Independence and Aging

Getting older isn’t the problem. Losing independence is.

WRITTEN BY ANTHONY PANNOZZO & SAMARA WATKISS
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ABSTRACT

The nearly 73 million US Baby Boomers currently exiting the workforce and aging into social security will seek to maximize their retirement experience, opening up the so-called “Longevity Economy.” As this demographic expects to live longer than any previous, the ability to maintain their independence will define the quality of their lives. We imagine a future where physical and cognitive deterioration no longer means a loss of independence and the dignity that comes with it. We believe this massive demographic shift is a call to action to create new products and services that are designed to help people adapt to changing circumstances in order to maintain independence and continue to contribute meaningfully in their 70s, 80s, 90s, and beyond.
HERE COME THE BABY BOOMERS

The Baby Boomers number roughly 73 million people in the United States alone, with the majority of them reaching age 65 in the next decade. Baby Boomers have challenged conventional wisdom about what it means to grow older as they have passed through each life-stage. They challenged what it meant to be 40, what it meant to be 50, and we should expect no different as they enter retirement age. This attitude toward aging, combined with a forecast of unprecedented longevity, indicates we are in for a slew of new challenges with wide-ranging implications for society, our economy and the healthcare system. These challenges represent a significant opportunity for organizations of all kinds. According to a report released by AARP and Oxford Economics, this new, so-called Longevity Economy already generates $7.6 trillion in US revenue annually and is only expected to grow from there.ii

At frog, we believe design has the power to solve problems by adding joy or removing pain from people’s lives. While the Longevity Economy will certainly open up new areas of opportunity, creating real value for Boomers will be less about solving the problems of aging, and more about creating products and services that allow them to maintain independence longer.
THE INDEPENDENCE EQUILIBRIUM

To design for independence, you must first define independence. Through our research with seniors and our client work in developing experiences for those over 65, we have learned that independence is the foundational motivation that drives us as people and enables us to live our lives to the fullest. When we are young, gaining independence is about freedom—being able to live your life on your terms, separating and individuating from your parents. But when we age, independence becomes more about maintaining dignity and purpose as our circumstances change. Independence is threatened as we begin to contend with physical and cognitive decline. Arthritis, vision and hearing impairment, dementia and other deteriorations place our ability to navigate the physical and relational world at risk.

We refer to an individual’s understanding of what it means to maintain independence in their circumstance as the “independence equilibrium.” The independence equilibrium is essentially the balance that we achieve in the relationships with the important people in our lives (e.g. friends, family, neighbors, caretakers). For example, a long-term couple who have walked in lockstep through major life stages may be comfortable relying on one another for many things, but the independence equilibrium becomes vulnerable for upset when physical or cognitive decline happens at markedly different rates. This can cause one partner to be completely dependent upon the other, shifting their roles from life partners to caregiver and care receiver. Disruptions to the equilibrium can also be subtle and evolve over time. Perhaps a senior is no longer able to drive at night, and requires a ride here or there to evening events or outings. While they may have friends or family willing to lend a helping hand, these changes are often the start of a greater dependency, which can, in turn, begin to limit the independence of those who help.

Another key factor that affects the equilibrium is when someone over 65 loses a life partner to death or separation. These people are forced to recalibrate to life alone, perhaps having to learn new skills or coping mechanisms, just when other physical and cognitive declines are setting in. Many times, adult children feel the obligation to take on caregiving responsibilities. However, adult children are often in the ‘rush hour’ of life as they struggle to balance the peak of their career responsibilities with other factors like raising a family or keeping up with the household to-dos. In taking on the role
of caregiver for their parent, adult children begin to lose a measure of their own independence and experience increasing stress that comes with the responsibility.

We observed that seniors are extremely aware of and sensitive to these imbalances. “I don’t want to be a burden on anyone,” is a familiar refrain we gathered from our research. And if they do feel like they are taking more than they are giving, they are eager to find ways to pay back the debt and restore the equilibrium.

Additionally, changes in professional lives, place of residence, or even wider social circles and the communities can have equally disruptive effects on our ability to live our lives to the fullest. Consider retirement, downsizing and relocation: retirement can mean a loss of routine, purpose or sense of identity for someone who spent 40 or 50 years establishing an identity through a career. Relocation—whether it be to a warmer climate, a smaller home or to be closer to a loved one—can break the casual but essential social bonds we take for granted, like running into familiar faces at Starbucks, chatting at the grocery store, or meeting up at the local Fourth of July parade. Social bonds can also weaken as friends and neighbors face their own declining health. Poor health, weakened social connections and loss of purpose can all lead to depression and social isolation, which can in turn accelerate the path to dependency.

Designing for independence is more than just accommodating aging in place. It is about understanding the pain points along people’s life journey in a human-centered way. It is about understanding the tensions, the motivations, and both the functional and emotional needs that are not being met in today’s markets. In understanding and designing for these changes and unmet needs, companies will find opportunities to create real value in the Longevity Economy.
DESIGNING FOR INDEPENDENCE

For today’s seniors, there is no real road map of what to expect. As societal expectations around aging and ability continue to change, much of society still is not designed to grow and change with us. Physical, professional and even familial structures need to be reimagined if we want to moderate—rather than multiply—the difficulties that come with an aging body and mind. So how do we design for this demographic in a way that will have real impact in helping seniors maintain independence and lessen the burden of care on others?

When it comes to designing for independence, we have found inspiration in the innovation framework for addressing climate change—yes, climate change. This innovation falls into two distinct categories: mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation is about reducing root impact of industrialization on the environment through technologies like fossil fuel alternatives and systems like recycling. Adaptation is about adjusting to a ‘new normal’ through strategies such as building homes away from encroaching shorelines or adjusting to regulations that ban things like single-use plastic. Similarly, when it comes to designing for a new demographic aging in the digital era, we can use the same principles of mitigation and adaptation. This could be as simple as using a low profile hearing aid to adapt to hearing loss, or creating new types of professional experiences to mitigate the loneliness that comes from retirement.

Here we have assembled a list of provocations, ideas and real-world examples of human-centric solutions for maintaining independence.
As we age, our ability to process incoming information or recall previously acquired information diminishes. The embarrassment and shame of forgetting a name or familiar face can prevent people from interacting with their community and nudge them towards social isolation. This isolation is also caused by breakdowns in social circles and communities, widowhood and a lack of opportunity to meet new people.

- What if people with memory challenges could wear AR glasses with integrated facial recognition that can whisper or display the names of the people they meet out in public, or send reminders for appointments or medications?

- What if apps like the dating service MyTime tackled isolation by expanding explicitly into the physical world? Given the life stage and potential professional and financial status enjoyed by seniors, these kinds of services or apps could take inspiration from Airbnb and offer facilitated group experiences, either locally or as travel destinations, that blend digital and physical world engagement.
Among adults 65 and over, 87 percent would prefer to stay in their current home and community as they age⁴, despite the fact that many homes are not designed to support cognitive and physical decline. Also, despite robust growth projections in the field of home health and personal care aides (up 41 percent, to more than 4 million jobs by 2026⁵), this type of care is expensive and out of reach for most. In early 2019, Amazon received HIPAA compliance for its Alexa devices, meaning it can now partner with healthcare companies to create programs or “skills” to help users with all kinds of healthcare needs, from booking an appointment with a doctor to getting a reading on their blood glucose levels.

What if UPS, FedEx or Amazon paired regular home delivery with home health assistance? Delivered by a trained home healthcare nurse, a senior’s weekly groceries, meals and presorted vitamins and medications would be delivered and put away for them. While there, the trained home health aide/delivery person would check the senior’s vitals, look for signs of a changing routine, and engage in a simple “cognitive conversation”—all to compare against their baseline, and then share back with their family through a connected home device, like HIPAA-compliant Alexa.

For those looking to continue living in their homes, we can find ways to adapt these existing homes with monitoring, safety and assistive technologies that enable independent living. And for those who choose to relocate, either for retirement, or to be closer to loved ones, we can utilize “smart home” or “small home” trends to create the next generation of retirement communities that provide tech-enabled living, rather than nurse-assisted living. These homes are custom designed, physically adaptable and outfitted to enable independent living⁶. While there are still challenges in IoT and smart home setup, integration across devices, and identity/personalization⁷, there is great promise on the horizon for these approaches to enable truly independent living for longer periods of time.
FINDING PURPOSE BY STAYING ON THE JOB

After retiring from a full-time career, many seniors do not feel as though they are ready to quit cold turkey on their professional lives. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that by 2024, 36 percent of people between the ages of 65 and 69 will be working—up from 22 percent in 1994. Meanwhile, recent research shows working longer can stave off dementia. While older workers typically process information more slowly, other functions such as semantic memory (common knowledge such as facts, names and dates acquired over a lifetime), language and speech actually improve with age.

What if AI can be designed to augment a senior’s diminishing capacity to quickly process new information? Working together, the AI might capture, organize and add insight to information during meetings or conversations, then help them review and interpret the information later. Additionally, seniors could offer significant value as AI trainers, either explicitly or implicitly through conversational interactions with speech-enabled digital assistants. Facebook is already training their naturalistic bots by having them watch hours of Skype conversations; seniors could be employed for similar training.
FINDING PURPOSE BY HELPING OTHERS

As seniors enter a stage when they begin to need more assistance, the opportunity to give something back directly to the people who are helping them, or to their family or community in general, can make it easier to accept assistance without feeling like a burden. Friendship Bench, an initiative in Zimbabwe, is already doing this by employing grandmothers to meet with patients who otherwise would not receive mental health services for things like depression or loneliness. At the same time, smartphone apps such as Talk Space are working to provide immediately accessible therapy to users.

What if we used network technology to facilitate in-person meetings or digital connections so seniors can provide support to those in need, giving them purpose by recognizing they still have much to offer while lessening their feeling of being a burden?
KEEPING THE INDEPENDENCE EQUILIBRIUM INTACT

Seniors often avoid engaging with their grown children because they don’t want to feel like a burden or accept help that could lead to lost independence. However, maintaining a sense of purpose is often crucial to maintaining a sense of self, so enabling contribution—even for those seniors far away from their younger family members—can help to re-balance the equilibrium.

What if the combination of smart refrigerators and grocery-delivery services enabled seniors to take over meal planning and grocery shopping for their busy children, and then use telepresence technology to teach their grandkids how to prepare and cook a meal with the groceries they ordered?
EASING THE PAIN OF DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

It is estimated that approximately 65 percent of older adults with long-term care needs rely exclusively on family and friends for care, with another 30 percent supplementing this care with paid assistance. As caregiver relationships often overlap with many of the most important personal relationships between children, partners or close friends, good communication is doubly important for maintaining the independence equilibrium. However, fears over losing independence, being a burden or damaging a relationship can stifle communication, causing people to avoid difficult but necessary conversations. These difficult conversations include talks about disability, end of life decision making and assisted living needs. Kindu is an app that helps would be sexual partners communicate more honestly about their desires by offering suggestions and allowing them to individually state their level of interest before it shares the suggestions both expressed interest in. Similarly, Iris Plans is a platform that walks families through the difficult process of making a plan to guide future health decisions.

What if there were similar mechanisms that facilitate children raising concerns with their aging parents? For example, an app that could help you broach difficult subjects like breaking it to a parent that they are no longer able to drive safely. Additionally, filling out a digital profile, which many aging seniors are familiar with from LinkedIn or Facebook, could be a more accessible platform for families to work through the medical and legal steps necessary to make sure a parent’s affairs are in order.
AS OUR SOCIETY ADJUSTS TO AN OLDER POPULATION WITH LONGER LIFESPANS, PEOPLE ARE REDEFINING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A SENIOR CITIZEN. WE MUST FOCUS ON HOW WE CAN ENABLE LONG, HEALTHY, INDEPENDENT LIVES.

There is no single definition of today’s “senior;” and even within an individual, different aspects of their lives “age” at different rates. As we continue to explore the opportunities opening up in the Longevity Economy, we must do so in a way that creates real value for this new generation of tech-savvy seniors that continue to defy expectations. We must design solutions that leverage technology in a way that addresses real pain points for people and communities, taking into account the entire ecosystem of loved ones, personal and professional networks, and service providers around seniors. In short, we must redefine what it means to be a “senior citizen” in the digital age.

Innovators have an unparalleled opportunity to enable seniors and those around them to create a new future. As we embark on this new era, it’s up to forward-thinking companies to define new products and services that employ holistic strategies to meet new challenges.
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