

The Longevity Imperative

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Building a Better Society for Healthier, Longer Lives

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Introduction

Would you like more time?

How about if I gave you an extra hour today? Sixty minutes to do with as you wish. You could catch up on sleep or finally get ahead with that work project. Perhaps you would choose to spend it with family or friends. Alternatively, you might just delight in enjoying some quiet time of your own.

If that sounds appealing, what about if I could make the week last for eight not seven days? A whole extra day for you to do whatever you wanted. Now I am getting the hang of time transformation, how about if I stretch the year out to last thirteen months? An extra four weeks! Does that sound appealing?

I of course can't give you this gift of time but I can let you in on a secret. Actually, it isn't really a secret but something we all know yet fail to act on. You already have been given more time. And not just an hour here, an extra day there or a whole month but years and years of additional time.

This is because of increases in life expectancy. Over the last hundred years life expectancy has increased by around two to three years every decade. That's more time than any of my thought experiments above. No matter where you live or how old you are, you can expect to live longer than past generations.

Does this additional time feel as appealing as the extra time I initially offered? Do you get the same sense of excitement, of pressure taken off you and new alternatives opening up? Or do you feel ambivalent? Uncertain about the benefit of living longer? That is how a lot of people feel. They see those extra years coming at the end of their life whereas they want the time now. And they fear that

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instead of being able to make use of that extra time they will become ill and frail and run out of money.

But what if those later years weren't characterized by illness, frailty and a lack of resources? What if they were healthy and engaged? That would bring enormous benefits. The longer we maintain our health, our productivity and our sense of engagement the more options we have when we get older and the more we value longer lives. And it is not just our later lives that get better. With the prospect of more years ahead, we can do things differently today. We can rethink the way we live our whole life.

Right now though we are not set to reap the benefits of these longer lives. That is because we haven't adapted to one very profound change in the human condition: that each of us is now likely to become very old. The problem is that doesn't sound like a very profound change. After all, there have always been old people and old people were always previously young. But what is genuinely revolutionary is the fact that now more young and middle-aged people can expect to become the very old. Throughout human history, only a minority lived long enough to become the old. Now it is the majority who will have that experience. That really does change everything. It means we need to invest a lot more in our future years in order to achieve better outcomes. If we don't then we run the risk of experiencing what we most fear. Longer lives therefore create a new longevity imperative—to age well.

The dramatic implications of this shift and the resulting emergence of a longevity imperative are what this book is about. Individually and collectively we need to pursue what I call an “evergreen” agenda. According to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, an evergreen plant is one that “remains green and functional through more than one growing season.” In a wider sense, the word means remaining “universally and continually relevant.” That is what we need to achieve over our longer lives. We need to make sure that our health and all the other things that matter to us extend to match our now longer lifespan. Past progress created longer lives. Future progress is about how we make the most of this additional time by changing the way we age.

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In this book, I want to explain why this longevity imperative is so important, both to you as an individual but also to wider humanity. I outline in detail the innovations an evergreen agenda demands: the substantial changes to how you plan your life and career; in the way our health system, economy and financial sectors operate as well as the necessary seismic shifts in cultural and philosophical views of what it is to be old and how we age.

I also want to correct the problem that longevity receives far too little attention given its importance. Worse, when it does get attention it is misrepresented as being only about an “aging society” and a rising number of older people. Correcting this lack of attention and misunderstanding is a major motivation for writing this book. We need to talk about and build a longevity society not an aging society.

At London Business School I teach a course on the world economy. In the first class, I ask my students to tell me about the major trends they think will shape their lives and careers in the decades to come. I stand at the front of the classroom with my pen in hand poised and ready to write their suggestions on the board. In reality, I don’t need to wait. I know what the first two topics are that they will mention—artificial intelligence and climate change. When it comes to forces that are set to change our world, those are the two that governments, business and individuals currently agree will dominate.

After these two topics have been discussed the students roam far and wide with other suggestions. As the energy in the class starts to subside and the number of issues mentioned slows someone will put their hand up and say “Demographic change.” At that point, I push them a little further and ask what they mean and they invariably say “an aging population and more old people.” The tone of voice is flat and the implication always negative. If AI and sustainability spark involved, enthusiastic debate about how we urgently need to improve our future, the reference to an “aging society” triggers nothing. Discussion ends with the phrase “more old people.” It is as if it is obvious that more old people is a bad news story and there is little that can be done. Debate about an aging society rarely goes beyond mention of spiraling health costs, a pensions crisis, dementia and care homes. It is never seen as exciting, challenging or interesting.

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There is a sense of acceptance and acquiescence rather than reform and adaptation. Above all it is seen as being about old people and not relevant to the student who raises the point.

I want this book to help you realize, both from the perspective of your own life as well as the viewpoint of society, that longevity is just as critical for our future as AI and sustainability. That it is equally as fascinating and demands the same level of radical change if we are to avoid future bad outcomes.

But there is also something distinctive about longevity as an aggregate trend. While it is a force that will change the world around us it is also a reality that affects each of us individually in a profound way. It is above all about your life and how you respond to the prospect of more time. That is why this book features both the personal and the societal viewpoint. It is impossible to think about how you live your own longer life without thinking about how society will need to adapt. Understanding this aspect of the longevity imperative is crucial if we are to realize an evergreen agenda and jettison the “aging society” narrative.

The aging society narrative encourages seeing longer lives as a problem and not an opportunity. It leads to the damaging idea that there are too many old people and we are living too long; to a focus on the end of life rather than taking action across all of life. It demands resources to meet the needs of older people, rather than also supporting the young to prepare for longer lives. That creates a growing generational conflict pitching young and old against each other.

It also turns one of humanity’s greatest achievements into a prospective nightmare. Instead of celebrating the reduction of grief over lost children, of fewer parents snatched away in midlife and more grandparents and even great-grandparents meeting their grandchildren, it sees greater longevity as a burden. Not only is that a perverse way of seeing a triumph of human development, it darkens unnecessarily our view of our future lives.

The challenge we really face is to adapt to a radical change in the human condition—that the young can now expect to become the very old. That is why we need to seize the longevity imperative and become “evergreen.” We need to focus on constructing a society

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that prepares us for longer lives and ensuring that the quality of life matches its newly found quantity. That is how we seize the opportunities that more time can offer us. This book shows what must change both for individuals and for society in order to do so.

Part I outlines the evergreen agenda and explains why it matters by answering the following questions:

- What has happened to life expectancy, what is likely to happen and what constitutes the longevity imperative?
- How do we age and what can we do to age better?
- Why is the evergreen agenda so important now and why does it signal a new era for humanity?

Part II addresses the major changes required to deliver the evergreen agenda. It does so by exploring the following questions:

- How do we change our health system and our own behaviors to ensure longer lives are healthy ones?
- How do we pay for longer lives and deliver an economic longevity dividend, and what does that mean for our careers?
- What changes are required in the financial sector and your own financial behavior in order to remove the risk of running out of money?

Part III focuses on the required shifts in our beliefs, culture and psychology of aging and old age. It examines questions such as:

- How do we find purpose in this longer life and how do we adapt our psychology and culture around aging and drop agist assumptions?
- How do we achieve intergenerational fairness if the young are faced with norms and institutions that don't support their longevity in a society with a rising proportion of older people?
- What are the major roadblocks to a successful evergreen society and how do we overcome them? What steps should you take to further your own evergreen future?

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For decades, governments and policymakers have been aware that a major demographic transition is underway. But the aging society has diverted attention from the most pressing problem. The challenge is not about how we deal with more old people in the future, it is about how we adjust to living for longer now. Our past inaction means we need to make significant changes and make them soon.

It is time to embrace the evergreen agenda.