Longevity

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Living to 100: The impact of Longevity on Business, Workforce, and Learning

Longevity is one of the most profound structural transformations shaping contemporary economies and societies. Far from being a marginal issue linked only to ageing or retirement, longevity reflects a fundamental reconfiguration of how long we live, how we work, how we consume, and how we organize our institutions. Life expectancy has increased dramatically over the past century, while birth rates have declined in most developed economies, leading to a rapidly ageing population and a shrinking younger generation. As Peter Drucker anticipated more than two decades ago, the demographic balance of societies is being radically altered, with significant consequences for markets, organizations, and individuals.

Importantly, longevity is not synonymous with ageing. Ageing is a gradual process, not an event that suddenly occurs at a predefined chronological threshold. Longevity invites us to rethink the entire life course, from education to work, from consumption to retirement. It calls for what has been described by the Stanford Center on Longevity as a "new map of life" in which linear models are replaced by more flexible, multi-stage trajectories.

Longevity as a Business Opportunity

From a market perspective, longevity profoundly reshapes the consumer landscape. By 2050, more than one-third of European consumers will be aged 65 or over, while the proportion of those under 30 will have declined significantly. This demographic shift is already transforming demand patterns, purchasing power distribution, and consumption preferences.

Several industries are directly and deeply impacted. Healthcare and pharmaceuticals are at the forefront, responding to increased demand for medical services, prevention, and solutions that extend not only lifespan but 'healthspan'. Yet the impact of longevity goes far beyond healthcare. Fashion, hospitality, education, banking, and insurance are all being re-shaped by the rise of older consumers with substantial purchasing power.

The so-called "silver or longevity economy" challenges persistent stereotypes. Older consumers are not a homogeneous or passive group; they are diverse, active, and increasingly demanding. In fashion, for example, the 50+ segment already represents nearly half of market growth and is expected to account for half of total demand by 2050. Brands that recognize this shift – by adapting products, representations, and marketing narratives – are better positioned to capture long-term growth. More broadly, companies must critically assess who their customers are, how much value older segments represent, and whether their strategies and investments adequately reflect this reality.

Longevity and the Workforce

Longevity also transforms labour markets and talent dynamics. Across Europe, employment rates among older workers are rising, while the relative size of younger cohorts entering the workforce is declining. Between 2010 and 2030, the number of workers aged 55-64 is expected to increase substantially, while younger age groups contract. This shift challenges organizations that continue to rely on outdated assumptions about career length, productivity, and retirement.

Contrary to widespread ageist beliefs, research shows that productivity does not necessarily decline with age – particularly in service-based and knowledge-intensive sectors. Experience, judgment, and relational skills often increase over time, and older workers tend to contribute significantly through mentoring, collaboration, and knowledge sharing. Studies consistently demonstrate that mixed-age teams outperform age-homogeneous teams, especially in complex problem-solving, innovation, and creative tasks.

Yet ageism remains pervasive in organizational practices. Older workers are often disadvantaged in recruitment, promotion, training, and performance evaluations. Addressing longevity therefore requires not only demographic awareness but also cultural and managerial change. Organizations must redesign talent strategies to value experience, foster intergenerational collaboration, and invest in continuous learning across all ages.

From Education to Lifelong Learning

Longevity fundamentally alters the role of education institutions. The traditional model – education at the beginning of life followed by uninterrupted work and eventual retirement – is increasingly obsolete. Longer lives imply longer and more varied careers, making lifelong learning, upskilling, and reskilling essential.

Universities are uniquely positioned to respond to this challenge. Beyond educating young adults, they can serve as hubs for multigenerational learning, mentoring, and experimentation. Programmes targeting midlife transitions, executive education for experienced professionals, and initiatives that connect students with older learners reflect an emerging shift from education as a one-time investment to education as a lifelong companion.

At an individual level, longevity forces a reconsideration of career planning, retirement, and personal development. If people live longer, they may need – and want – to remain economically and socially active for more years. This raises critical questions about second or even third careers, often in fields such as consulting, teaching, coaching, mentoring, or non-executive roles.

Preparing for a longer life extends beyond professional skills. Health, financial security, and social connections become central pillars of long-term resilience. Longevity thus becomes not only an economic or organizational issue, but a deeply personal one, shaping how individuals envision purpose, contribution, and balance over extended lifespans.

Conclusion

Longevity is not a distant trend; it is a present reality with far-reaching implications. It reshapes economies, markets, organizations, talent management, and individual life choices. The central challenge is not simply to live longer, but to live – and work – better for longer. Companies, leaders, and individuals that proactively adapt their models, mindsets, and strategies will be better equipped to thrive in this new 100-year life era. The business world needs to adjust from a market, talent and learning perspective!

References

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