



Results

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The Future is in Ageing - Old is the new black

Last month I was invited to speak at the 2016 Global Welfare Summit at the Gold Coast. Arranged by CHARLTON BROWN®, the theme was “Striking the Balance- Responsibility & Innovation in Care for the Ageing”.

The three day Summit brought together policy makers, researchers, practitioners, health experts and innovators representing the diverse sectors of government, academia, industry and the community to discuss the significant transformation occurring globally around ageing and caring for the aged. Delegates came from many countries including Malaysia, Japan, India, Denmark, Korea, China, Indonesia, the United States and Australia.

Despite such diversity what unified the 300+ delegates was first, recognition that change and disruption within and towards the sector was the ‘new normal’ and secondly the significant opportunities in innovation and impact that could be realised.

I might not be an age expert, compared with my fellow Summit practitioners, however I have been ageing since the day I was born! And I am not alone. About 8% of the world's population – i.e. 524 million people are over 65 years of age and life expectancy is expected to increase. By 2050, this number is expected to nearly triple to about 1.5 billion, representing 16 % of the world's population. In Australia alone there are approximately 3.5 M people aged over 65 with ABS projecting this number to nearly double by 2031.

Against the backdrop of the ageing population it's important to also consider interdependent global trends such as urbanisation, environmental and climate change. By 2050, 75% of the world's populations will live in cities.

“The loudest and largest generation in history, the baby boomers are older. Their numbers and needs will place unprecedented demands on ageing services in a time of workforce shortages and budgetary constraints. So is the answer to simply expand the services or is it to ask- what's the new future of ageing?” Joseph Coughlin MIT- Ageing Labs

Summit keynote demographer Bernard Salt, shared many top level findings about those booming baby boomers:

Australia is embarking on an era of ageing with baby boomers about to find themselves not only users but ‘customers’ of services.

As a generation they are better educated, richer and more technologically savvy so consequently demanding more from services and service providers.

Along with other developed nations Australia is experiencing change, disruption and growth in the knowledge and caring industries.

Fun Fact Aside: Salt also described (my) Generation X as the ‘forgotten generation’ and the reason why we are grumpy all the time. What a revelation Bernard! I now don't need to make excuses!

Another Summit speaker Tim Russell from Five Good Friends shared examples of ‘good practice’ that industry leaders globally were making so that communities might ‘age successfully’.

My key takeaway from Tim's presentation was the nexus between the technological and health sectors and ways to use data and innovation to consider the new future of ageing services.

Other highlights included research from the Milken Institute in the US that was using data to understand a city's performance in how it promoted, celebrated and enabled successful ageing by its citizens. As the report highlights, cities are the frontline for not only the challenges but the opportunities that face this ‘age revolution’.



The report examines:

“.. how metropolitan areas are stepping up to the challenge; we rate and rank their capacity to enable people to age independently and productively, with security and good health.”

In other US cities, Mayors have begun signing Pledges to work better for older adults and in doing so strengthen cities. Only last week the LA Mayor also signed up and contemporaneously launched a three-year plan incorporating civic participation, employment and support in the community for health and transport services. As the article says ‘Hoorah for Hollywood’. A great step forward for Mayors of all cities and nations worldwide.

It was clear the Summit was richer for having created an opportunity to hear from global practitioners and leaders from nations including Japan, Korea, the United States and Denmark who shared their experiences. For example the work of Anne Holm, Director of Bellinge Welfare Academy who introduced the solid welfare system and social policy to Denmark highlighted the importance of the customer at the heart of decision making for this sector especially around policy and resource allocation. Her work focuses on truly knowing the client referring to Danish pastor and philosopher Nikolaj Grundtvig:

“One must be informed about the society in order to make judgments and choices.”

What struck me throughout the Summit was that often carefully considered questions returned multiple answers or no definitive answer at all. It speaks volumes to the dynamism of the sector and the blurring of ‘known knowns’ with ‘known unknowns’. Delegates were asking:

What are the biggest challenges going to be to care for those who remain in their homes? What’s the role of the neighbourhood if they remain in their homes?

How can aged care and residential care adapt to the changing needs of people? Where is the biggest disrupter coming from? Will we adapt and transform or..?

Are solutions technologically focused or client focused?

I came away from the Summit thinking that perhaps it was time for the sector to have a brand refresh : an ‘Ageing IS the new black’ campaign perhaps. Why ? I think for so many people, especially millennials, discussing or understanding dementia or being old or losing independence are foreign, distant concepts; nor do they seem ‘edgy’ or ‘cool’. Further I don’t think the sector is tangible, visible or relevant until it becomes personal; e.g. a family member requires consideration of options for care.

What is therefore exciting about the changing nature of the sector are the very real opportunities that can bring generational expertise and relations together.

Young people have a natural disposition for being optimistic and testing new ideas and projects. This is generally supported by a relatively high appetite for risk and a ‘fail fast fail better’ attitude. Many graduates are also keen to start their own companies. So if we can share data and highlight where there are opportunities to grow a new business or address a problem that supports successful ageing it can only be of benefit to all.

“Innovation is the key to healthcare in the future”. Martin Kelly, CEO Health XL Ageing ‘Hackathon’ with IBM’s HealthXL at Carlton Connect.

Bernard Salt also highlighted that the fastest growing sector for jobs in Australia is the health care sector and this statistic is shared with many other nations. To support this reality it is therefore assuring to see that that strategies and initiatives supporting the nation’s innovation eco- system - e.g. incubators and accelerator programs - have begun to take a sharper focus on the sector and the opportunities within.

The suite of courses on Society and Ageing (e.g. Specialist Certificate in Ageing through to Masters of Ageing) taught online at the University of Melbourne and the very popular online MOOCS on Understanding Dementia at the University of Tasmania are also examples of where universities are committed to not only strengthening the skills of the workforce and those who actively participate paid or not within the sector but to improving the lives of those ageing.



“The Future is already here- it’s just not evenly distributed.” - William Gibson

In one of the Summit panel sessions I asked members what they thought were some of the key challenges holding the sector back. Responses included:

Lack of connectivity and interoperability between systems

Egos/ power imbalances, both visible and invisible

Fear of the future so no courage to try new things

One size does not fit all.

Summit delegates also considered the key characteristics defining Successful Ageing. Referencing the research of Rowe & Kahn they included the ability to

Stay healthy

Nurture and maintain personal relationships

Maintain a good sense of self efficacy

Participate in community/productive activity.

Clearly innovation can play a strong role in enabling these key elements. However, as the Summit theme emphasised, must be balanced or blended with notions of respect, care and responsibility for those ageing and for those who support them. Innovation has been defined as - fresh thinking that captures value. Fresh thinking comes from diversity of view points and experiences and can be catalyzed by creating opportunities where such diversity can reflect collectively on the challenges and the opportunities.

“Population ageing is a global phenomenon that is both inevitable and predictable. It will change society at many levels and in complex ways, creating both challenges and opportunities... It is now up to the global community to take up the challenges it identifies and truly add life to our increasing years”

The Summit was successful in opening up these conversations about not only the challenges but the opportunities. Successful Ageing is something we should all aspire to; creating the best ecosystem and supporting change catalysts for this to be realized are the first key steps.