

INSIGHTS INTO AN AGING SOCIETY

from THE CENTER FOR INTERACTIVE DESIGN, DENMARK

Acknowledging the significance of aging society and the related challenges to world wide welfare, TrygFonden, INDEX: and CIID set out to Investigate the lives of elderly people to provide a new understanding of old age as inspiration for new designs solutions.

Our research broke some notions we held about old people and shifted the focus of design thinking from being a facilitator of special aids and appliances to seeking opportunities in the socioeconomic and macro perspective. Our findings reveal distinct trends in the area of secondary occupations, connectivity, dignity and the way time and space is perceived amongst the elderly.

Drawing from user observation methodologies, design thinking and synthesis we observed and filmed old people in their homes in UK, US, Denmark, India, Taiwan, Italy, Israel, South Africa and Columbia.

The findings are described in two connected articles; this article puts the findings in context with the person and the possible solutions that apply to individuals. The other article puts the research and findings into perspective of societies and solutions that address the bigger picture.

THE CHALLENGE

Global demographics will change dramatically in the coming decades. The global 60+ group will reach one billion in number by 2020. In other words: In less than two decades one in six people globally will be above the age of sixty.

Even more prominent changes will be seen in countries like Japan. Italy and Germany which are going to have an even larger greying population. Already alarm bells are ringing in sociopolitical and economic areas over the ever increasing pension and health care costs.

This is an entirely new situation for global society. Historically speaking, old age is a new phenomenon. Never before in the history of humankind have so many people lived for so long and so many people been so old. This demographic fact creates series of new challenges and at the same time a series of new possibilities are arising. The increase in the percentage of people in aging society puts a consequent pressure on welfare budgets creating a situation where old people in many societies are looked upon as a burden and no longer looked at as the carriers of experience, vast knowledge and human resource surplus.

In Denmark this is directly expressed by the politically invented expression: The Elderly Burden. In many societies old people are considered a burden and very few look at it as an opportunity. If we really start to think about the opportunities, imagining impact in the context of dignity, feeling of inclusiveness and connectivity on individuals is not hard, Combining this way of thinking with the new socio-economic

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dynamics that have not been experienced in the world before amounts to a loud and clear signal that we should start designing our own near futures.

This inspired TrygFonden, INDEX: and CID to study the real life of old people around the world in order to provide insights, map opportunities and provoke action on this front.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Secondary Occupation, Connectivity, Dignity and the Perception of Time & Space.

These four main drivers were found to be the putty that holds the lives of the old people we observed together. The four main drivers were surprisingly found to be independent of culture, context, ethics, income or nationality.

Five related concepts were detected and substantiated our findings. These supporting concepts are astounding due to their cross cultural existence, implying that the themes included in them are reflections of their actual lifestyles, struggles and ambitions irrespective of their nationality.

SUPPORTING CONCEPT 1: THE IMPORTANCE OF RITUALS

Trivial activities are often ritualized by old people. The objective of this seems to be the need to stretch time. Rituals are important to create patterns, tempo and rhythm in daily life.

SUPPORTING CONCEPT 2: DENIAL OF AGING

Old people seem to develop a friction between acceptance and denial of aging especially in the context of physiological limitations. This leads to a clear tendency to constantly test ones personal physical limits.

SUPPORTING CONCEPT 3: NEED FOR SENSE OF RHYTHM

There is deep desire between old people to have a rhythm and sense of normalcy in life. Sometimes this need for structure is even created by invention of new activities or even attaching greater importance to exciting core activities.

SUPPORTING CONCEPT 4: GROCERY SHOPPING IS SIGNIFICANT

In growing old, shopping for groceries seems to go beyond a mere functional activity to an elaborate activity that has social value, providing a core activity to focus on and giving a sense of achievement.

SUPPORTING CONCEPT 5. THE PARADOX OF WISDOM

The knowledge component of wisdom is out of context for many old people due to rapidly evolving practices and technologies. This impacts on an old persons self esteem and their perception of new products and services.

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MAIN DRIVERS

In our research we deciphered four main drivers from the insights and supporting concepts we discovered. These drivers could form the basis of new thinking and design solutions.

MAIN DRIVER 1: SECONDARY OCCUPATION.

During the study it was found that most people continue working informally after retirement. This secondary occupation gives old people a purpose in life, creates rhythm and contributes to social capital. (*Social capital is a concept in economics and sociology, defined as, the advantage created by a persons location in a structure of relationships although it does fill a void which the organized workforce cannot easily fulfill like painting fences, taking care of grandchildren, volunteering at refugee camps, advising neighbors on taxation, selling home cooked food etc. The very fact that old people are eager to be productive is inspiring and points to interesting opportunities in an informal economy. It is almost similar to the concept of hidden unemployment.*) What is most striking is the level of passion and knowledge the people observed acquired in their secondary occupations.

One of the most visible and interconnecting drivers of the lives of the old people observed is what could be called a "secondary occupation". The heading of secondary occupations is chosen since this form of occupation fulfilled most of the purposes in a professional primary occupation but without the direct economic benefit. All the old people observed have developed a core activity that becomes a prominent aspect of their daily life. The activity varies from very simple activities like knitting sweaters or charity to complex tasks like filling in tax returns for other people. What is important is that these activities create a sense of fulfillment for the individual. When detecting this and specific questions we received responses ranging from "Oh that's just an obsession" to others saying "It gives me a purpose in life".

We observed old people engaged in activities like buying and selling records, chain marketing special kitchenware, managing allotments, writing columns for the local weekly newspaper and volunteering as translators etc. These activities are not necessarily associated with the old people's formal skills and need not be a substitute to a previous primary occupation. When probing deeper into this phenomenon some sense of why these activities were so common arose. Apart from creating a sense of fulfillment these activities were instrumental in creating a sense of rhythm in the everyday lives of the old people observed. Having a sense of rhythm gives the feeling of normality. Mr. Shed from the UK admitted - "I am very lost when it rains and I cannot attend to my allotment".

Emphasizing the detection of secondary occupation is the fact that most old people observed had elaborate calendars with a lot of trivial appointments, which also could be seen as an adaptation strategy to create a rhythm in their lives. Finally a secondary occupation also creates a domain for the

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elderly that boosts their self esteem and visibility in their neighborhood. Mr. Jayraman in India says with pride "go on a lot of pilgrimages and people consult me when they need to travel to far-off temples". The discovery of the concept of secondary occupation creates a valuable opportunity to introduce a semi-formal framework to capitalize the contribution of old people to society.

Currently old people's contribution to society is not acknowledged as mainstream work.

MAIN DRIVER 2: CONNECTIVITY

Connectivity is a vast and intriguing area to study amongst the elderly. It ranges from daily visits in the grocery store to the use of information technology and close following of neighborhood activities with a degree of curiosity which is paramount to old people.

A part of the study emphasized how old people connect to others and through technology with society. This was done by observing behaviors, sometimes emulating situations and being participatory in communications. One finding was that sometimes, technology becomes unimportant in daily life as they grow older. Mr Huang, from Taiwan had a very well connected life with friends and family with just a fixed line phone. He never used email or a cellular phone but that did not prevent him from his social pursuits. He had built a social hub from his studio where he also paints for 1 hour a day. Mr. Huang had at least 8 visitors during the day we spent with him, which he explained was *below average'. He had taken up painting landscapes during retirement and this has helped him keep connections alive with the local art community and people.

For almost all of our respondents real world connections with people were the primary focus, By contrast. Ms Ello from Denmark used email reasonably often to communicate with friends in far off places. She owns a laptop which is almost only used for emails.

Often using technologies like the internet is perceived as distant but useful. Mr Jayraman in India explained that booking train tickets for his frequent pilgrimages was becoming tough as the local train station had removed the 'senior citizen ticket counter' and he had to stand in a long queue at the 'regular counter'. So instead he now calls his son-in-law in another city who books the tickets online. Such human proxy helps him mediate complex technologies.

Another part of connectivity for old people is about being aware of their neighborhood. Almost all of our respondents knew quite a lot of details about their neighbors, though this did not mean they necessarily socialized with them. Many of us might refer to this behavior as being nosy but keeping informed means a lot to the elderly. The high degree of awareness

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creates a sense of security and keeps them entertained as well. For Mr and Mrs Shed, their front window in the living room acts as a portal out onto the community. It keeps them entertained, watching locals go about their business. They know almost everyone who goes past the window. During our field work our researcher observed:

"During the day the old couple observed their 70 year old neighbor suffering from senile dementia going to church at the wrong time, another neighbor who has an obsessive compulsive disorder parking in front of their window, getting out of his car and checking the wing mirrors before getting back in and repeating this action over and over again. Another neighbor took someone to his garage where they inspected a motorbike, so it was assumed they were selling the bike and then a girl who is seeing the girl next door but had parked her car too close to the hedge, lastly, there was a gas inspection van which was not inspecting a potential leak, but dropping a couple of local children off home."

Socializing builds favor banks and a sense of belonging. A large part of this consists of small talk with shop owners, arguments with service providers and social occasions with friends. We noticed this especially strongly in India and Taiwan where our respondents spent a lot of their time outdoors talking to 'familiar strangers'. After a long conversation with a store owner, Mr. Jayraman said "I like to come to this vegetable shop as they treat me with respect even though the prices are a bit high". Apparently this is a daily routine for him. When we probed into their communication patterns, especially with immediate family we realized that presence is more important than communication. In most cases the sons or daughters called the parents quite frequently to check on them. They did not always have much to talk about but the conversations were quite predictably ritualized. Some admitted that they felt good when their children called even though they did not have much to talk about. Most of the current technologies are made for direct communication and it looks like there is clear opportunity for a subtle and elegant way to create presence between elderly and their often distant family.

Very often communication with the rest of society is mediated through family, friends or even technological interventions. Our findings point to clear directions for creating community oriented, inclusive design solutions that incorporate communication techniques specific to old age. Such solutions should adopt a simplistic approach to the interfaces and effectively mask the complexity behind them.

MAIN DRIVER 3: DIGNITY

Maintaining dignity becomes harder over time. Dignity at old age is a compound of several factors including independence, economic status and self esteem. Most old people strive hard to maintain it

Studying dignity was much harder than other main drivers as it is so connected to other aspects of life. Physical self sufficiency and independence are especially relevant. Many of our respondents had deteriorating health and they were very conscious of this. In fact we notice a slight friction between

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acceptance and denial of aging especially in the context of physical limitations. There is a strong tendency for old people to constantly test their physical limits by doing tasks that they are unsure of. like cutting hedges, pumping water, lifting heavy objects, etc. We assume that this provides them with confidence that they are still physically capable. Over time this is also a way for the aged to check their rate of deterioration. As Ms. Ello mentions - *"I control the house, not the other way around"*.

Many older people are dependent on others for even the basic functions in life like eating, washing and mobility. But not every old person is incapable and dignity to them is like trying to constantly prove that they can take care of themselves. Life is quite different when severe illness strikes. Very often their partner is the one more affected, as there might be a high level of dependency. Mrs. Shed described how lost she felt when her husband was admitted in the hospital for a week due to a mild heart attack, On the other hand a shift in income and social status is also relevant to self-esteem. In most places retirement means less disposable income and thus change in lifestyles. The concept of a secondary occupation links to dignity by the way it adapts to lifestyles, gives a feeling of being useful and wanted by the community.

Emerging technologies are not only difficult to comprehend and use by the elderly but also have tendency to alienate them in other ways. The knowledge gap is also increasing between generations, mainly due to the rapid development of technology. Very often the knowledge of old people seems to have no direct value to the younger generation. Mr. Jayraman was a professional printer in his career and has received awards for his work but now feels disconnected to his profession due to lack of understanding of digital workflow in the printing business. This has changed our perception about the 'wisdom of old people' as the old person's knowledge often does not match the experience. This is felt in their sense of pride and firmness about the things that they know well. One retired accountant explained with prudence how he helps all his friends and family file their income tax returns every year. Recognizing this element of old age is crucial to all design processes. The design of products or services should build into them the ability to encourage equitable use and not stigmatize users based on their reduced abilities in old age. Creating elegant and inclusive design solutions has a very direct appeal to old users and goes much beyond mere convenience. This is particularly important in public services like health care, transportation and other fundamental services used often by the elderly as very often there are not multiple choices for such large-scale top down governmental interventions. Care should be taken to enable, not patronize the limitations posed by old age.

MAIN DRIVER 4: PERCEPTION OF TIME AND SPACE.

The way time is perceived changes after retirement. Managing voids is almost a full time activity by itself. Old couples spend a lot of time with each other indoors and become slightly territorial as well. The concept of time and space undergoes a lot of change in old age. We often noticed that the elderly found unique ways to fill the void in their days. Filling time is done by adopting methods like by being

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meticulous, by prolonging activities, by enhancing trivial activities and inventing new ones. Doing things slowly might be a combination of lack of physical abilities and an unconscious desire to prolong the activity.

We filmed the whole process of setting the lunch table at Mr. Huang's house and noticed that the couple tended to do each activity in sequence instead of trying to cover activities in parallel. For example they would take each bowl from the shelf and lay it on the table one at time instead of stacking them and bringing them over to the table in one move.

We noticed similar patterns at Mr. Jayraman's house when his wife was cutting vegetables or hanging up cloths to dry. Upon asking her why she was behaving in this way, she replied that she was not aware she was doing it.

Efficiency is a factor of time and obviously time is abundant in their lives. Sometimes a trivial task is glorified and done really well. For example, we noticed an old man polish his sandals carefully for about 15 minutes before stepping out his home.

The most fascinating trend in respect to time is ability to invent new activities. Mr. Jayraman takes used old envelopes and reuses them by carefully opening them up to reverse them. He had a set of small tools like a wooden knife, brush and glue stick ready to do this ritual daily. In fact now he distributes all the mail to his neighbors and keeps the junk mail for himself.

Apparently junk mail has the best quality paper and the worst glue, perfect for his pursuits. This trend was reinforced by the copious use of calendars and schedules in many cases. For example Ms. Elio maintains an extensive appointment calendar and a daily task list. She fills these with trivial tasks and tries to complete them. We assume that she gets a sense of accomplishment from this as it makes her time more visible. Similarly Mr. Jayaraman had several calendars for tracking various activities in his home.

The concept of space is also interesting. Many of the people we observed felt more secure when they lived close to other homes. In India old people prefer staying in dense neighborhoods, as there is a sense of security in case of sudden health emergencies as the ambulance response times are unreliable. Old couples often find themselves in each other's company continuously after retirement. This creates new kind of dynamics in their relationship and in the way they use shared spaces. We noticed this in all the couples we studied. They tend to be territorial about their own space. For example Mr and Mrs Shed each had their own armchairs to rest. They almost created a mini cocoon around their armchairs from the things they use often. Similar behavior was seen in the homes of Mr. Jayraman and

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Mr. Huang where their wives created a sense of territory around the kitchen, perhaps due to their cultures as housewives.

The concept of time and space as a driver does not map directly to any obvious design opportunity but is something that could be thoughtfully integrated into design solutions and subtly embedded into products and services. It is deeply linked to other elements like the sense of security, achievement and usefulness which are all very deeply seated emotional drivers. If products and services could exploit such trends amongst the elderly not only would it serve the genuine needs of the elderly but also create a new trend in design for elderly.

OPPORTUNITIES IN DESIGN THINKING.

An aging society brings with it a set of challenges, but in our perspective it also brings opportunities. We are looking not just at the market opportunity of almost one-sixth of the world population in the near future, but also at the potential to make welfare costs sustainable.

It is very important to think of design as a holistic enabler for the elderly rather than making mere adaptations to existing products to make them usable. Also thinking of design strategies as services models increases the scope of solutions and reduces scalability concerns. The dual approach of being systemic about the larger concerns of the elderly and attention to small details that make improvement to age-specific needs are vital to be create acceptable design solutions. Highlighted here are a few potential concept directions to illustrate the possibilities of how we can translate the insights of this research into objective design thinking.

OPEN DESIGN IDEAS

CONNECTED PILL BOXES - MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY AND SOCIAL NETWORKS.

Would it be possible to imagine a medication system, that not only ensures that old people in the local community take their medication at the right time but also connects them in social networks within relevant communities. A concept like this could also be extended to connect nuclear families with aged family members and also monitor medication. However care should be taken to not transform it into a surveillance gadget. A system like that would help Mrs Shed overcome the annoyance of remembering medication timing and at the same time it would help her to connect to other people with similar needs in the local area.

THE PUBLIC GARDEN PLOT - BEAUTIFUL, CHEAP AND FUN.

Imagine if your local public garden had small manageable plots that were tended by various elderly people. The municipality could provide infrastructure for suitable space and resources but each plot was tended and styled by individuals in a participatory way. This would enable elderly people to engage themselves in a task that was not just an engrossing activity but a continuing public display of their

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passion and skills. Such a normal activity could help build neighborhood connections, support physical activity and build social capital if it were presented with a service model that took away the difficult parts like heavy physical work, purchasing supplies and expert knowledge of plants. This could be envisioned as a service offered by the municipality that enables elders to connect to the society and at the same time save on high maintenance of beautiful gardens. Could a system like that ensure that Mr. Shed is not alone in his garden, could Mr. Jayraman use his organizational skills to get it up and running?

A MENTOR NETWORK - PASSING ON EXPERIENCE

The elderly carry a lot of experience and a wealth of knowledge and connections. It's a pity that only a small part of it is put to good use. Imagine a neighborhood level mentor network that helped the youth set-up new initiatives and build their futures. It could be as simple as setting up a local bakery to more complex things like understanding investment banking. The important thing is to conceive this as an organized but informal service model where all stake holders have clear social incentives. Such a system would provide guidance to the youth simultaneously building self-esteem and dignity amongst the aged by channeling their energies on supporting development. The design of such a service model will require deeper insights into the social networking models amongst the elderly and the youth and balanced use of technology enabled systems. For example Mr Huang tries to pass on his experiences in the art circles and skills of painting through informal classes in the afternoons.

THE TASK BANK - PUTTING IT INTO A SYSTEM

There are countless chores around our homes that just require time and dedication and very little expert knowledge or special skills. We observed how the elderly transform such chores into rituals and convert them into important activities. Why not systematize this situation and create a technology-mediated service of tasks that are timeless in nature. These tasks could be both big and small and could be done by different age groups of elderly people. Mr. Huang already teaches art, Ms Ello already teaches languages, Mr. Jayraman could engage in planning trips for groups and individuals in the community and Mr. Shed could tend gardens. Other obvious tasks could be baby-sitting, cooking for parties and neighborhood watch. It would be interesting to tap into this informal economy and create a visible and semi-formal structure in the form of a task bank for the elderly. It doesn't have to be disruptive to existing practices but just a supplement.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study point to some clear opportunities in using design thinking at the strategic level to improve the quality of life for the elderly. There are also some interesting trends in our observation that could spark radical innovation especially in public sector initiatives and of course some incremental innovation in the design of products and services for the elderly.

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We hope that this document acts as both an inspiration and a provocation for the enablers of such future products and services. The complimentary article titled 'informed Anecdotes: Design for an Aging Society' deals with the macro issues of the aging and describes how design thinking could contribute to a more age integrated society and transform a notional burden into an opportunity.

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THOUGHTS FROM OUR OBSERVATIONS

During the study several distinct lines of thought were detected, which all has to be taken into consideration, explored and addressed when designing solutions for the aging society.

THE GRANULARITY OF OLD AGE

Most of the myths and notions about aging arise due to a lack of understanding of the variations amongst the elderly. Old people are not just old people, but series of different groups. There is a vast difference between a recently retired elderly around the age of 60 and a person in their 70's. Old people

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over 80 are quite uniquely different due to their diminished physical capacity. For most statistical purposes the UN and many countries defines an old person as being over the age of 60, The exact taxonomy of this is not what matters but to be able to understand the abilities and aspirations of the various post retirement groups is crucial. For example several of our respondents over the age of 70 had been spending the last decade working indirectly for their local community. Better understanding of the various age groups beyond the current bracket 'beyond 60' is vital to the future directions of business, policy makers, public bodies and service their industry.

THE DESIGN APPROACH

The Demographic transitions on the horizon will provide a huge opportunity for design intervention. A user centric approach of looking at the needs of the elderly can inform actions that are both at a policy level and a product or service level.

Globally the elderly are cared for by both formal and informal systems in varying ratios in different countries. Design thinking at a strategic level has to consider this duality of old age concerns and find appropriate solutions.

Informal systems with no governmental intervention or little market involvement are still the primary mechanism of care in most developing countries. It is deeply ingrained in extended family systems, investment in property etc. which acts an unofficial pension system and mitigates risk. An estimated 70 percent of the world's old people rely on this. Understanding nuances of the aging process and incorporating social elements like kinship and informal socio-political structures is vital to the design process. Design thinking at this level needs to be sensitive to cultural influences and legacy systems while still adopting elements of a formal system to bring appropriate benefits.

On the other hand formal systems practiced in developed countries offer more homogeneous and reliable support for the elderly. Legislation and policies create frameworks for the formal system but design intervention requires careful thought. Formal systems evolve on urbanization, nuclear families, change in the social fabric and breakdown of traditional social norms. But such practice also alienates the elderly, offers lesser control to an individual and does not accommodate exceptions easily. Systematic user research and consideration of the longevity of ideas is crucial as changes have sweeping impact on masses. Design for such a system has to work towards improvement within the existing frameworks but could draw inspiration from informal systems to make it more elegant and enriching.

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This map shows the size of the countries relative to their populations over 65 -- the greatly expanded countries have more, given their population size. The US is one.

THE UNIVERSAL APPROACH

Adopting the principles of universal design is already a big step closer to creating a more elderly friendly design. Universal design defines the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.

A combination of these universal design guidelines, parametric recommendations from standards and due consideration to cultural context of application has significant potential in improving many of the minor details, reducing the pain points and thus eventually improving the quality of life. Universally designed products that meet most of the needs of the elderly would always be applicable to other age segments too. But when it comes to information products or technology intensive applications it becomes imperative that the design is not just universal in its attributes but is thoughtful about the mental models and metaphors that are contextual to time. For example in our study we noticed a lot of elderly people using cellular phones. However some of them prefer to maintain a physical address; book instead of storing the numbers on the phone itself.

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THE DANISH CONTEXT

Currently in Denmark the welfare and tax system does not encourage work beyond retirement. Many people look forward to retirement as it offers a less stressful lifestyle. But many retirees also want a secondary occupation that has less responsibility and offers greater flexibility in its scope and timing. It would therefore be interesting to investigate how retirement might become a gradual transition, rather than an abrupt end to a primary occupation. The initiatives in the Danish government's recent welfare reform (Velfærdsreform I. which raises the formal age of retirement, encourages prolonging the working age of the primary occupation to combat spiraling welfare costs. However, the real answer might be to find new ways to harness secondary occupations after retirement from the primary occupation. It would mean a reform at a policy level that encourages the blurring of the boundary between a formal and an informal economy at old age. We therefore believe it is a worthwhile challenge to find new ways to help bridge the current gap between the primary and secondary occupations. This would demand collaborative thinking at the level of tax, welfare and labour policies combined with clever implementation of new service models that operate at the local level to support the shift in thinking,

CONCLUSION

Quality of life in old age moves beyond mere creature comforts to having a healthy, secure and meaningful life. Healthcare and housing is just one facet of their needs. Building a sense of inclusiveness and dignity should be a public initiative as much as a social responsibility.

In addressing the aging society by design, it seems obvious that public sector innovation in the area of aging would probably have the maximum impact in improving the quality of life for the elderly. If this was done as a collaborative effort within and between societies, the result would not only mean a better quality of life for old people but would also hold the potential to reduce welfare costs, improve service quality and create a more age integrated society. A McKinsey report titled 'The Demographic of Deficit: How Aging will Reduce Global Wealth', talks about the macro economic issues of aging and the suggestion it makes is "The only meaningful way to counteract the impending demographic pressure on global financial wealth is for governments and households to increase their savings rate". This could be perceived as being a bit narrow in approach as it is not the "only meaningful way" and addresses only one facet of the challenge. Myriads of creative solutions can be created if an effort is made to understand the many diverse individuals who make up what is often considered the "Elderly Burden" but are actually hidden assets and a power in society.

Ask yourself | What can be done to prepare people just about to retire to adopt new forms of occupations and continue to contribute to society in an active way ? How can you create a more age inclusive society by reducing barriers and creating new opportunities in your organizations and enterprises?