

Innovation Insight: The Freedom to Age Well

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"How old would you be if you didn't know how old you are?"
- Satchel Paige

Baseball legend Satchel Paige understood that in many respects, age is a state of mind. Yes, all of us will age, but we don't all age in the same way – physically or emotionally. We all know seniors who never slow down, who seem to have an endless energy source that keeps them active and involved. They also seem to be healthier and happier, and usually are. They are aging well and enjoying life.

But not all seniors fit this positive description. Too many lead lives limited by fear and isolation, lives that could be fuller and richer if they were empowered with the confidence to get out and go again; if they were more connected to family and friends; if they felt safe in *and* out of the house. Meaningful innovation can provide that kind of freedom if we as a society accept that the aging of the world's population will be one of the great challenges of the 21st century and understand that new technologies can play a major role in meeting that challenge by giving seniors the freedom to age well and stay connected to the world around them.

Meaningful innovation can help seniors age well

When it comes to aging, the good news is we are living longer. In 1930, the average American could expect to live to almost 60 years. Today, that number has jumped to 80 years plus. Together, life expectancy and exploding population growth means that over the next 40 years the earth will grow from 7 billion to 9 billion inhabitants with more than two-thirds living in urban areas¹.

People over 60 will make up the fastest growing segment by 2025 and reach 2.4 billion by 2050 when there will be more than 4 million centenarians¹. Even sooner, in just five years, people over 65 will outnumber children under 15 for the first time in history¹.

With more and more cutting edge research, we're beginning to understand both the complex physiological and psychological factors that drive the aging process and it's becoming increasingly clear that meaningful innovation has enormous potential to help seniors live longer lives of purpose and possibility. Both the private and public sector must recognize not only the needs of seniors but also their ability and desire to continue to contribute to their families, friends and community.

An “older” world has serious implications that are personal for seniors and structural for society. In the decades ahead, we will see significant increases in chronic illnesses and with this challenge, a rising demand for accessible, quality health care. That means providers must shift focus from treating illness to promoting wellness. It means health care systems in the future must be more accessible and responsive to the demands of older patients while, at the same time, strive for more efficient, less costly care.

Seniors also need mobility and opportunities to stay connected. That means city planners, for example, will have to factor in the unique requirements of seniors as they work to create livable, sustainable cities in the future. Seniors in both urban and rural areas will need transportation systems that are senior friendly, communications technology that is user friendly and an environment that makes them feel safe and secure.



Lose the attitude

“We need to recognize aging as a time of innovation and new possibilities, rather than a time of inevitable decline.”

- Philips Active Aging Think Tank

If we are going to successfully develop solutions to these problems, however, the first step is to begin to think differently about aging; in other words, lose the negative attitude. Getting older doesn’t have to mean being less productive, less healthy, less independent or more limited in our ability to engage in the world around us. It’s time to embrace the idea that rather than dreading our senior years, we should celebrate them. There’s growing empirical evidence that with a positive environment and proper support, older people can be world-class workers, creators and contributors to society.

According to a 2004 report written by Sara Rix, Ph.D., of AARP’s Public Policy Institute, the U.S. has “one of the highest labor force participation rates for persons 65 and older in the developed world.” In the years ahead, that’s a resource of wisdom and experience the country cannot afford to waste as the pool of older Americans grows rapidly. To meet the great challenge of aging in the 21st century, we must keep seniors independent and engaged. Meaningful innovation offers plenty of solutions.

Staying independent and engaged through innovation

We know many factors impact an older person's ability to stay independent and engaged. Health issues, isolation, lack of confidence, lack of transportation and financial constraints can negatively impact a person's mobility – both physical and psychological. When an older woman decides to stay home instead of playing bridge at the senior center, she loses a little mobility but over time, those moments add up to isolation and isolation can lead to depression.

An elderly man who fears falling and the embarrassment that might go with it stops volunteering at the local food bank. He loses mobility. The food bank loses a sorely needed volunteer.

Engagement trends: Isolation increases with age

As seniors age, they become less mobile and more isolated from the things they used to be engaged with, such as:



Family



Friends

Work



Learning

Places of Worship



Volunteering

Hobbies

Studies show that there is a correlation between good health and longevity and participation in meaningful activities.² For example, a lack of social interaction can increase the risk of depression and the health issues that are associated with it. People need human connections and today's computer technology can help make those connections whether through email, video chats, Facebook or other social media.

For our aging population, living independently means leaving the house, and for many seniors, that can be a frightening proposition. Whether it's the worry of falling or becoming ill, a concern for safe streets or perhaps the fear of losing their way, many seniors leave home knowing they are at risk. And while these are legitimate concerns, the answer isn't isolation. It's innovation. Innovation and technology will be critical drivers in the search for ways to help seniors remain independent and socially engaged.

Freedom from fear is a game changer

New technology innovations can create safer environments for seniors, but more importantly, they can help our older citizens be less fearful and get more out of life. To do this effectively, we've got to clear some of the roadblocks that are keeping seniors from enjoying their lives to the fullest through technology.

Complex technology alone does not equate to innovation. Meaningful

innovation must deliver that technology – however complex – to the market in a form that is easy to use and experience. This is not always the case. Steve Jobs understood that basic fact of human nature when he said, “Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works.” Simple is not only better when it comes to using technology, it ups the odds of that technology succeeding in its mission.

If seniors are going to have the freedom to “age in place,” they must be able to take advantage of everything open to them from preventive health care to volunteer or work opportunities; from community resources to technology support that will help them live independently in their own homes and on their own terms. There are plenty of innovations on the market and on the horizon that can help them achieve their goals. Innovations like wireless home health monitoring, give them an important role in their own care. Advanced medication dispensing devices help them take their medications on time and reduce the risk of medication errors.

And then there is technology that has been around for close to 40 years— simple help buttons or personal emergency response systems (PERs) that offer seniors the ability to get help when in their homes. While this technology has traditionally helped those who tend to be more homebound, advancements in PERs can help instill confidence in seniors who wish to get out of the house and continue to engage in activities they enjoy.

Mobile personal emergency response systems work similarly to current home-based PERs systems. They are designed to provide the user with access to help not only in their home but also outside their home. Good systems tend to come in the form of a small, easy-to-use, waterproof pendant that leverages fall detection capabilities and locating technologies. These systems are a major step forward and can make a real difference in supporting seniors as they aim to stay connected and independent.

Here is a scenario that typifies how this new technology works:

Imagine a woman walking her dog just a block or two from home. The dog suddenly bolts, pulling the woman to the ground. The fall has left her confused and she can't remember the way home. Once she might have been left there helpless until someone happened by.

Today, technology can play a significant role and help lessen the potential helplessness she may feel. She can get support in the form of automatic fall detection, clear two-way voice communication and advanced locating technologies – all through a pendant worn around her neck. She can talk immediately with a responder on the other end who can determine her location and call a neighbor or emergency services for help.

"Living the best life"



Barry Rand, the CEO of AARP, argues that older adults "are focused on living, not aging – not just on what we need but what we want." He calls that philosophy "living your best life."

In the end, meaningful innovation has the potential to give the world what one aging expert called the "longevity dividend" of productive seniors connected and contributing to their communities. But only if society values its more experienced citizens, understands their needs and their capabilities, and provides the human and technological support to help them live happy and healthy lives.

New technologies can change the future for so many seniors. They offer our eldest citizens freedom from fear and isolation, freedom to control their lives and stay connected with the world around them; and for their families, freedom from worry. Most of all, it gives seniors the freedom to age well by staying independent and engaged and getting more out of life.

"You can't help getting older, but you don't have to get old."

- George Burns

"The tragedy of old age is not that one is old, but that one is young."

- Oscar Wilde

"Methuselah lived to be 969 years old. You boys and girls will see more in the next fifty years than Methuselah saw in his whole lifetime."

- Mark Twain

¹ "The New Promise of Aging: A White Paper on the 'Aging Well' Framework of the Philips Think Tank on Active Aging, July, 2012, p. 22.

² Robert Butler, "Productive Aging," in Brocklehurst's Textbook of Geriatrics and Clinical Gerontology, ed. Howard Fillit et al. (Philadelphia: Saunders, 2010) 193.