



Shock of Gray

The aging of the world's population and how it pits young against old, child against parent, worker against boss, company against rival, and nation against nation

by Ted C. Fishman

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416 pages

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Take-Aways

- The world's people are aging: Worldwide, the average human life span is now 64 years; in 1900 it was 30.
- Improved medical care means that more seniors will live longer in the future.
- Declining birthrates will make seniors a greater percentage of the population. In the long run, fewer children will need to support more family members.
- Businesses will have to "turn silver into gold" by catering to markets of older people.
- Young, low-paid, mobile workers from developing countries will increasingly move more fluidly around the globe to serve older nations.
- Literacy, urbanization, infant care and – most importantly, being born in modern times – accounts for growing longevity.
- For a view of a gray America, consider Florida, which has the US's oldest population.
- By 2050, Japan will have lost 41 million in population and one-third of its labor force.
- In this century, hundreds of millions of people will age without family or friends to care for them, shifting an unimaginable burden onto governments.
- If you live into your 90s, you're closer to the end, but "impressively resistant to disease."

Rating (10 is best)

Overall

9

Importance

9

Innovation

9

Style

9

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Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) Why the world is aging, 2) What impact older citizens and workers will have on society, and 3) How nations are coping with demographic change.

Recommendation

If age is just a number, then that number is about to present enormous global consequences in the next few decades. So says veteran journalist Ted C. Fishman in his around-the-world study of how an aging planetary population will affect all aspects of society, including business, government and family life. Fishman's in-depth study leans heavily on stories, anecdotes and conversations, backed by extensive statistics and impressive academic research. His tales are as entertaining as they are illuminating, pointing out the contradictions, foibles and hard realities of life lived on a graying globe. *getAbstract* highly recommends Fishman's all-encompassing look at old age – not just to older people or the middle-aged, but also to members of younger demographics, who are about to embark on an unprecedented journey with their elders into the future.

Abstract

The Silver Lining

The estimated life span of a person in ancient Rome was 25; by 1900, that number had advanced only to 30 years old in most of the world. Today, average longevity globally has reached 64. The world's population is undoubtedly getting older: Medical advances that extend life spans portend relatively greater numbers of oldsters in upcoming decades. Meanwhile, declining birthrates guarantee that elders will be a larger percentage of the population. In the US, the number of people aged 75 to 85 will almost double by 2050, by which time the country will have 2.5 million centenarians. Senior citizens will make up 40% of Japan's population by 2050. Europe's elder populace will grow faster than any other of its age cohorts. Even developing nations are aging, with the proportion of children dropping and the proportion of over-60s rising. The impact a graying planet will have on future businesses and lifestyles is already in sight.

Some companies are learning “how to turn silver into gold” for profits. For example, Lifeline, a US company, provides monitoring services for elderly clients. Reacting around the clock to electronic signals from necklace or wrist devices, trained operators serve more than six million users by answering inquiries and sending help; they can respond to almost 700,000 calls within a few hours. The security of an automated signal for help allows seniors to continue living on their own, even far from their relatives. Services like Lifeline play into society's fear of aging, the individual desire to remain independent and capable – even beyond their abilities. In 2006, the Dutch conglomerate Philips acquired Lifeline for \$750 million in a “big bet on health care services for the growing population of the elderly,” an expanding \$140 billion industry.

But some businesses have to adjust downward to accommodate changing demographics. Harley-Davidson motorcycles, once the totem of defiant youth, increasingly are a “rite of passage” for older riders seeking to relive their rebellious pasts. Faced with an aging clientele, Harley is seeking ways to recapture young riders, who consider its iconic bikes fit only “for old fogies.”

“The world is going gray. Getting not just older but old.”

“The well-being of the globe's young is also at stake, because it is they who need resources also required by the old... in the end, it is largely the young, who, as family members, friends and citizens...will eventually care for the old.”

“The world is changing as a result of mankind’s greatest gift to itself, the engineering of longer lives.”

“The numbers are pretty shocking. Fewer kids, more old people – nearly everywhere in the world.”

“More than nine in ten older Americans say independence is among their foremost objectives.”

“Education has replaced a big family as the world’s preferred insurance for old age.”

Increasingly, companies are designing new products and approaches to meet the needs of an aging society. A Japanese company invented a robotic plush baby seal that emits soothing sounds; it helps calm dementia patients in nursing homes. A community in Germany recruits former prostitutes to provide elder care in nursing homes because the women “possess good people skills, aren’t easily disgusted and have zero fear of physical contact.”

A Gray Planet

As its population ages, Poland suffers from a lack of able-bodied construction workers. Its robust, young workers have emigrated for higher-paying jobs. Young Filipino nurses train and work in the US, undercutting the labor force at home. China’s youth work for foreign manufacturers, but time’s inexorable passage means that China, The Philippines and other now-young countries also will face labor shortages one day as their people age and birthrates fall. Eventually, fewer young people will work to support more older folks. “From womb to tomb,” certain patterns emerge:

- **“Global aging is the result of mankind’s greatest triumphs”** – Brilliant advances in medical care and technology allow humans to live longer.
- **“Success [requires reconsidering] how to maintain every benefit”** – How can society afford to maintain the aged in their accustomed comfort throughout their lives?
- **“The spheres of active, healthy, engaged older adults will grow”** – From working to volunteering to pursuing varied interests, more elderly people will stay busy and active.
- **“An aging world is an increasingly dependent world”** – More elderly people will need care; additional young or middle-aged people will need to care for them.
- **“Global aging dramatically transforms the relationships between men and women”** – Women live longer than men and will increasingly become their husbands’ caretakers.
- **“Age discrimination pays”** – Despite their numbers, elders will remain vulnerable to ageism. The world remains “ingenious at figuring out ways to marginalize and exploit older people.”
- **“The aging world moves people around the globe”** – Nations with young, low-paid mobile workers will increasingly serve older nations. People as well as goods and services will transit more fluidly around the globe.
- **“Young people today will live in a far older world tomorrow”** – Fewer children will have to support more family members.

Long in the Tooth

Discussions around aging are a modern phenomenon. Throughout history, death came early and quickly: Illnesses and plagues, high infant mortality and unhygienic living conspired to cut down relatively young people. In 16th-century London, 20% of children did not survive their first year, and another 20% died before age five. The greatest assurance of a long life is simply to be alive when you are, to have been born in the modern era, after “the turn of the 20th century...Nothing else even comes close.” Contemporary people live longer than those in the past for many reasons:

- **Literacy and education** – The ability to read and act on health information matters, whether it’s food and drug labels or mass media and the Internet. For every extra year a girl spends in school, the infant mortality rate of her children will drop by almost 10%.
- **Urbanization** – Living in the crowded, filthy cities of the past once wiped out thousands from disease. Modern cities are the best places to live longer lives. Cities provide access to better services and information: People younger than 25 live longer in cities than in rural areas, according to global mortality rates. New York City residents’ longevity rates soared by five months in 2004, beating the national average by three months.

“Just as an iron nail rusts and weakens when it is exposed to oxygen, a person ages and weakens as free oxygen radicals destroy animal DNA bit by bit and instigate the death of cells.”

“Nowadays, death would be more accurately depicted totting a vial of slow-acting poison that afflicts victims with congestive heart failure or late-onset diabetes for years.”

“Gravity is a mortal enemy to older people. The hard floor is one of the world’s most dangerous places.”

“In just about every measure of cognition, people’s abilities begin to decline ever more steeply beginning around age 50...but the prediction for the powers of any one person at 80 was that person’s abilities at 50.”

- **Prenatal and child care** – Infant mortality rates in the most destitute nations now are far less than those in the wealthiest nations centuries ago. And in the US, better child survival rates account for most of the 20th century’s increase in life spans, adding 33 years to most Americans’ lives.

Regardless of where you live, you will age the same way everyone does. Aging occurs at the molecular level, when antioxidants or the extra oxygen molecules from nutrition and the environment, corrode and kill human cells. Smoking, sweet and rich foods, radiation, pollution and minor illnesses all add antioxidants to the body. Aging begins when you’re born, but its effects become more apparent from your 30s onward, as your muscles and tendons weaken, your metabolism slows, your brain begins to decline, and you become susceptible to cancer and diabetes. In your 40s, eye diseases such as cataracts, glaucoma and macular degeneration begin; fatigue sets in; joints weaken and ache with arthritis; you lose height; your hair starts to turn gray; and you get cellulite and baggy eyes.

Your 50s are prime time for high blood pressure, sugar and cholesterol; weight gain; broken bones; gum disease and decaying teeth; and memory loss. By your 60s, heart disease and cancer are your biggest risks; your hearing falters, the fat under your skin diminishes, making your ears and nose more prominent; you lose ease of mobility and are prone to falls. And in your 70s and 80s, the incidence of Alzheimer’s disease and dementia soars. If you make it to your 90s and to age 100, you’re closer to the end, but “impressively resistant to disease.”

“God’s Waiting Room”

If you want to see what a gray America might look like, check out Florida: It boasts “the oldest population of the 50 states,” with more than 3.3 million people older than 65, plus another almost one million senior winter residents. Aside from the abundant sunlight that promises rejuvenation, Florida entices retirees with good social services, “continuing care retirement communities,” fine arts programs and extensive medical facilities for the aged. Florida’s young people, however, get shortchanged: Spending for childhood education is among the lowest of all the states. And the recession has suppressed the already low pay for workers serving the older population, with better-qualified people accepting minimum-wage jobs. Active seniors crowd out their younger competition for low-paying jobs. Nonetheless, Florida residents are tolerant of slow-moving elderly in the shops and streets, and they are careful with older drivers on the road.

The picture of active seniors on golf courses and in pottery classes belies the reality that the elderly are getting much older; nonagenarians and centenarians are much more prevalent. But partly because of Florida’s good weather and focus on outdoor activities and socializing, being “85 here is not the same as in an aging town in the Midwest. The 85-year-olds here look 65.” As they grow frailer, pensioners will have to spend heavily on private home care and nursing homes; those who can’t afford such necessities will have to rely on already-strained state and federal aid.

Aging Around the World

Women in Spain have the highest life expectancy of any group in the EU: 84.4 years. The country is rapidly aging, and its birthrate is among the world’s lowest. Immigrants from Africa and the Middle East arrive in large numbers to fill the jobs fewer Spaniards want. One-third of Madrid’s population is foreigners. Popular opinion credits the Mediterranean diet of fish, olive oil and fresh vegetables (plus wine) for widespread longevity, but the socializing impact of meals taken with friends and family also plays an important part.

“The complexities of global aging strain human comprehension.”

“The American writer Kathleen Thompson Norris once observed that ‘in spite of the high cost of living, it’s still popular.’ And in an aging world, it’s more popular than ever.”

“Time on earth is the ultimate scarce resource and one prize that, so far, money cannot buy enough of.”

More old people live in Tokyo than in any other city. Japan’s population began to decline in 2005; by 2050, it will have gone down 41 million in population and one-third of its labor force. It will host one million centenarians in 2050, up dramatically from slightly more than 32,000 in 2007. The country is shrinking demographically. Given that decline its population will be proportionately smaller in 2050 than the rest of the world, where population will more than triple. Traditional values are changing; more Japanese women work, thus putting off marriage and childbearing. The elderly no longer are assured that their children will care for them at home, since families are more likely to live apart. Yet the burden of elder care continues to fall on women, who care successively for children, parents and other relatives. Older men feel the changes more acutely: Nicknamed “big junk” and “soggy leaves on the ground” for their perceived ineffectiveness, Japanese men’s suicide rate is the highest in the developed world. Many Japanese firms will rehire retired employees – at reduced wages – to benefit from their expertise, thus reducing opportunities for younger workers and raising the question of how an increasingly older workforce can compete globally.

Rockford, Illinois, near Chicago, is emblematic of the industrial and manufacturing decline of the American Midwest. Once one of the wealthiest towns in the US, the former “Screw Capital” is economically depressed. Fewer job opportunities compel older workers to collect Social Security earlier than they would have if they’d remained employed; they can approach their former earnings only by cobbling together several part-time, low-paying jobs. Despite older Americans’ stated desire to work beyond retirement age, they may well find too few available jobs or they may be forced to compete with younger workers for less-lucrative, entry-level employment. One bright spot in Rockford’s economic picture: Former employers are rehiring engineers and skilled production workers as consultants to advise the manufacturing companies in China that have taken on their previous jobs.

Adapting to the Aging

In this century, many millions of people will have no “familial resources” and will age without relatives or friends to care for them, shifting an unimaginable burden onto governments. Changes to business practices also are on the horizon: How much liability will banks and financial firms incur in dealing with older investors, who can rightly claim frailty and senility when suing for investment losses? Entertainment media will chase the once-ignored older-than-50 cohort, which watches more television and spends more money than young people. The stereotypes about old people – they’re slow, not as capable, demanding – die hard, but the greater their presence in society, the more people will have to overcome their ageist biases and confront their own fears of aging. They need only look to the example of Ida Ruth Hayes Greene, who in 2010 got her high school diploma on the eve of her 99th birthday. Comedian Jay Leno tartly commented on Greene’s achievement: “On the advice of her guidance counselor, she will attend a two-year college.”

About the Author

Ted C. Fishman writes for *The New York Times*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *National Geographic*, *The Sunday Times*, *Harpers*, *USA Today*, *GEO* and other prominent publications. He is also a frequent keynote speaker.