

Designing

CONNECTED AGING

Experiences

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



BUSINESS
INNOVATION
FACTORY

Support
provided by

Robert Wood Johnson
Foundation



INNOVATION INTENT

As our population ages, we are increasingly focused on the question of care. People begin to ask themselves: What care will I need and where will it come from? Can I afford it? Will I be able to stay in my home?

Following suit, providers, entrepreneurs, and planners focus on solutions (from technologies to services) that aim to address the issue of care.

Yet, we believe a focus on care models alone will not be sufficient if we are to increase the independence, well-being, and health of a society that is living longer. We must also explore how we age better through social participation, relationships, purpose, and meaning: what we call connected aging.

Our focus on care heightens our sense of weakness and dependence, and deeply influences our notions of self (which directly affects our wellbeing). A 2009 article by Intel's Experience Study captures this insight well:

Social isolation – our inability to contribute meaningfully to our families and communities – also affects our overall health. Isolation is linked to depression, high blood pressure, difficulty learning and remembering, and weakened immune response.

We believe that the crux of transformation requires shifting our thinking away from care towards social participation. We believe that the future of aging can be characterized by how we contribute to our communities, families, and professional environments. We believe that by focusing here, we will also improve general health as we age.

“People of all ages aspire to have a sense of belonging, a legitimate role in the life of their family and community. We are meaning makers all through life, meaning is made through social interaction and that does not cease in older age.”

CONNECTED AGING

The Business Innovation Factory (BIF) began exploring the aging experience in 2006 as part of our Elder Experience Lab. We discovered that the health of our relationships often defines our aging experience and affects everything we do, from eating, to planning the day, to making financial decisions.

As we age, many people become increasingly involved in our lives – from caregivers to doctors. The elements of our daily experience can become more dependent on others: our families and caregivers journey through our aging experience as partners and agents. It becomes increasingly difficult to dress, bathe, and feed ourselves. We rarely make decisions by ourselves. These relationships are important to our overall health and the ability to contribute meaningfully keeps us healthier longer. But our ability to engage meaningfully and reciprocally is much reduced.

In December 2013, BIF completed a human centered design effort, supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, to understand how older adults in today's society use and access social engagement to live more purposeful, connected lives. Human centered design is the practice of putting people and their experiences at the center of learning. We conducted 30 qualitative interviews with adults aged over 60-91, from across the United States, and observed 12 of these adults in various settings, such as grocery shopping, volunteering, or at community centers. We then gathered our 30 research participants together to co-create solutions – for example, we asked them to consider how might senior centers move beyond a service delivery model, or how might we build a connection through transitions? We grounded this research in a popular media scan to understand the cultural norms that surround connected older adults.

From this process, we learned that to live a connected aging experience - beyond the framework of care and increasing isolation - requires intention and an enabling environment that supports this intention.

As designers and innovators, we can purposefully support this transformation, designing for the connected aging experience—one that could promise increased independence, well-being, and health.



DESIGNING THE CONNECTED AGING EXPERIENCE

We can imagine a future that builds a connected aging experience using seven design principles:

Be age agnostic.

Organizations and systems no longer view chronological age as an accurate gauge of behavior. Seventy-two year old women are roofing homes for those in need. One-hundred year olds are serving as life role models for friends a decade younger. To serve this population, planners, designers, innovators, and policy makers no longer design for stereotypes. They meet people where they are in their life journey.

Enable the lives people want to live.

Rather than delivering one-size fits all experiences, organizations recognize diversity and work to support and design for it. There is no one “senior life” to plug into.

Place engagement at the core.

People connect through relationships, but also through place and purpose. Designers, planners, and innovators know they must create experiences and services that engage the aging, first and foremost.

Support people as they face continuous change.

New models must help older adults adapt to shifting ground and find ways to re-engage, build resilience, and experience stability in the midst of never-ending change. People will navigate many changes as they age, some gradual and others quite sudden.

Create opportunity for continued development.

New experiences and services promote a sense of discovery and learning. They challenge people. This often involves asking people to step out of their comfort zone and requires organizations to see the aging population as people with experience, wisdom, and contributions (rather than as aging, vulnerable, and weak). People grow through all their years—they don’t stop being vibrant learners just because they are aging

Recognize and reward elders as creators and innovators.

Rather than services designed for individual consumption, organizations provide resources that people can use to self-organize around topics or needs that interest them, incenting elders and supplying them with the resources to create their own experiences.

Strive to build dense layers of gratification.

Organizations no longer oversimplify the needs of older adults. They deliver experiences that afford opportunities for mastery, learning by doing, flow, bonding/building tight relationships, fun and enjoyment, commitment to others, confidence building, and contribution to others.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR INNOVATION

Based on our research, we have identified four key areas to apply these principles in an effort to reimagine the aging experience:

Design for Moments of Belonging

We can augment the daily activities and interactions of older adults with unexpected special moments or adding a sharing “layer” to something normally done alone in order to establish a social culture of inclusion. For example, what if we catalyzed local social currencies that encourage belonging and inclusion? Could we incentivize individuals who act as connectors, people willing to take personal responsibility to actively help others be social. Taking inspiration from **the Buddy Bench**, we could look at the built environment as a design opportunity to imbue everyday experiences with sociable moments or chances for participation?

Build Platforms for Participation

We need to move from service delivery models that focus on providing for older adults to a platform that actively solicits knowledge, expertise and ideas, and invites the co-creation of experiences and place making. For example, we can imagine the Senior Centered Reimagined, using a distributed model like the **Design Museum Boston**. Without any permanent address, this model turns the museum inside out and creates its experience through a network of exhibits and programs hosted by other organizations. We imagine a senior center expanding beyond its walls and becoming a networked experience. It shifts from life as a single-focus destination to an embedded neighborhood delivery program. Older adults have more choice in what programs are available to them, as any number of community organizations can become a provider. Elders have greater access to programs as activities become more proximate when spread throughout a city or neighborhood. Rather than build new facilities, existing facilities are maximized by repurposing them for different activities at different times of the day. Elders regain their place as active and visible members of their communities.



Elementary school kids developed an idea for **the Buddy Bench** to help kids who feel lonely during recess. Sitting on the Buddy Bench signals a request for contact with others. The bench communicates its purpose and its invitation to connect. It's not hard to imagine park benches designated for older adults seeking connection.



Design Museum Boston, a museum dedicated to educating the world about design, has no permanent address. Instead, it “turns the museum inside out” and creates its experience through a network of exhibits and programs hosted by other organizations. By breaking free of one physical space, Design Museum Boston turns the city into a museum and demonstrates the positive impact of design everywhere where people go in the city.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INNOVATION

Enhance Connection During Transition

Transitions are inevitable, but enabled through connection. We can create models for reflection and celebration to help build a narrative around transition experiences, positively influencing self-perception and the motivation to persist. Inspired by programs like **Super Better**, we imagine games or events that help people recover from transitions, increasing resilience, while helping them stay positive, curious, and motivated even in the face of tough challenges.

Catalyze New Concepts of Age

Culturally, we would benefit from a movement that tips society towards a new concept of age. What if we engaged older adults to take an active role in shaping the new connected aging possibilities for themselves and their communities? Creating a new vocabulary helps people see what's possible. Providing open learning exchanges invites elder changemakers to come together with peers and partners, creating a space where they can trade ideas and share inspirational practices. Many people are defining connected aging experiences for themselves, but its work to discover each other and learn together; there are few opportunities or venues to exchange experiences and ideas. Inspired by the **Dove Campaign For Real Beauty**, we imagine a national conversation to redefine age, to make age a source of confidence and to challenge stereotypes. When people share what they're learning about how to live a longer life, they have the power to change perceptions and beliefs about age. When they exchange ideas, they cultivate the power to influence the policies and systems that affect their lives.



Super Better uses gamification to help people recover from an illness and increase resilience - helping them stay curious, optimistic, and motivated even in the face of tough challenges.



The Dove® Campaign for Real Beauty, began a worldwide discussion to redefine beauty after learning that only 2% of women globally would “describe themselves as beautiful.” With a goal to make beauty a source of confidence, Dove has recently launched a Pro-Age (versus Anti-Age) campaign to challenge stereotypes and invite women to join the conversation.

NEXT STEPS

Through the Patient Experience Lab, BIF is helping leaders design and test new models for health and wellbeing – models that fundamentally move us away from our sick care system, and toward a system of well care.

With the insights and opportunities gleaned from this study, we seek partners willing to help us build the Connected Aging Experience in a real world environment. For more information, contact Leigh Anne Cappello via email at leigh@businessinnovationfactory.com

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