1.87 million workers leave within ten years

Nearly one in five Dutch workers is 55 or older. Those positions have to be filled again, even if no company grows at all.

Summary

Of the 9.42 million Dutch people working between the ages of 15 and 64, 1.87 million are between 55 and 64: 19.9%. They leave the labour market within roughly ten years. That is not a cycle and not a growth scenario, it is an age structure already fixed. The demand for staff it creates exists regardless of what the economy does, while the inflow meant to absorb it is smaller than the outflow.

Most conversations about recruitment are about growth. A company wants to expand, so it looks for people. That is the smaller half of the story. Most hiring in the Netherlands is replacement, and that demand is already fixed in today's age structure.

The figure

The Netherlands has 9.42 million people working between the ages of 15 and 64. Of those, 1.87 million are between 55 and 64, which is 19.9%.

Nearly one in five people working today leaves the labour market within roughly ten years. Those positions do not leave with them. The work remains, so the positions have to be filled again.

The Netherlands is not exceptional here, but it is not well placed either. Across the EU, 20.5% of workers are between 55 and 64. In Germany it is 24%, close to a quarter. The German labour market is therefore a few years ahead of the Dutch one in the same process, which means German employers will reach into the same pool sooner.

Why this differs from scarcity

Scarcity comes and goes. The vacancy rate fell from 5.1% to 4.2% between mid-2022 and mid-2025, and would fall further in a recession. Replacement demand does not behave that way. Someone turning 65 in 2032 turns 65 whether the economy shrinks or not.

That makes replacement demand the most stable argument there is for the necessity of recruitment. It does not depend on order books, investment decisions or consumer confidence. It follows from years of birth.

The outflow is also not absorbed by the inflow. The Dutch labour force grew by more than 100,000 people a year for four decades. Projections show that growth falling close to a standstill in the decade after 2030. So a period arrives in which a large group leaves while on balance almost no new people arrive.

Two kinds of demand, two conversations

For an employer the difference is practical. Expansion demand is a choice: you can decide not to grow. Replacement demand is not: you cannot decide that someone will not retire.

Even so, replacement is almost always picked up late, because there is no moment at which it becomes urgent. A growth plan has a start date. A retirement has one too, but it sits three years ahead in someone else's calendar.

Where it goes wrong is the handover. In expansion you hire alongside existing knowledge. In replacement you hire someone who has to absorb knowledge that is about to walk out. If the new person only arrives after the old one has gone, the handover is already lost.

Where this will land hardest

Replacement demand does not fall evenly across sectors. It bites hardest where the age structure is skewed and where the inflow from education is small against the outflow. In the Netherlands that means engineering, construction and healthcare, precisely the sectors where the vacancy rate barely fell over the past three years.

That is not a coincidence. Where outflow through ageing is large and demand is not cyclical, the market stays tight regardless of what the economy does. In construction the vacancy rate stood at 7.4% in mid-2025, against 7.5% three years earlier.

The Dutch research centre for education and the labour market publishes a forecast every two years that separates expansion demand from replacement demand by occupation and by field of study. That is the source that makes a replacement conversation concrete for a given market.

What an agency does with this

- **Ask about the age structure, not the vacancies.** How many people on this team are 55 or older? Clients often do not know that number offhand, and it lands harder than any market statistic.
- **Convert the outflow into years.** Four of twenty people over 55 means on average nearly one departure a year, every year, for ten years.
- **Sell the overlap.** The value of hiring early sits in the months where the outgoing and incoming people work side by side. That is a concrete argument for starting sooner, not a general appeal to plan ahead.
- **Use this with companies that are not growing.** A client with no expansion plans still has replacement demand. That is exactly the conversation competitors are not having.

Method and sources

Age figures come from Eurostat, dataset lfsa_egan22d, people in employment aged 15 to 64, reference year 2025. The 55 to 64 share is calculated as employment in that age band divided by the 15 to 64 total. Eurostat does not publish this breakdown for the Netherlands at sector level, so the sector passage rests on the vacancy rates in jvs_q_nace2 and on the Dutch occupational forecast.

The figures on labour force growth and the outlook to 2040 come from the DNB analysis of labour scarcity of February 2024, which itself draws on national planning bureau projections. That publication is under copyright and is summarised and cited here, not reproduced.

Growth, Shortage, All markets

Sources

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