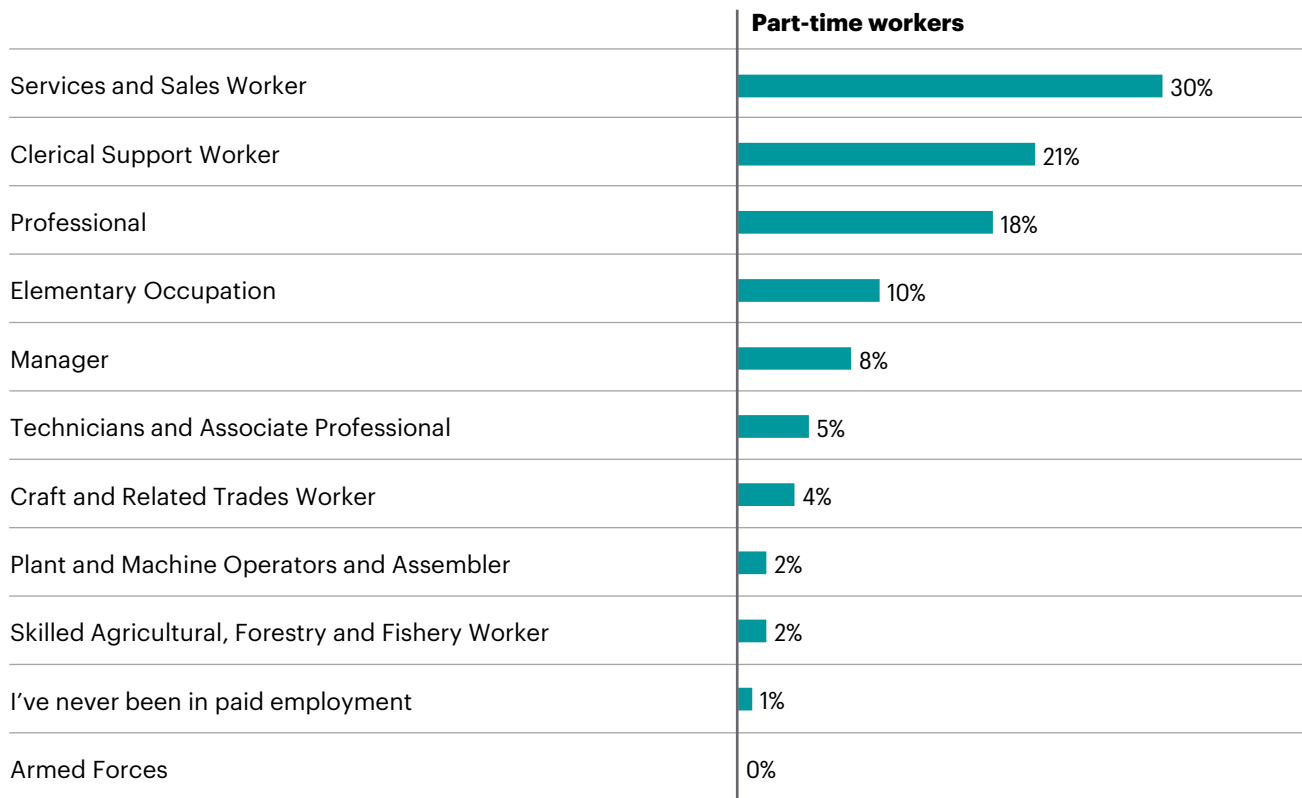


Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: “Hidden Worker – Worker Survey,” Accenture and Harvard Business School’s Project on Managing the Future of Work, May-June 2020.

Figure 5: **Many occupations offer part-time employment**

What best describes your current occupation? If currently unemployed/not working, what was your last occupation?



Source: "Hidden Worker – Worker Survey," Accenture and Harvard Business School's Project on Managing the Future of Work, May-June 2020.

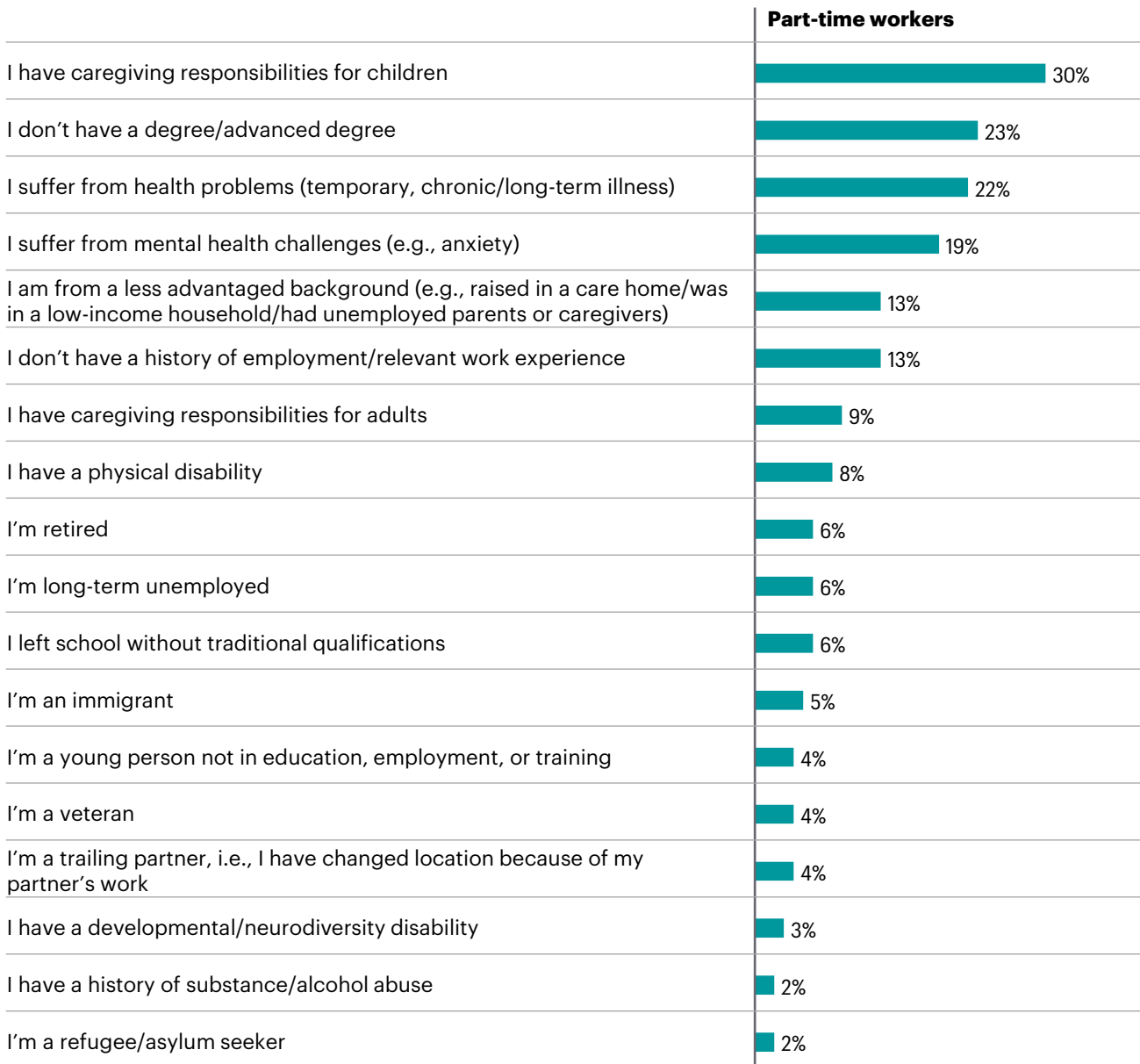
Barriers to full-time employment

While the part-time workers in our sample would ideally prefer to work more hours, they all faced barriers that prevented them from doing so. (See Figure 6.) The most common barriers were having caregiving responsibilities for children (30%), not having a degree (23%), suffering from health problems (22%), and

suffering from mental health challenges (19%). These workers often faced multiple barriers simultaneously. Despite these challenges, many workers reiterated their commitment to further employment, and indicated they wanted more work or to work more hours.

Figure 6: **Part-time workers faced a variety of barriers to finding work**

Thinking back over your life, do any of the following situations apply to you?



Source: "Hidden Worker – Worker Survey," Accenture and Harvard Business School's Project on Managing the Future of Work, May-June 2020.

Many part-time hidden workers believed that the criteria employers use to evaluate applications prevented them from advancing through the hiring process. In their view, the biggest factors were the strict requirements for years of experience at any given role and having employment gaps in their resume. (See Figure 7.)

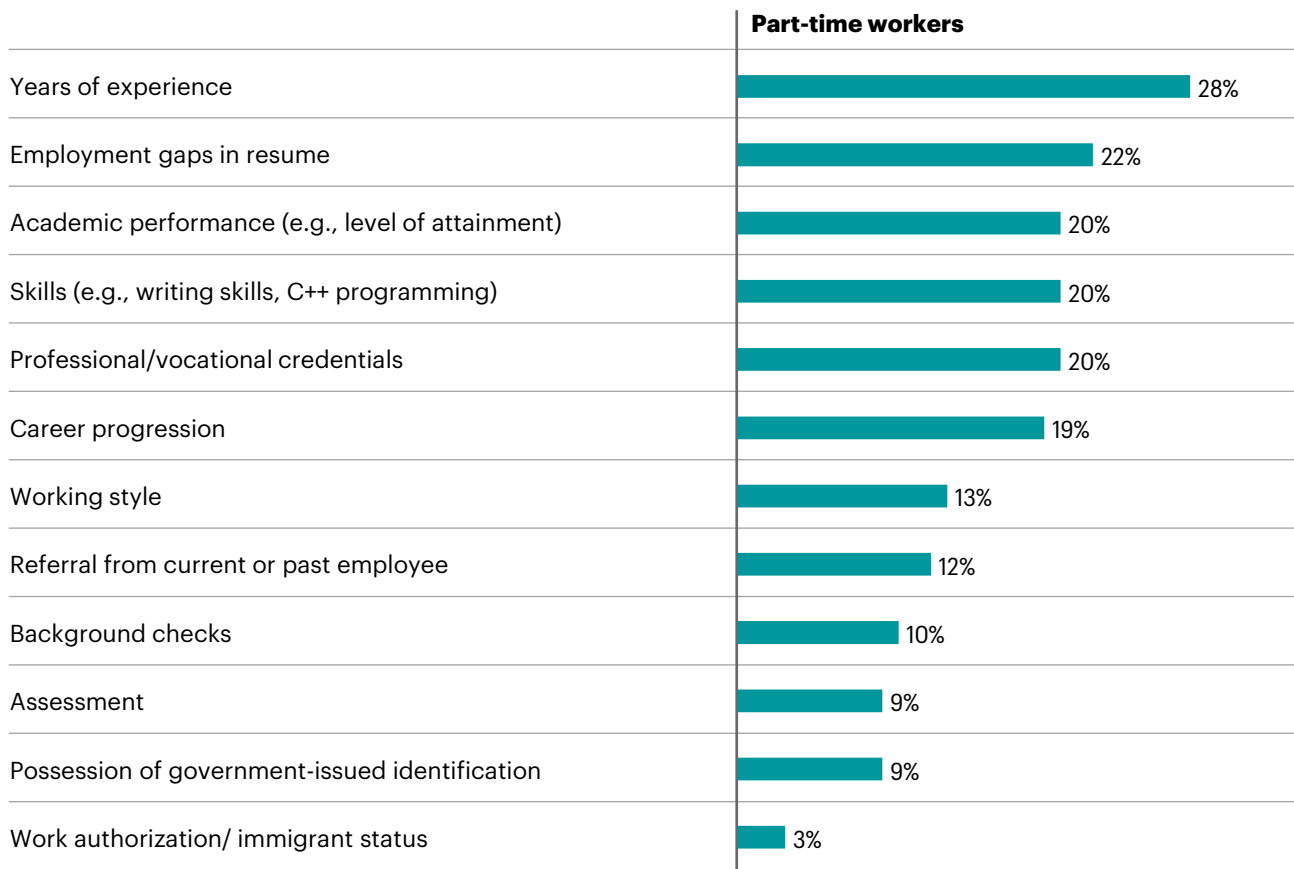
And such fears were not unfounded. In our survey of 2,275 executives of employers, 41% reported that years of experience was, indeed, used as a filter when evaluating candidates for middle-skills positions, jobs that require some post-secondary education or certificate, but do not require a four-year degree. Likewise,

employment gaps in a resume were used by 48% of the employers to weed out middle-skills candidates.

We asked part-time hidden workers which parts of the application stage they found particularly difficult. The biggest challenge workers reported was not being able to find jobs near where they live or jobs to which they could travel conveniently. (See Figure 8 on page 11.) Other difficulties included struggling with interviews, not being able to find jobs that allowed for personal circumstances (such as caregiving obligations), and not being able to find jobs that paid sufficiently.

Figure 7: Strict employer requirements prevent part-time workers from working more hours

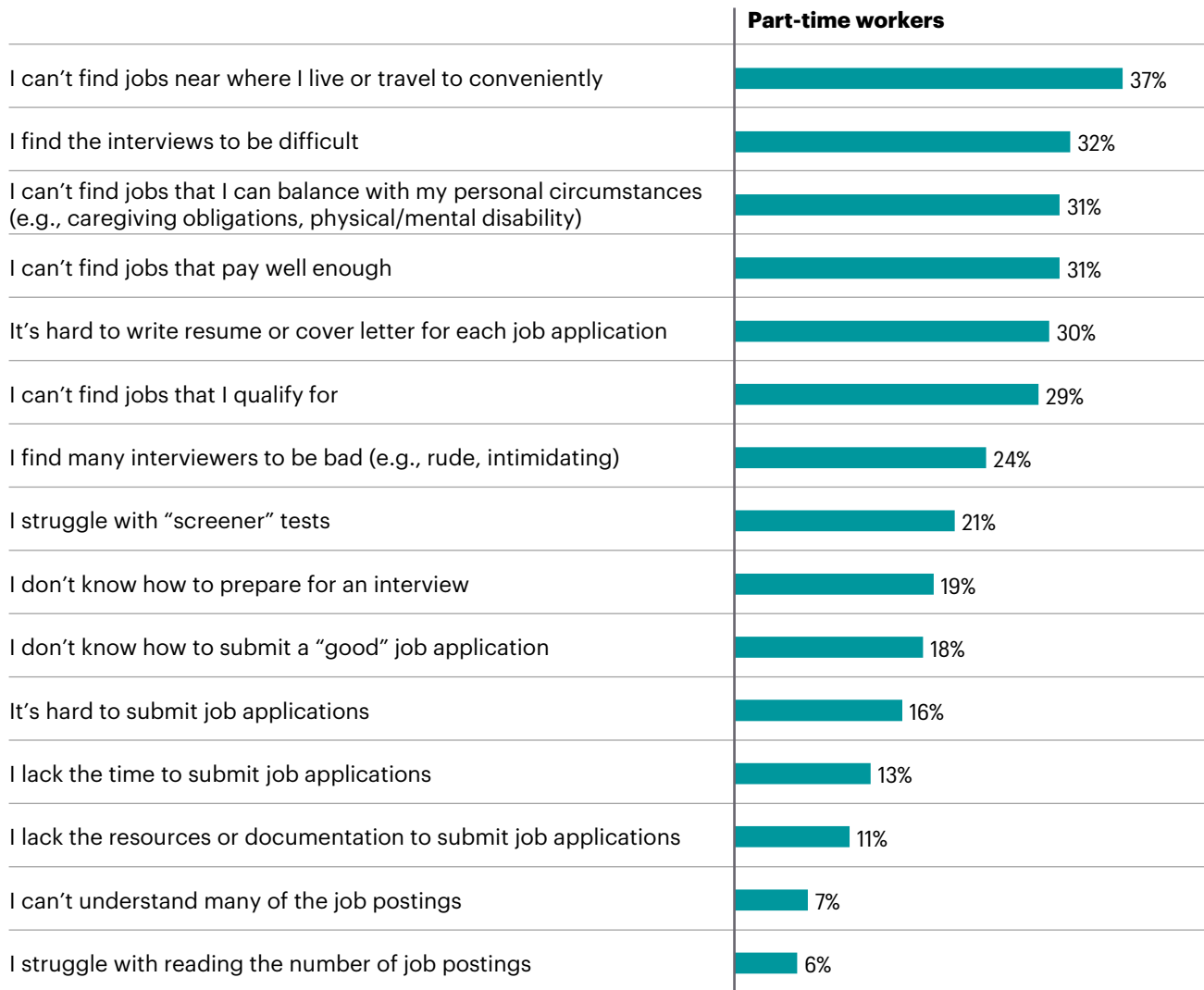
When applying for a job, employers often ask for a list of essential and desired requirements. Which of the following criteria do you think stops you from finding work/working more hours?



Source: “Hidden Worker – Worker Survey,” Accenture and Harvard Business School’s Project on Managing the Future of Work, May-June 2020.

Figure 8: **Part-time workers face challenges in the job applications process**

What specific parts of the job application stage do you find particularly difficult?



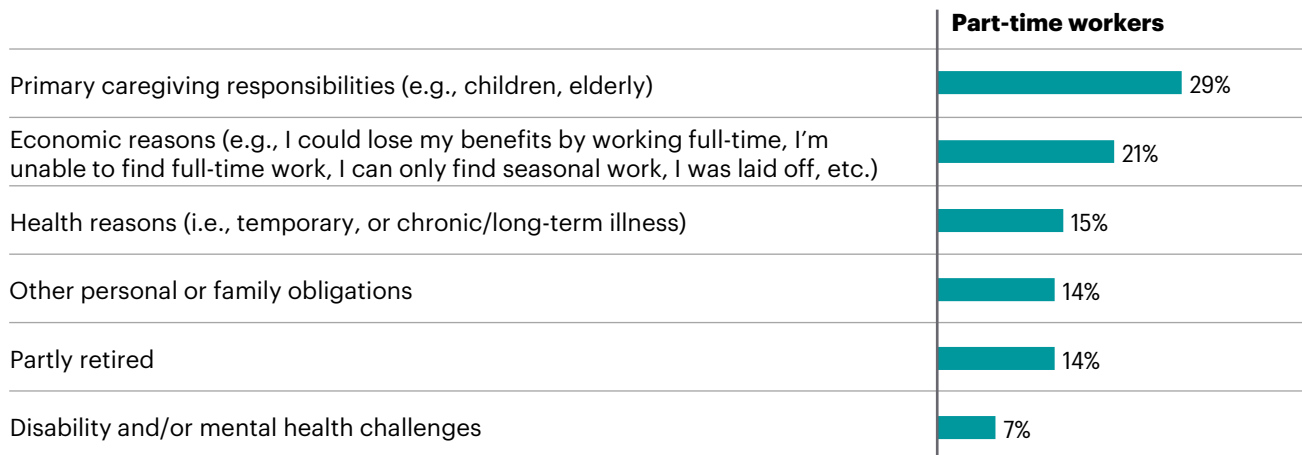
Source: "Hidden Worker – Worker Survey," Accenture and Harvard Business School's Project on Managing the Future of Work, May-June 2020.

Segments of part-time workers

Part-time hidden workers are not a homogeneous group. They have varying reasons for working part time. In our sample, the largest portion worked part time due to caregiving responsibilities (29%), followed by those working part time for economic reasons (21%), health reasons (15%), other personal or family obligations (14%), being partly retired (14%), or due to a disability and/or mental health challenges (7%). (See Figure 9.) Each of these groups face different challenges and, thus, require different approaches by employers in the hiring process.

Figure 9: **Many workers choose to work part time due to caregiving responsibilities**

Please indicate the primary reason that you are in part-time employment.



Source: "Hidden Worker – Worker Survey," Accenture and Harvard Business School's Project on Managing the Future of Work, May-June 2020.

Caregivers

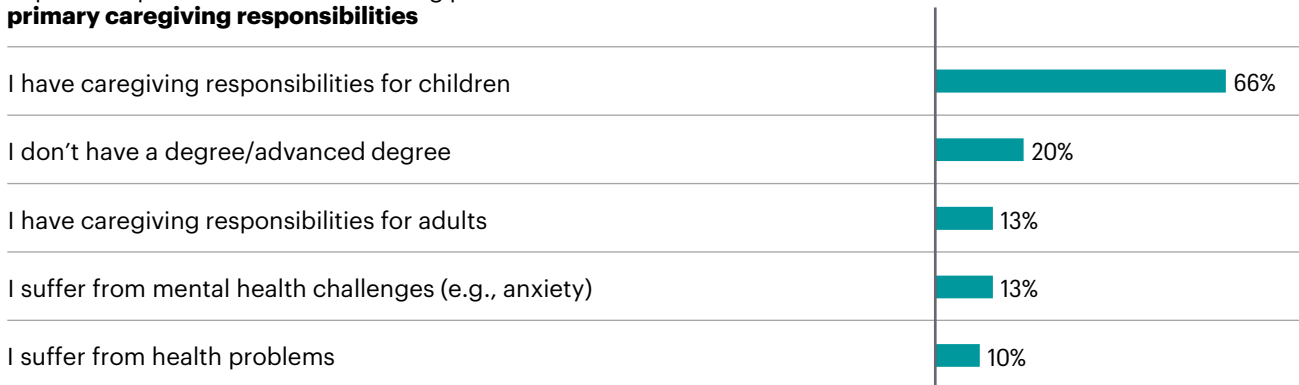
The largest portion of our part-time workers were those with caregiving responsibilities. Childcare costs often force parents to stay home. Furthermore, as populations age in advanced countries such as Germany, the U.K., and the U.S., there are more “sandwich generation” workers obliged to take care of both children and parents or other elderly relatives. As a consequence of these responsibilities, many capable workers are unable to work a full-time job. When asked about their lifetime situations and the barriers they face as a result, the most common response was caregiving responsibilities for children. When asked what factors were preventing them from being able to work more hours, these workers cited the inability to balance work with their caregiving responsibilities. (See Figure 10.)

Although these workers face barriers to full-time employment due to caregiving responsibilities, they may nevertheless have the qualifications and experience that an employer is seeking. For hard-to-fill positions, employers could consider offering flexibility in schedules for certain roles, allowing these workers to balance work with their caregiving responsibilities. To attract more part-time workers who have caregiving responsibilities, employers could offer on-site childcare, subsidized offsite childcare, or engagement with a third-party vendor to help their employees find other caregiving services in order to work full time. As always, when weighing the investment in such efforts, management would need to contrast the direct costs with the hidden costs of having unfilled positions and chronic turnover that results in the loss of revenue, erosion of customer satisfaction, and the burden imposed on existing employees.

Figure 10: **Caregiving reasons for seeking part-time work**

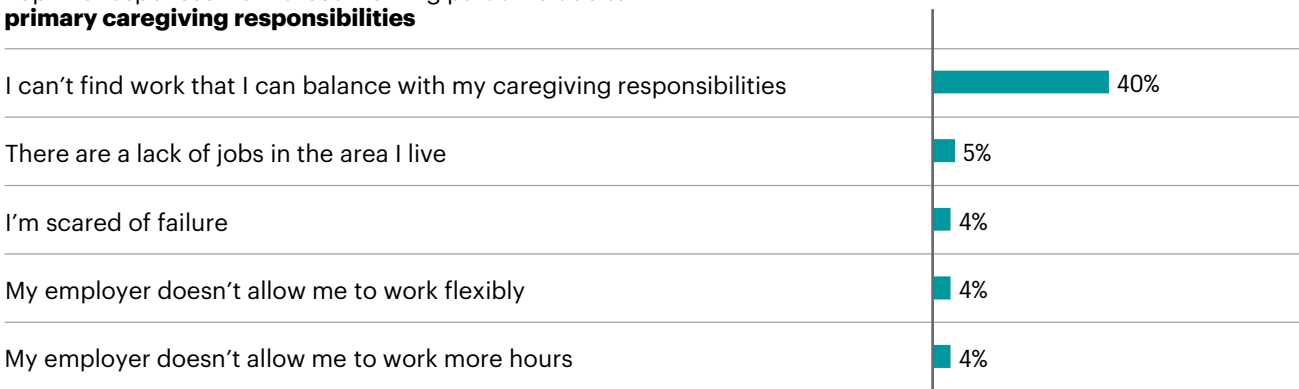
Thinking back over your life, do any of the following situations apply to you?

Top five responses from those working part time due to **primary caregiving responsibilities**



Why do you think you can't find work/work more hours, or couldn't find employment in the past?

Top five responses from those working part time due to **primary caregiving responsibilities**



Source: “Hidden Worker – Worker Survey,” Accenture and Harvard Business School’s Project on Managing the Future of Work, May-June 2020.

People facing health challenges

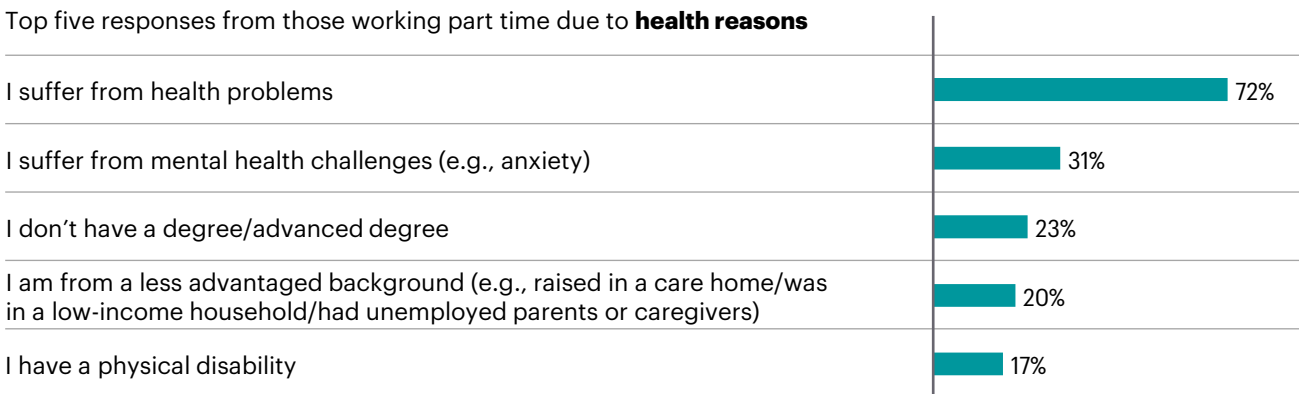
Another group of part-time hidden workers suffer from health problems. When asked why they are not able to work more hours, the most cited reason was that these workers were not able to find the right balance between working and supporting their health. (See Figure 11.)

Flexibility is a key factor for employers to consider. Those who have health issues may need time off for medical appointments or may require leave for medi-

cal treatment. Flexible scheduling allows workers with health challenges to work a full-time job while managing their health issues. Additionally, employers should engage in a regular dialogue with these employees about what accommodation will allow them to remain on the job and work additional hours. If employers can understand what challenges these workers are facing, they can adapt to meet workers where they are.

Figure 11: **Health reasons for seeking part-time work**

Thinking back over your life, do any of the following situations apply to you?



Why do you think you can't find work/work more hours, or couldn't find employment in the past?



Source: "Hidden Worker – Worker Survey," Accenture and Harvard Business School's Project on Managing the Future of Work, May-June 2020.

People with disabilities and/or mental health challenges

For these part-time workers, the most commonly cited barriers include suffering from mental health challenges, suffering from health problems, and having a physical disability. These workers struggled to find a job that they could manage with their disability or mental health challenges. (See Figure 12.)

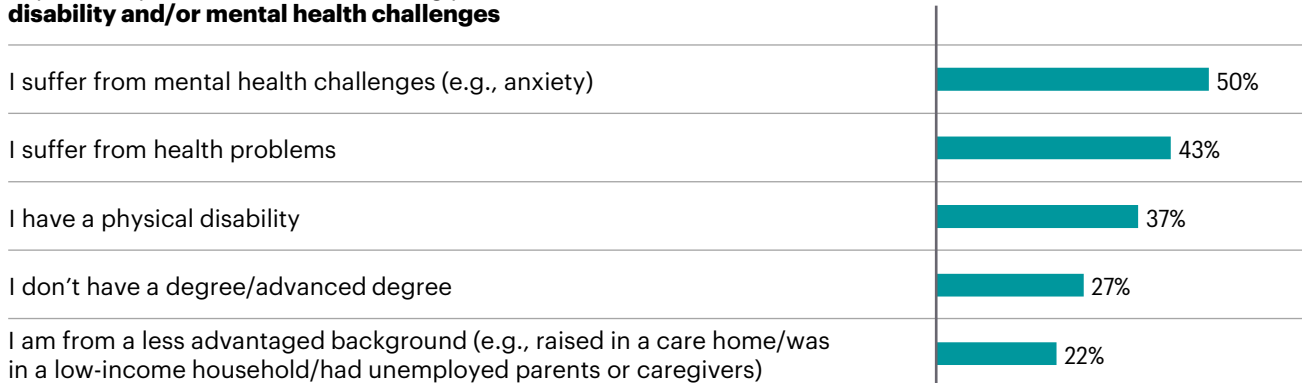
To attract these workers, employers can create hiring practices that are designed to be sensitive to the needs of those with disabilities and/or mental

health challenges. Virtual interviews for those with physical disabilities and removing unnecessary degree requirements for those whose disabilities posed a challenge to educational attainment are relatively simple first steps. Employers should also talk to their part-time workers on a regular basis about who wants to move to a full-time position and what would be required to get there.

Figure 12: **Disability and mental health reasons for seeking part-time work**

Thinking back over your life, do any of the following situations apply to you?

Top five responses from those working part time due to **disability and/or mental health challenges**



Why do you think you can't find work/work more hours, or couldn't find employment in the past?

Top five responses from those working part time due to **disability and/or mental health challenges**



Source: "Hidden Worker – Worker Survey," Accenture and Harvard Business School's Project on Managing the Future of Work, May-June 2020.

Other personal or family obligations

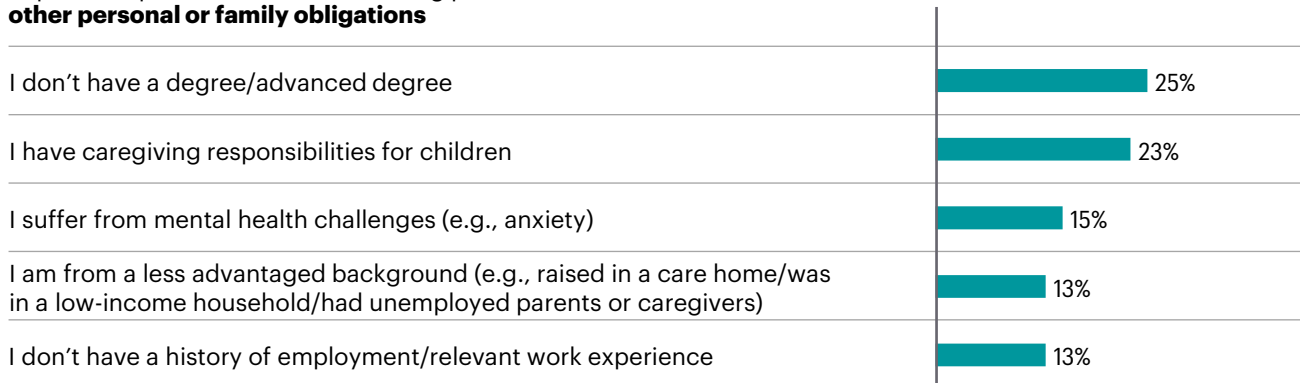
Another group of part-time hidden workers is those who work part time due to other personal or other obligations. For this group, the most common barriers beyond their caregiving responsibilities were that they did not have a degree. They consistently identified their belief that they didn't feel they were the right "fit" for many organizations as a reason for their inability to secure full-time employment. (See Figure 13.)

When asked why they had turned down jobs in the past, the number one answer this group gave was that they didn't feel they were the right fit for the organization. Often, part-time workers can feel separated from the full-time workforce at a company. Organizations need to work to change their company culture to be more inclusive. If a worker feels involved in the company while working part time, they will likely be more willing to stay at that company and might even consider shifting to a full-time role.

Figure 13: **Personal or family obligation-related reasons for seeking part-time work**

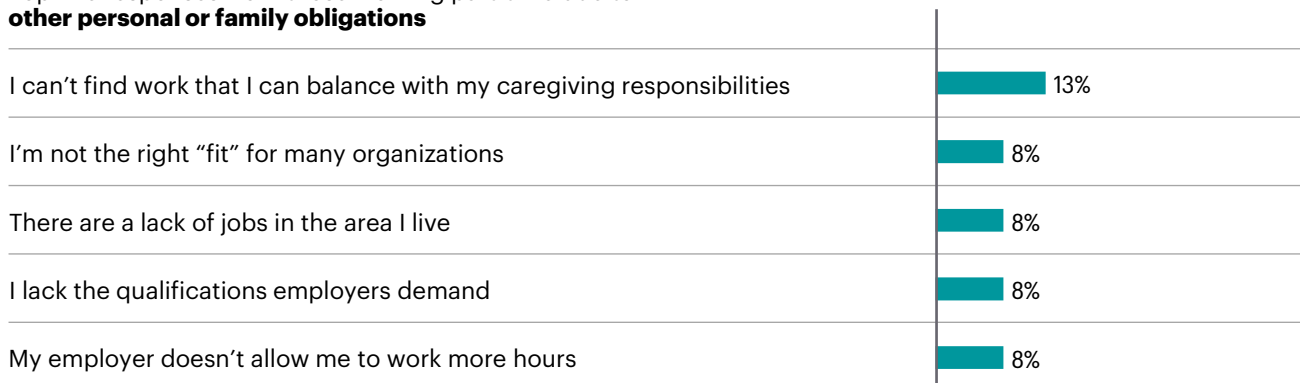
Thinking back over your life, do any of the following situations apply to you?

Top five responses from those working part time due to **other personal or family obligations**



Why do you think you can't find work/work more hours, or couldn't find employment in the past?

Top five responses from those working part-time due to **other personal or family obligations**



Source: "Hidden Worker – Worker Survey," Accenture and Harvard Business School's Project on Managing the Future of Work, May-June 2020.

The partly retired

Some workers who are partly retired work part-time jobs. For those who are partly retired, the reasons for being unable to work more hours were much more varied. The most common selections were employer restrictions and a lack of jobs in their industry of choice. (See Figure 14.)

The partly retired is a group that employers can easily access. Most of these workers have years of experience. Employers may not understand that workers

who are partly retired may actually want to work more hours. Employers may also be concerned that older workers don't have the relevant skills required. However, if a worker has experience in a role, they can be trained to learn the new skills. Retaining these workers who have valuable institutional knowledge may be cheaper than bringing in new employees who must familiarize themselves with the practices and culture of the firm. Employers can develop programs to help their part-time workers develop the skills necessary to qualify for a full-time role.

Figure 14: **Retirement-related reasons for seeking part-time work**

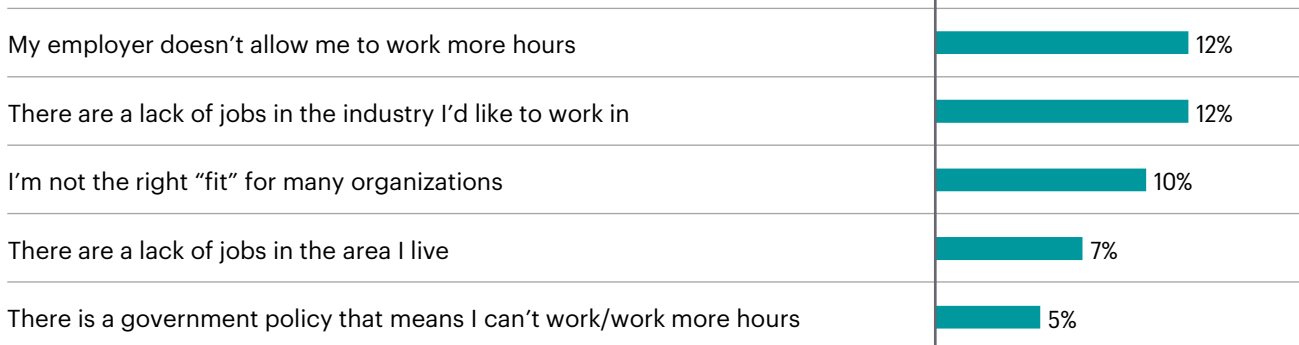
Thinking back over your life, do any of the following situations apply to you?

Top five responses from those working part time due to **being partly retired**



Why do you think you can't find work/work more hours, or couldn't find employment in the past?

Top five responses from those working part time due to **being partly retired**



Source: "Hidden Worker – Worker Survey," Accenture and Harvard Business School's Project on Managing the Future of Work, May-June 2020.

Economic reasons

The last segment of hidden workers were those who work part time due to economic reasons, including that they were unable to find full-time work, find the hours they wanted to work, or would lose government benefits if they worked full time. This group was not defined by a clear barrier, but identified with a wide range of challenges, ranging from not having a degree, not having a history of relevant work experience, having mental health challenges, having caregiving responsibilities, and coming from a less advantaged background. They reported other reasons that limited their ability to secure more hours, including having a lack of jobs near where they live, an employer-imposed cap on

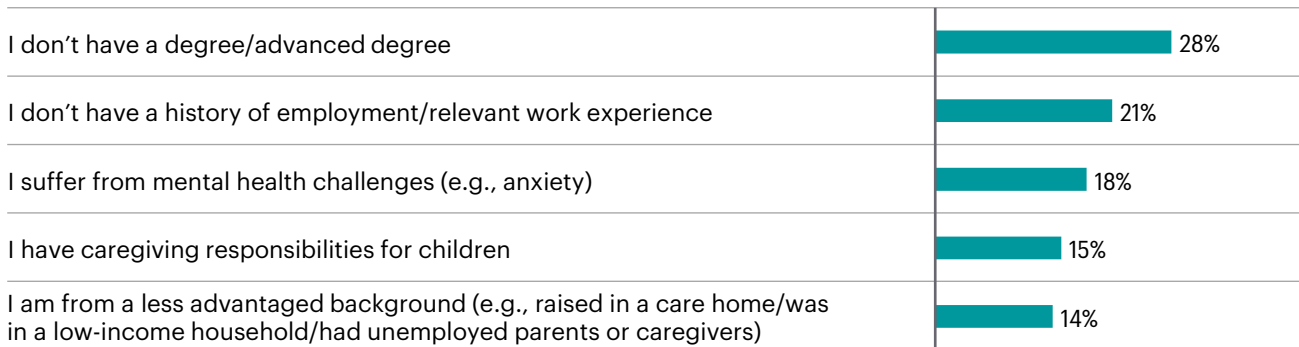
the number of hours worked, lacking the qualifications employers demand, the overall lack of jobs in their industry, and not feeling like the right fit for an organization. (See Figure 15.)

Others reported that they relied on online job boards to find work. They also acknowledged that they were not very adept at using social media to boost their employability. Companies should open their hiring processes to find talent by including sites that candidates actually frequent, rather than those their recruiters find to be convenient.

Figure 15: **Economic reasons for seeking part-time work**

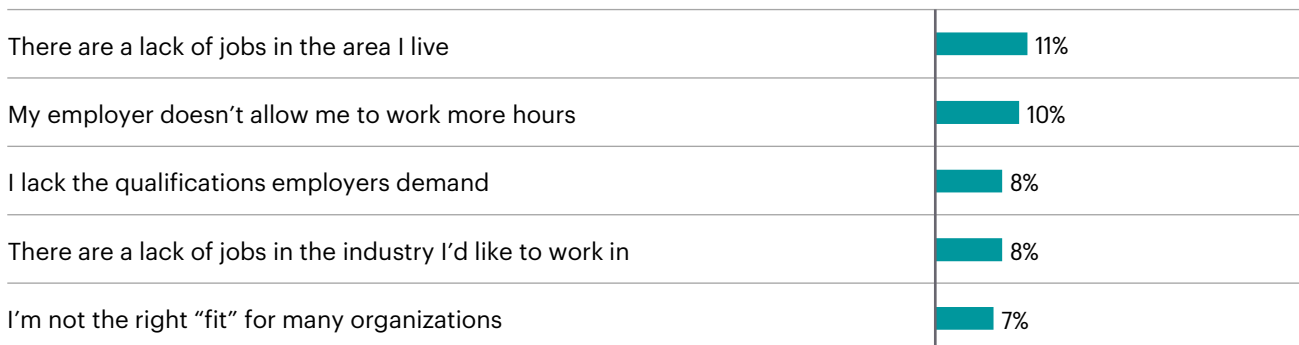
Thinking back over your life, do any of the following situations apply to you?

Top five responses from those working part time due to **economic reasons**



Why do you think you can't find work/work more hours, or couldn't find employment in the past?

Top five responses from those working part time due to **economic reasons**



Source: "Hidden Worker – Worker Survey," Accenture and Harvard Business School's Project on Managing the Future of Work, May-June 2020.

The role of government

Although there are many ways companies can help more part-time hidden workers find full-time employment, there is also a role for governments to act. This is especially true for those working part time who would lose government benefits if they worked full time.

One option: Policy leaders may consider reevaluating the benefits threshold and removing barriers that inhibit people from working more hours. The U.S. government has moved in this direction in recent years, particularly with the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit and the low-income component of the Child Tax Credit—programs that either grow or remain unchanged for every additional dollar earned by most families among the working poor. The United Kingdom has taken similar action: The government is phasing out the Income Support program, which provides funds for those working fewer than 16 hours a week, in favor of the Universal Credit program, which includes no such limit on working hours. Germany's unemployment insurance program currently removes all support for those working 15 or more hours per week.

Beyond altering the income-level thresholds, governments could also design programs to target subgroups of part-time workers. For those with caregiving responsibilities, all-day childcare solutions or tax credits would allow them to work more hours. Governments could also increase incentives for the semi-retired to return to work, for example, by abolishing the payroll tax in the U.S. for both workers and employers for those above age 65. Such an incentive would encourage people willing and able to work after the age of 65 to stay in the workforce, reducing the rate of early acceptance of Social Security and other benefits. Another option would be for policymakers to introduce an incentive, such as a tax credit, for companies or other institutions to develop programs that bring marginalized workers back into the workforce.

Takeaways

Whether they find themselves working fewer hours due to caregiving needs, health issues, or economic reasons, the two things part-time workers need most from their employers are flexibility and frequent two-way communication.

Flexibility: Employers want a workforce that can meet their needs. Similarly, hidden workers are eager to find companies that are willing to accommodate their needs in a way that allows them to be productive and advance in their work. It falls to employers to fill that gap. There is a vast reservoir of skilled hidden workers shut out of employment by inflexible rules established by companies. Employers need to recognize that their quest for ideal workers as defined by the filters they implement in their applicant tracking systems creates an artificial shortage of candidates. Over time, they have adopted policies that inadvertently exclude a large population of qualified workers with relevant skills. The experience of employers that embrace the potential of hidden workers proves that adopting work

rules that accommodate the needs of such candidates can greatly help in finding talent. The skills shortage can be addressed if companies relax their stringent definitions of the attributes they are seeking in applicants.

Clear communication: The second piece of the puzzle for employers is to communicate their needs far more succinctly. A good start is to offer well-defined job descriptions focused on essential skills. Employers need to be open to understanding the underlying reasons for a workers' decision to settle on working part time, despite wanting to work more hours.

New forms of work would not only enable more people to participate in the workforce but shape the future of work itself. By considering how to make work "work" for the many kinds of part-time workers, companies can rewrite the rules of engagement and pave the way to becoming employers of choice.

Methodology

In 2019, Accenture and Harvard Business School's Project on Managing the Future of Work launched a multiyear, mixed-methods research effort to explore the challenges faced by "hidden workers" people who want to work, are actively seeking work, but unable to find employment for extended periods of time. The three groups characterized as "hidden workers" were:

- **Missing hours:** People who are working one or more part-time jobs but could potentially work full time;
- **Missing from work:** Those who have been unemployed for a long time but are still seeking employment;
- **Missing from the workforce:** Those who are currently not working and are not actively seeking employment but who could be working under the right circumstances.

To understand the perspective of workers as well as employers, we conducted two separate surveys in three countries: Germany, the U.K. and the U.S. The employer survey was conducted in January and February 2020, just before these economies went into lockdown due to Covid-19. More than 700 senior leaders filled out the survey in each of the three countries. The worker survey took place in May and June 2020, when all three economies were experiencing large-scale unemployment due to the pandemic. Necessary precautions were taken in the survey design to minimize the impact of Covid-19 in the responses. The survey was filled out by nearly 3,000 workers in each country.

The report *Hidden Workers: Untapped Talent* was published in September 2021. For the full report, as well as the detailed methodology, please visit HBS's Project on Managing the Future of Work at: <https://www.hbs.edu/managing-the-future-of-work/Documents/research/hiddenworkers09032021.pdf>

Hidden workers working part time

This report published in March 2023 focuses on a substantial subset of hidden workers: those who work part time. This deep dive into the data was undertaken to help better understand the barriers that part-time workers face when looking for and securing work, as well as understanding the reasons contributing to their working part time.

A total of 8,720 workers from Germany, the U.K., and the U.S. filled out the worker survey. Of these, full-time workers were identified as all workers who selected that they were in full-time employment at the time of the survey, they did not enter full-time employment due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and they all were out of full-time employment (meaning they were either unemployed or working part time) at some point in the past five years. These were all considered "previously hidden workers" and accounted for 4,470 workers.

Part-time workers were identified as all workers who selected that they were in part-time employment at the time of the survey, they did not enter part-time employment due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and they all would prefer to be working more hours if their circumstances were different. These were all considered "current hidden workers." The research in this report is based on the analysis of the survey responses of 1,516 hidden workers who identified as working part time.

Notes

¹Fuller, J., Raman, M., (January 2022). *Building From the Bottom Up*. Published by Harvard Business School.

²Fuller, J., Raman, M., Sage-Gavin, E., Hines, K., (September 2021). *Hidden Workers: Untapped Talent*. Published by Harvard Business School's Project on Managing the Future of Work and Accenture.

³"The Employment Situation – November 2022." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2 December 2022, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/empisit_12022022.pdf

⁴Causa, Orsetta, Nhung Luu, and Michael Abendschein. "Labour Market Transitions Across OECD Countries: Stylised Facts," *OECD Economics Department Working Papers No. 1692*, 10 December 2021, [https://one.oecd.org/document/ECO/WKP\(2021\)43/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/ECO/WKP(2021)43/en/pdf)

⁵"Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 20 January 2022, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11b.htm>