The Tech Boom for Baby Boomers

April 2016 | *By Elana Kieffer*

On April 7th on the 5th floor of the Cambridge Innovation Center, 80 people squeezed into the Havana Room to hear from four thought leaders in design and technology. The event was hosted by the Venture Café Foundation, which runs weekly gatherings for budding entrepreneurs and innovators to learn from established professionals and collaborate with each other. The panel was titled "Baby Boom or Bust: Planning for our grandparents through design and technology". It was co-sponsored by Boston Bridge, a professional development and networking organization for emerging leaders in the field of aging. It was also co-sponsored by Aging 2.0 Boston, an incubator for tech innovations that improve the lives of seniors, and the MIT AgeLab, a multidisciplinary research program that works to improve the quality of life of older people and their caregivers.

The panel featured some of Boston's finest in this field: Dr. Joe Coughlin, founder and director of the MIT AgeLab; Heather Boesch, director of business operations at IDEO, Anna Hall, director of resident programs engagement at Brookdale Senior Living Solutions; and Bern Terry, vice president of healthcare for Vecna Technologies. It was moderated by Barbara Friedman, co-founder and president of Boston Bridge.

The panel started with an exploration into what drew these professionals into the field of aging. Reasons ranged from enjoying working with a population that is "fun and honest" to noticing that we will be living on a "geriatric continent" in the near future. Terry gave perhaps the two most compelling reasons: 1) he grew up with three of his grandparents, and 2) he has a vested interest in ensuring that technology will fit his own needs in thirty years.

Friedman then asked about the benefits and challenges to creating products and a user experience considering the age gap between the designer and the older adult consumer. Boesch and Coughlin talked about the importance of "stealth design", making products that are useful for seniors without making it known that they are geared towards them. This includes high contrast colors in carpeting at senior living facilities and health monitoring devices that look like jewelry. One area that the MIT AgeLab is working on is a non-invasive yet effective pill reminder system. And in order to even access the pills, designers are now working on how to make easy-to-open yet secure dispensers so that we don't hear stories like that of the older woman who used an industrial meat slicer to open hers.

Technology is notorious for advancing at lightning speed, and the caregiving force in particular is ill-equipped to keep up with the changes. In response to this concern, Hall talked about how Brookdale is giving iPads to all of its activities directors. With the advent of new apps on an almost daily basis that can positively engage seniors with limitations like memory loss or vision impairment, it is critical that professionals who care for them are knowledgeable about these programs. Brookdale also has an Entrepreneur in Residence program which sounds just like it is:

"the program offers those entrepreneurs developing products and services for seniors the opportunity to move in for that period of time so they can better understand the true wants and needs of the aging." This way, the technology that is being created for seniors is actually useful to them.

And that is exactly what Coughlin reminded the audience: despite the myth that seniors avoid technology, most do in fact embrace products as long as they are simple, affordable, and make their lives easier. One surprising statistic was that more than one-quarter of adults 65+ use a smartphone. It "opens up a new world for them": apps like FaceTime connect them with loved ones in other states and can alleviate loneliness.

And if those in the audience can emulate the thoughtful and valuable work of these panelists, then people like Terry have nothing to worry about: technology will become a friend, not foe, of the next generation of older adults.