Introduction

A Note from Shirlee Sharkey, President and CEO of SE Health

I can't wait for you to meet Carrie! In Chapter Five, you'll be introduced to this vibrant and complex woman in her late seventies. When we first meet Carrie at the beginning of the chapter, we see a person who is tired of being patronized; she's frustrated by the constraints placed upon her as an older woman, but she's also unsure about how to begin revisiting her passions during her "fourth quarter." At the end of the chapter, we get a glimpse of a reimagined Carrie, this time seeing a woman who has been empowered to courageously explore long-forgotten parts of her life. By leveraging technology and new models of care, Carrie is able to revisit important aspects of her identity—including her sexuality—and challenge who she was, is, and will be. Her story paints a vivid picture of how aging adults could defy expectations when given access to the right resources.

Carrie is one of the five personas you'll encounter when reading *The Future of Aging*. These fictional characters are meant to capture the essence of what this book is all about. Aging well is an expansive, important issue—one that goes far beyond healthcare. The methods that organizations use to work with aging adults, and the design solutions they create as a result, impact virtually every aspect of society. At SE Health, our focus is on caring for people in their homes and communities. We were drawn to this work because it reflects our desire to solve the problems people face today, but it is also equally focused on uncovering opportunities for tomorrow. This partnership with Idea Couture was a "hand in glove" fit for us, and I'm pleased to share it with you. Our organizations are passionate about putting people first; we see humans, not organizations, as catalysts for changing assumptions about what it means to age, and about who should ultimately shape how aging is experienced in the future.

The book comprises five chapters: Aging and Community, Health Interventions, The Promise of Gerontechnology, Economic Contexts, and Identity. Each chapter covers the current realities and future possibilities around its core theme. Combined, these chapters represent a complex, holistic view of what it means to age, and what it takes to age well. The book's flexible design means that it could be used as an extensive stand-alone resource, while the individual chapters could also be leveraged by different audiences.

Each chapter begins with a set of insights that capture the current experiences and challenges facing older adults. It then shows how these challenges can be overcome through a set of foundational shifts—that is, large-scale transitions taking place within society today. These shifts are anchored by signals, which are cutting-edge examples from across the private and public sectors, including academic, health, and industry-specific organizations. These groups are already doing the hard work of making the world a better place for aging adults. The robust, engaging research informing each chapter helps this work strike the balance of evidence-based content that is also accessible, fun, and

informative. A very cool example of this can be seen in a section of Chapter 3: The Promise of Gerontechnology, in which the persona from this chapter uses home monitoring extensively. This isn't science fiction—most of the technology described throughout the book already exists. It is very exciting to think that, in the not-too-distant future, new technology and systems will work to positively impact the lives of older people everywhere.

Certainly, emerging technology will play a pivotal role in the future of aging. When it comes to considering potential solutions for the challenges that seniors face, we need to start in the right place. Rather than adding new layers of technology, the people and organizations designing these solutions should pause and think through how technology can *complement*, rather than *complicate*, people's lives. For example, as my own mother aged, we found it easier to simply leave the television on all the time, because Mom often pushed the wrong buttons and lost her channels. When I think about this in the context of today's technology, I consider the multiple chargers, software updates, and interfaces that many of us—regardless of our age—find challenging to navigate. It's important to remember that new solutions should be designed in a way that considers such possibilities, as poor usability can have broader human implications. The fact is, older adults want to engage with technologies—they just need to be brought into the process of designing in the first place.
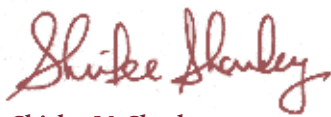
This book also examines the personal, cultural, and social needs of aging adults. Seniors, like most people, have an innate desire for a sense of belonging; for the ability to make their own choices regarding their identities and relationships; and for respect from those around them. This book further explores these needs—including how we are failing to meet them—using data and global examples. We hope that such exploration will inspire conversations around how we can support aging adults to live independently and make their later years rich and meaningful.

This book will leave you Spreading Hope and Happiness®, our vision at SE Health. With its refreshing tone, exploration of real-world solutions, and analysis of significant challenges facing the aging population, *The Future of Aging* offers a great balance of knowledge and humanity. Looking closely at the different issues we explore in this book—like the myth of living longer, the importance of maintaining one's sense of self, and the experience of isolation—inspired me to look at the future that I want to build for myself. I soon found myself thinking about my identity, which is inextricably tied to my work at SE Health. This led me to consider the possibility of my future retirement. It strikes me as odd that the transition from working to retirement is a hard stop, unlike so many other life transitions. For example, the role you play in raising your children changes as your family ages, and physical changes (including most ailments) occur gradually over time. It seems possible, then, that the abrupt end of a person's work life might contribute to feelings of loneliness, identity issues,

and even depression. I can't help but to reflect on how we might improve this transition: How can we enable retired adults to keep their spark, to continue growing, and to find new ways to shine a brighter light on society?

Contemplating this issue and its relationship to other challenges has me thinking, believe it or not, about interlocking toy bricks, like LEGO®. The issues that aging adults face comprise many different parts of one interconnected experience—just like a partially constructed LEGO® tower. Many parts of the tower have already been built, but some loose pieces still remain. Some of the sections have already been attached to the base of the tower, while others have yet to be incorporated. It seems like an enterprising child could sit down on a rainy Sunday and transform this chaotic construction zone into one complete, fully connected model. But the beauty of LEGO® is not just that it's possible to connect things—it's the infinite number of combinations that are possible. This level of personalization can serve as a metaphor for good design, as it teaches us that our solutions must be flexible and adaptable. When it comes to the experience of aging, there is certainly no one-size-fits-all answer.

All of this is to say that many of the innovations, ideas, and devices described in this book already exist. Many are well-designed and constructed; now, it is time to connect these disparate parts to build a cohesive, interactive system that will improve the quality of life for aging adults, now and in the future. We are very close to this future state, but completing the final stages of construction will mean working together. By collaborating with individuals and organizations across different areas of expertise, we can build a lasting and flexible structure that will benefit each of us long into the future. And what an exciting future it will be.

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Redefining What It Means to Age Well

What comes to mind when you think of an older person? Who are they? Where do they live? What does their day look like? Perhaps, like many others, you see something like this:

A slightly hunched man in his seventies or eighties sits in an armchair. He wears slacks, glasses, and a worn-out sweater. The man uses a walker to get around the retirement home he resides in, where the staff know him as being friendly and genial, though often forgetful. Someone always reminds him when it's time to head to the dining room for meals, and a nurse brings him his pills at breakfast and dinner—all generic options covered by his insurance. She leans in close as she places the small cup of pills next to his plate, and she speaks loudly into his ear so that he can hear her voice over the bustle of the dining room. He watches old TV shows, fumbles to understand how to use the smartphone when his grandkids try to FaceTime, and generally distrusts or ignores new technology.

Once a week, his daughter visits with her family. She presses him about medication, worries about his health, and tends to assume that he should just "listen to his nurses and doctors." His grandchildren smile respectfully as he recounts stories they've all heard plenty of times before: tales of the job he has long been retired from; the cottage that he can no longer climb the steep steps to visit; and the wife, their grandmother, who has been gone for five years. He often mixes these stories up—proving, at least to his family, that he is both in decline and stuck in his ways. Mealtimes and weekend visits aside, the man spends most of his time sitting in his room, lost in thoughts of the past and out of tune with the world around him.

This portrait is a familiar one. You've seen films and read books about this man; he may even bear some resemblance to someone in your life. Yet despite the truths it may touch upon, this image is far from a complete depiction of what it means to be an aging adult today, nor is it a detailed look at how this experience is changing. Aging, after all, is not a singular process. There are many overlapping—and often conflicting—social, emotional, and physiological dimensions that complicate what it means to age.

How can we begin to reimagine social systems and infrastructure, to implement training for skills and capabilities, and to create products, services, and technologies that will improve the lives of people getting older longer?

The habit of associating aging with illness and decline is borne not from malice, but from a lack of experience with diverse aging populations. After all, the rate of life expectancy at birth has been rising exponentially since the early 1900s, having nearly doubled from just 47 to 77 in the US. This three-decade increase has completely altered what it means to live well and live together. In other words, today's older adults are living longer, on average, than anyone ever expected them to—and society is not prepared for this change.

As a whole, individuals and institutions lack appreciation for the powerful implications that longer lifespans have for all aspects of life. Increased longevity presents profound challenges—and also incredible opportunities—for a diverse range of industries, government agencies, communities, and individuals. We must respond to the challenges by asking: How can we begin to reimagine social systems and infrastructure, to implement training for skills and capabilities, and to create products, services, and technologies that will improve the lives of people getting older longer?

We currently think of older adults as passive actors, rather than active participants in the world, and this stigma and prejudice shapes how we understand, engage with, and design for this group. But aging is

more than a process of diminishing health and mental acuity, and it is not defined by a loss of physical, social, and financial independence. It is also more than just a period in which people fall into static routines, behaviors, and worldviews. Rather, aging is a dynamic and evolving experience, one through which the contours of health, wellness, identity, politics, technology, and socioeconomics are constantly challenged by shifting needs and desires.

There are many emerging design challenges for those who provide services and products for the aging population. These go far beyond the goals often associated with aging: that is, overcoming the economic challenges of an increasingly large and unwieldy population of older adults, and developing cost-effective future healthcare interventions. The latter focus is particularly understandable, given that $1 trillion is spent on healthcare for elderly Americans each year. Still, there are many opportunities across other sectors of the economy—including for media and technology companies, lifestyle professionals, social media and app developers, apparel designers, architects, healthcare organizations, government agencies, and so many other stakeholders—to work from a more holistic frame of aging rooted in 21st century ideas. These organizations can use new models of collaborative design to create new policies, services,

products, technologies, living spaces, and even approaches to shaping intergenerational communities—all of which could be transformative for the lives of older adults.

These are among the many rich and provocative topics covered in *The Future of Aging*, all of which offer unprecedented opportunities for organizations globally. The vision proposed in this book is intended to help shape a holistic understanding of well-being that will ultimately support older adults in living well—and on their own terms—across all aspects of life. With this understanding in place, individuals and organizations can position themselves as long-term partners in navigating ever-evolving experiences of aging. These actors can contribute to a rich, complex aging experience that is the natural ground for exciting new innovations, partnerships, community initiatives, lived environments, and ways of connecting people.

In other words: The next time you're asked to imagine an aging person, we hope that you won't quite know where to begin.

Motivations and Methodologies

The Future of Aging is the result of a partnership between Idea Couture and SE Health. Together, we wanted to present a counter-argument to the common thinking and discourse around aging put forth in academia, business, and popular culture, where emphasis is frequently placed on a few very limited topics: the burden and cost of an aging population, the prevalence of loneliness and sickness in this group, and the experience of dementia. The focus on economic burden, in particular, has led to ageist metaphors like the "silver tsunami" appearing in various publications, from *The New England Journal of Medicine* to *The Economist*. Such language limits the role of older adults to one of dependence—a role that is transactional and devoid of agency. Further, it reflects a certain level of surprise on the part of analysts, most of whom have failed to account for aging adults up until now.

In contrast, we crafted the content of this book using the method of strategic foresight. This method is used to capture emerging trends across different social, political, economic, and technological contexts. In addition to using foresight methods to map trends in how aging is understood and engaged with, we conducted a series of expert interviews with leaders in private and public sectors from across North America and Europe to support our mapping exercises. The resulting work calls attention to the limits inherent to current approaches to aging, while also offering exceptional examples of leaders who are working to overcome these limits in the urban development, healthcare, digital technology, financial, government, and social service sectors.

We explore imaginative future worlds in *The Future of Aging* using personas: that is, stories grounded in ethnographic research that reveal how overarching themes may play out for a particular person. In each chapter, we first explore the challenges that a specific person might face; then, after exploring signals of change tied to these challenges, we revisit this person to suggest an alternate future. By closing each chapter in this way, we intend to showcase a future free of ageism, prejudice, and dismissiveness.

Here, aging is no longer seen as an inevitable process of loss and decline that is defined and shaped by the monotony of passing time. This vision also reflects a commitment to countering narrow-minded, fear-mongering questions around caring for the elderly, reducing the economic burden they pose, and maximizing their independence; it does so by offering constructive solutions to the challenges of today and tomorrow, in an evidence-informed way.

More than anything, this book is meant to help diverse stakeholders craft a better future for aging adults. We ask: How can these stakeholders partner with older adults to discover and create new meaning in their lives? How can they support older adults in embracing the dynamic and evolving dimensions of aging? How can they help people continue to build new, engaging, and caring relationships—to feel connected, yet still independent? How can they build technology into the experience of aging to help individuals live on their own terms?

We hope that *The Future of Aging* will serve not as an endpoint, but as inspiration for readers to begin a much larger conversation around how we can realize better futures for the aging population, today and in the future.

Overview of *The Future of Aging*

This book is organized into five chapters. Each chapter highlights a key aspect of the experience of aging, then explores the challenges and opportunities that an individual or organization might encounter when working with older adults to build a better future.

Though each chapter can be read on its own, the book itself represents the richness and complexity of what it means to get older. Together, these chapters reflect a holistic understanding of aging—one in which community, healthcare, technology, identity, and financial well-being are not siloed, but are viewed instead as entangled threads that hold equal importance for building a better future of aging. Each chapter is structured as follows:

A systemic perspective that brings to light dominant ways of understanding and engaging with the experience of aging, as they relate to the chapter's theme.

A set of **experiential insights** uncovered during our research, which help us explore specific challenges tied to the chapter's theme. These are followed by an **anchoring persona**, which helps bring these challenges to life.

Signals of change, which we use as inspiration for how these challenges may be addressed in the future.

A set of **design strategies** for overcoming obstacles, tensions, and emerging concerns that will impact how stakeholders across different industries grapple with the chapter's overarching theme. These are followed by a **future scenario**, in which the persona introduced earlier in the chapter benefits from solutions inspired by the signals.

Chapter 1: Community examines how living spaces and communities are changing. We explore what it means to live well with others. This chapter focuses on emerging concerns around community and urban development, as well as new spaces and models for home-making, healthcare, and creating health and wellness. It also addresses the informal systems that will come to play an important role in supporting healthy aging in one's community, and in providing agency to "live in place" and even "thrive in motion."

Chapter 2: Healthcare Interventions addresses problems with placing too much emphasis on biomedical interventions as the key to life extension and health management. This chapter focuses on emerging trends that privilege less formal and clinical approaches to care—approaches that help people take ownership of their health and wellness journey, and that treat individuals as people rather than patients.

Chapter 3: Gerontechnology is about the unique ways in which older adults engage with new and emerging technologies to help them maintain independence, restore and manage their health, and build and maintain new social connections. The chapter balances what might be technologically possible in the future with what will ultimately be desirable to individuals as they shape their own experience of aging.

Chapter 4: Economic Contexts challenges long-held assumptions about work, spending, retirement planning, and investment. More than anything, this chapter tries to highlight the value of breaking down the linear ways in which society tends to think about life stages and long-term planning.

Chapter 5: Identity reveals and seeks to overcome the troubling ageism that persists in how people understand and engage with aging adults. The chapter emphasizes shifts in how older adults are coming to think about their bodies, minds, relationships, sexuality, and mortality as fluid.