

From Silver to Gold*

There is a vast untapped market worth an estimated \$20 billion by 2020. Those with 2020 vision will set their sights on this potential goldmine.

The anticipated wealth derives from the range of products and services being developed to ensure a healthy and engaged population at all stages of life – particularly in older age. The power of this positive vision was highlighted at the Business of Aging Innovation Summit held recently at the MaRS Centre in Toronto.

Not surprisingly, oft-repeated messages were oft repeated. Canada has one of the most rapidly aging populations in the world. By 2050, 25 percent of citizens will be over 65.

Canada faces serious intergenerational tensions linked to end-of-life spending relative to the beginning. On health care alone, the Canadian Institute for Health Information

reports average annual provincial and territorial expenditure per capita of \$17,469 for people over 80 compared with \$8,239 for infants. The International Monetary Fund estimates the financial implications of aging as 10 times greater than the current economic recession.

Clearly, there is no room for Pollyanna in this picture. But there is another side of the aging story that is not told often enough.

Emerging research on brain fitness highlighted at the Summit demonstrates how new scanning technologies can identify chronic brain disease at least ten years before symptoms of debilitating conditions, such as dementia, actually appear. Postponing the onset of these symptoms can reduce the incidence of these conditions, such as Alzheimer's disease, by 50 percent – with massive savings of both dollars and *douleur*. Delay of symptoms by 10 years virtually can eradicate this disease from the population.

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Information and communication technologies have opened up worlds of opportunity – not just for an older population but for all. These technologies allow greater mobility in how and where work is carried out. Anyone with a lap and a top can pull together a powerful combination of contribution. There are no age or other limits in a wired world.

Finally, the new vision of healthy aging requires new policies. Current policies and programs evolved from early 20th century industrial society in which jobs largely involved physical labour and lifespan was shorter. Age 65 was deemed the point at which the average person would need a few years' rest before exiting the global stage.

But the world has tipped on its head since this economic foundation was cast in stone. While there are still millions of hewers, harvesters and heavy machinists, global wealth is rooted largely in the creation and application of knowledge. Brain has surpassed brawn as the primary driver in a knowledge-based world.

The shift means that there must be greater flexibility in employment and pension options so that workers can maintain some attachment to the labour market in ways that make sense to them – and that accommodate their unique preferences and needs. Black-and-white policies are outmoded in a world that is increasingly gray.

No one can deny the aches, pains and suffering typically associated with advancing age. But diagnostic and preventive interventions – along with lifelong opportunities for learning, employment and social engagement – can push back the onset of age-based incapacity. Recent health research found that

those who continue to do some work after 65 have better health outcomes than those who quit entirely.

The future should be seen not as two population solitudes in which the under-65's have the capacity to contribute and those on the other side of the outmoded age divide are seen as nothing more than a drain on resources.

The alternative vision sees not an aging population *writ large* but rather individual workers and consumers, creators and curators, and teachers and learners – both imparting and improving their wisdom throughout their lifetime.

The active and healthy vision requires a range of social supports and services along with accessible and affordable transportation. It also involves the development of technologies related to health diagnostics, home safety and security, mobility, and social and economic participation.

Silver can turn to gold if we make a conscious choice both to see – and seize – the huge prospects for innovation. Aging has finally come of age.

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