

B EEN A LONG TIME COMING:

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN LATER LIFE

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INTRODUCTION

In 1997, Encore.org (formerly Civic Ventures) took a bold step and began public conversations that challenged assumptions about the experience of aging and the productive capacities of older adults. Rather than viewing older adults as being on “a decline toward dependence,” Encore.org understood that the creativity, energy, experience, passion, and competencies of older adults could be harnessed to address many of the world’s problems.

In its quest to redefine the horizons of aging, Encore.org has identified a number of strategies to increase older adults’ interest in opportunities for encore careers. The organization defines these as paid or unpaid work in the second half of life that combines personal meaning with social impact.

One priority for Encore.org is to stimulate innovation among older adults by celebrating social entrepreneurs age 60 and older whose projects have had a notable impact on society.

The Purpose Prize, first awarded by Encore.org in 2006 and widely recognized as a game changer, is an ambitious initiative. Its goals and objectives are to:

- Showcase the value of experience
- Disprove notions that innovation is the sole province of the young
- Raise awareness in the general population (and particularly among those 60 and older) about the possibilities for purposeful work
- Encourage older adults to engage in encore careers
- Provide reward structures that acknowledge the efforts and accomplishments of people engaged in purposeful work¹
- Offer both financial and nonfinancial resources to projects having extraordinary merit
- Promote purposeful work by encouraging people in encore careers to share their passions and knowledge with people who might be interested in pursuing encore careers in the future

Social entrepreneurship is often associated with initiatives led by young adults. The people considered for the Purpose Prize have broken the mold because they have fully engaged in purposeful work during their older adult years. Since the prize program’s inception, Encore.org has received 8,414 nominations, honored 344 fellows and 86 winners, and distributed cash grants totaling \$4.7 million.

During the summer of 2013, the Sloan Center on Aging & Work and the Center for Social Innovation, both at Boston College, gathered data from 200 social entrepreneurs age 50 and older—all applicants or nominees for the Purpose Prize. This brief summarizes selected findings about the important activities and accomplishments of this group.

In addition to those selected for cash prizes as Purpose Prize winners, Encore.org recognizes a select group of individuals each year as Purpose Prize fellows. Although fellows do not receive cash prizes, they are offered other benefits including the right to use the Purpose Prize fellow designation in releases to the press, funders, and on their own websites. They also have the opportunity to participate in a learning community with other Purpose Prize fellows and winners to exchange ideas, resources, and support. Purpose Prize fellows who are not cash prize winners may reapply in future years for The Purpose Prize.

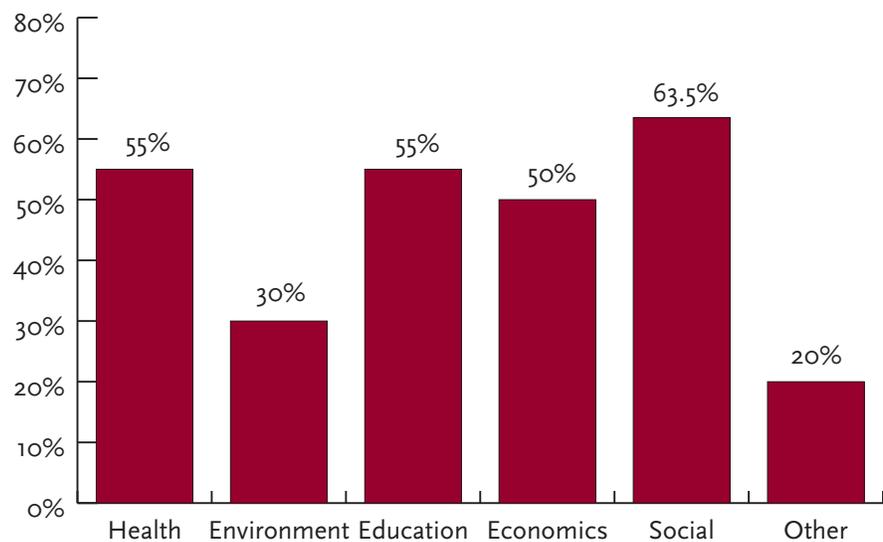
¹ In this report, “purposeful work” constitutes initiatives that are designed to have a positive impact on one or more social issues.

Is there a typical Purpose Prize project?

The diversity of projects featured in the applications for the Purpose Prize reflects the variety of the world's social, economic, and environmental challenges. Overall, 17.1 percent of the projects focused on local issues, 17.1 percent on regional issues, 34.2 percent on national issues, and 31.6 percent on international issues.

Figure 1 shows the range of issues that have called older-adult social entrepreneurs into action. Given the interconnections of social problems, it is common for a single project to address multiple issues. (Therefore, the sum of the percentages across the types of projects exceeds 100).

Figure 1. Types of Issues Addressed by Older-Adult Social Entrepreneurs
(% respondents)
N = 200



Below are descriptions of a few of the projects reported by those we surveyed. They are typical of the inspiring work that the older social entrepreneurs who participated in our study are doing.

- *We are completely independent volunteers from all walks of life who travel to areas of our hemisphere giving no-cost eye exams, glasses, eye surgery, hearing aids, and equipment to less fortunate people. We are non-religious, non-political with all volunteers paying for their own expenses of air, hotel, and food. Since 1989, we have served about 300-400 thousand persons.*
- *[This project], created by an international group of women, seeks economic justice for the market women of Liberia who saved many lives by keeping food moving during the 14-year civil war. It restores their rundown community markets and builds new ones in places where buying and selling take place in the open air. Our goal is to provide safe and healthy working environments and to empower*

women through access to literacy programs, business skills training, and financial resources, while keeping their “Susu” and other traditional savings groups active. These women are very often the sole support for families, many of which increased in size by adopting war and AIDS orphans and helping family members who had nowhere else to turn. As one woman put it: “We cannot depend on husbands.”

- *[This project helps] inner city high school students to be successful in college, grad school or professional school, and entry into the workforce. Assistance includes college preparation in math/calculus and writing/English with college level classes while they are in high school, a mentoring program, classes in college navigation including time management and learning skills, a summer jobs and internship program, an alumni network, and a program to facilitate entry into the workforce at the most appropriate and most advanced level consistent with each individual’s skills and education.*
- *[Our mission is defining], organizing and growing a mass regional teen youth media arts form(ed) to promote lifelong learning, [a] skilled workforce and civic engagement through digital media arts and technology. We drive public policy, model 21st century school and workforce system change projects, [and have a] major internet and social media presence.*

Stories about the passion and accomplishments of social entrepreneurs in their encore careers are compelling.² The story of Susan Burton, a Purpose Prize winner in 2012, is an excellent example (<http://www.encore.org/prize>).

² More stories of people recognized as Purpose Prize fellows and winners can be found at <http://www.encore.org/prize>

Susan Burton: A Purpose Prize Winner

It was 1997. Susan Burton was fresh out of jail, and not for the first time. Years before, Burton's five-year-old son had been killed when he ran into the street and was struck by a car being driven by an off-duty police officer. Wild with grief, she took drugs, became addicted, got arrested for a nonviolent crime, went to prison, got out, and then did it all over and over again for nearly 20 years.

But this time, a friend helped Burton find a job as a live-in caregiver for an elderly woman. Wanting to further improve her life by staying off drugs, Burton went to a treatment facility. The help she got in treatment made her realize that there was "another way." However, when she tried to sign up for a program to become a licensed home care aide, for instance, she found out that a felony conviction meant she could never earn a license in the field. Virtually all the resources an addict trying to keep clean and out of jail might need – food stamps, housing assistance, easy employment access – were out of Burton's reach because of her record.

Steadfast about not going back, Burton came up with a new plan. "I know what I can do," she recalls thinking. "I can help other women like myself, and nobody can stop me."

From her years in the prison system she knew that buses bound from southern California prisons routinely deposited parolees in downtown Los Angeles' Skid Row, an area infamous for rampant drugs, crime, and homelessness. Three or four buses pulled up every day, dropping off inmates with about \$200 (money parolees receive upon release) and often nowhere to go.

So in 1998 Burton started going to the bus depot and inviting women she recognized to stay at her place. She converted an alcove off the kitchen into her bedroom, and the women slept four to a room in bunk beds. About a year later, Burton was paying for everything with her rapidly diminishing savings. She had lost her job when the woman she had been caring for was admitted to a full-time care facility. Burton heard that a local church was giving away bus tokens, so she tried to get some for the women living with her. But the church group told her she needed to incorporate as a nonprofit organization to qualify for the tokens. Until that day she had never considered running a nonprofit. Though she had been helping others for two years already, A New Way of Life was officially born in 2000.

Twelve years later, Burton's shelter has grown to five transitional residences in downtown Los Angeles that have served a total of 600 people. The organization operates on a \$1 million budget, with 10 employees managing services for women rebuilding their lives after prison, including lodging, food, legal aid, and job training.

In 2011, A New Way of Life's five homes served 40 women and 13 children at about a third of the cost of incarceration, which in California averages about \$47,000 annually per inmate, according to the State Department of Corrections. "I think we all want to make an impact," Burton says. Even though her opportunity to do so happened later in her life, it "didn't mean it was too late. It meant if it was going to happen, I had better get busy and make it happen."

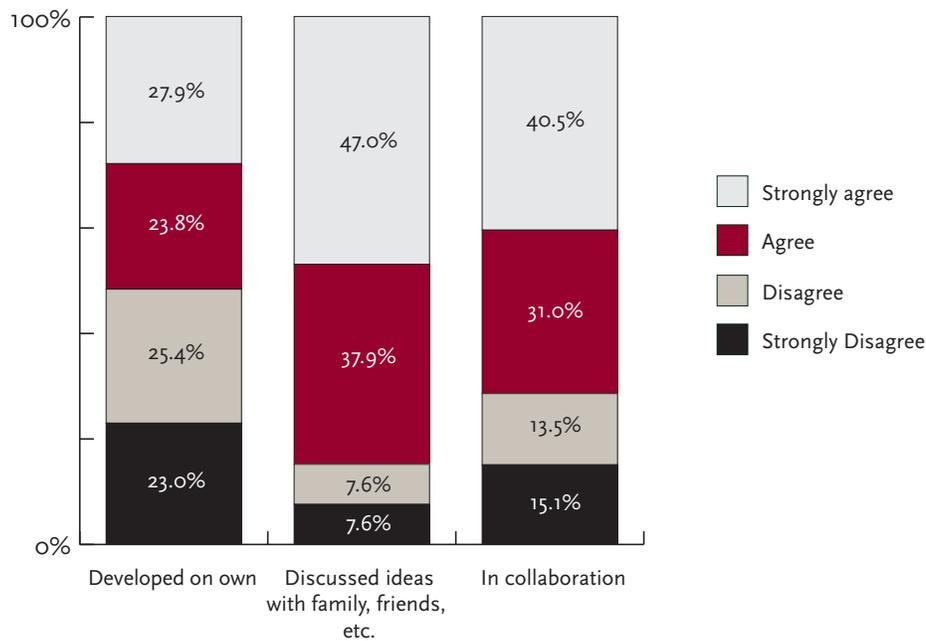
How did the social entrepreneurs get started?

The respondents in our study took different paths to find their purposeful work. One-third (33.5 percent) of the social entrepreneurs stated that they had worked for nonprofits for most of their adult lives. The same percentage (33.5 percent) said that they had worked in the for-profit sector. Nearly one-third (29.5 percent) reported that they had devoted significant time (at least half a day per week) to volunteer initiatives.

The survey findings indicate that as people begin to think about pursuing an encore career as a social entrepreneur, they initially spend some time engaging in solitary thinking, some time discussing preliminary ideas with others, and also some time pilot-testing some of the prototypes in collaboration with other individuals/ organizations.

A majority of respondents (71.5 percent overall) “strongly agreed” with the statement, “Once I developed my initial ideas for my purpose project, I discussed thoughts with family, friends, colleagues, and mentors who helped me refine my thinking until project implementation.” Figure 2, below, shows the percentages of respondents who “agreed/strongly agreed” with this or either of two other scenarios that we presented to the participants to discover how their encore-career ideas germinated.

Figure 2. Social Contexts of Ideation
(Percentages of respondents who agreed/strongly agreed with each scenario)
N = 122³



The process of ideation can feel risky. Sharing preliminary ideas with others might help social entrepreneurs to put their ideas into action.

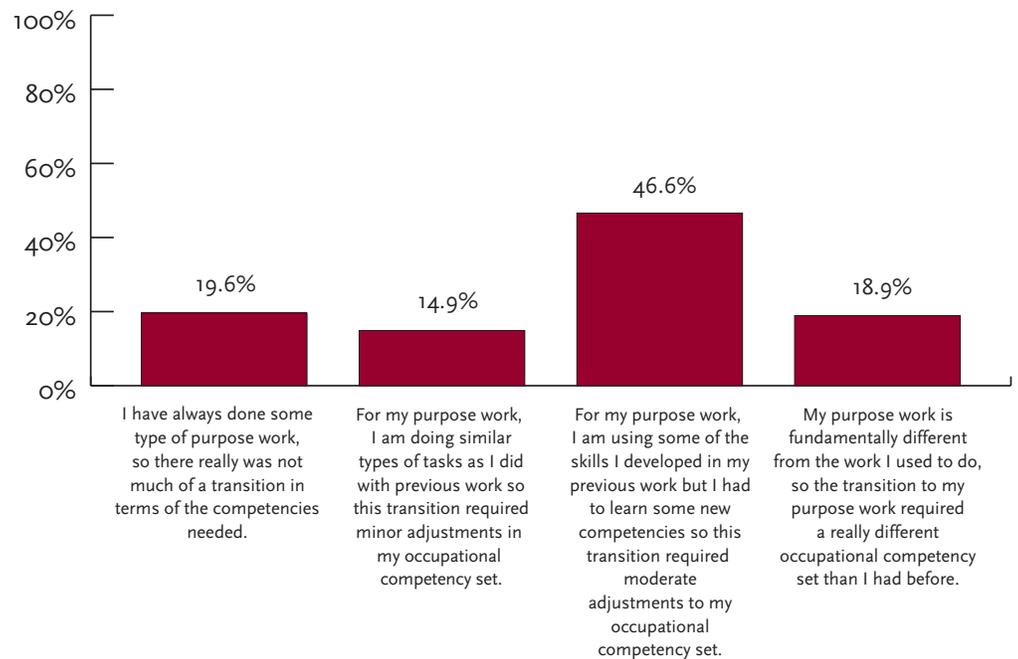
³ The range of the number of respondents for the three questions was 122 to 136.

Did the social entrepreneurs leverage existing competencies when they made the transition to purposeful work?

We asked the respondents to select one of four sentences that best described the extent to which they were able to use existing competency sets when they transitioned into their encore-career projects.

Nearly half (46.6 percent) of the survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “For my purpose work, I am using some of the skills I developed in my previous work but I had to learn some new competencies, so this transition required moderate adjustments to my competency set.” Several of the interviewees commented that although they had some expertise related to their Purpose Prize project (for example, familiarity with the needs of specific population groups) and also the skills they needed to launch their ideas, they had less experience than they would have liked in managing a nonprofit start-up.

Figure 3. Portability of Skills and Competencies Developed in Previous Work to Purpose Prize Projects
(Percentage of respondents)
N = 148



Older adults who are contemplating an encore career might find it helpful to fully appreciate the experiences and competencies that they already have and could apply to an initiative with social impact, even if social entrepreneurship is new to them.

Are the social entrepreneurs making a difference?

Metrics help people in encore careers to assess whether their projects are meeting expectations for deliverables (such as the number of children served) and whether the projects are having the intended impact (such as increasing graduation rates). While some of the Purpose Prize projects are limited in scope and might serve a relatively small number of individuals or families, others have been designed to have a national impact. Across the projects, there are clear indications that the work of the older-adult entrepreneurs has not only touched lives but also transformed them.

Because the work that social entrepreneurs do is varied, the metrics they use to evaluate the success of their projects are varied, as well. For this brief, we converted whatever unit measure the survey respondents reported using into “output units” and “impact units.”⁴

We asked the social entrepreneurs to share at least one metric of project output/impact at three points in time (approximately two years before they applied or were nominated for the Purpose Prize, during the year just prior to their candidacy for the prize, and in 2012 or the last year their project was in operation). Using these standard unit metrics, we found that the respondents reported dramatic increases in project accomplishments over time.⁵

Table 1. Growth in the Impact of the Purpose Prize Projects

N = 101 (measures are standardized scores)

	Applicant/Nominees
Over the course of the year approximately 2 years before application/nomination for the prize	-.66
Over the course of the year prior to application/nomination	-.013
Over the course of 2012 (or the last year of project operation)	.51

How do the social entrepreneurs feel about their Purpose Prize work?

Finding meaning and purpose in life’s activities contributes to well-being. As noted by James and her colleagues (2012), there is some evidence which suggests that this is particularly important for older adults. Answers to the survey questions indicate that older-adult social entrepreneurs have an almost irrepressible drive to make the world better. In most cases, their work seems to be a manifestation of who they are as people.

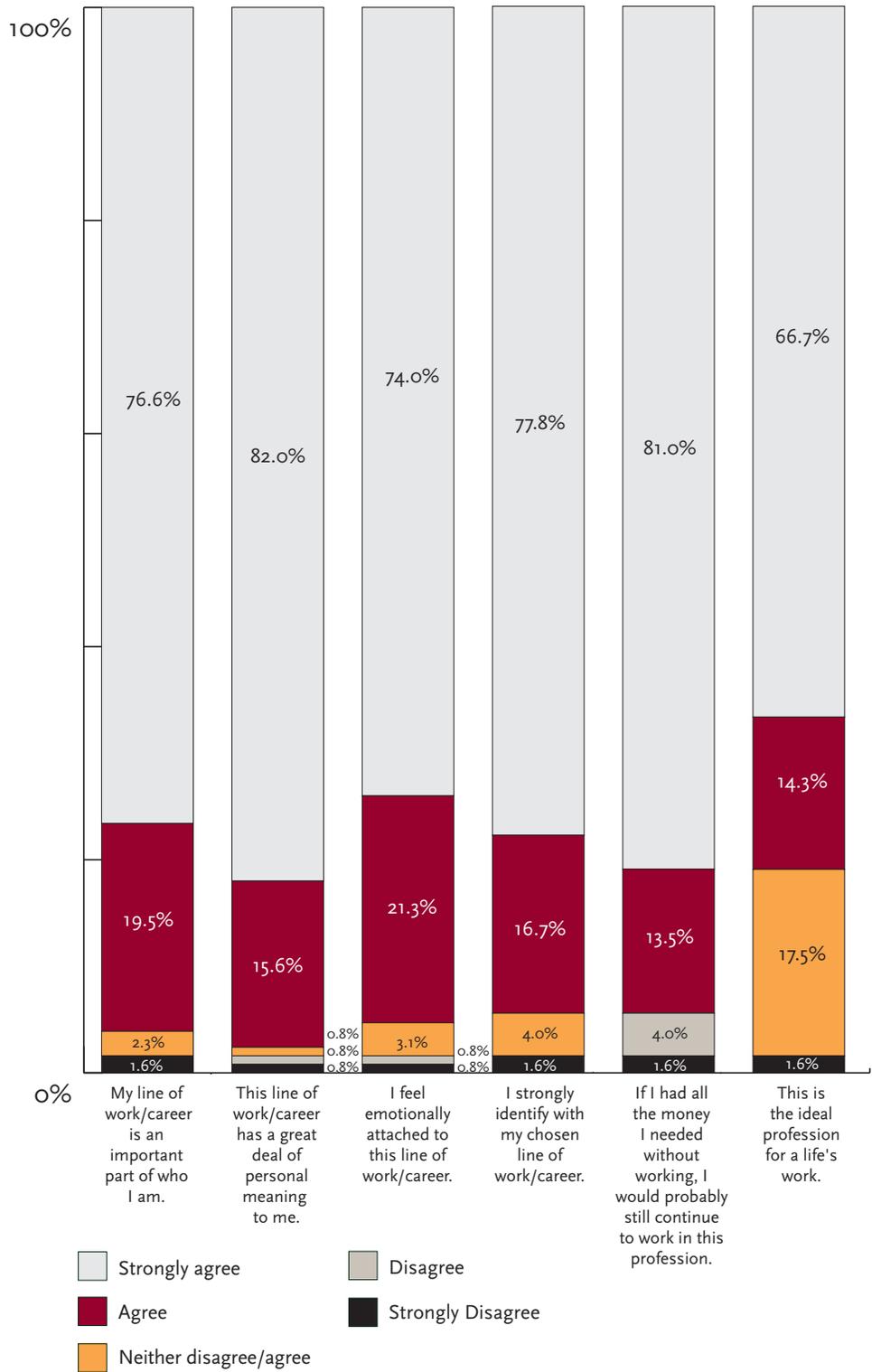
A majority of the respondents agreed that their Purpose Prize work is “close” or “very close” to an “ideal job” (mean score 4.69 on a scale where 1 = “very far from the ideal” and 5 = “very close to the ideal.” During one of the interviews, one applicant balked at using the term “job” at all, because he felt that the words “job” and “work” suggest that the tasks are arduous and unpleasant—the antithesis of his attitude toward his encore career.

As Figure 4 shows, most of the respondents feel strongly that their social entrepreneurship gives them a sense of purpose and meaningfulness.

⁴ The output and impact data reported by each respondent were converted into Z scores, making it possible for us to average the performance of all respondents’ projects over time, despite the differences in metrics used.

⁵ $p < .05$

Figure 4. The Meaning of Purposeful Work
 (Percentage of respondents)
 N = 148



Social entrepreneurs of all ages often comment on the importance of bringing passion to work with a social impact. When people in encore careers are deeply connected to the work they do, they are motivated to persevere, even at times when the work is challenging.

CONCLUSION

In our aging society, the talents of older adults are an increasingly valuable resource. The Purpose Prize focuses attention on the many ways in which older adults, through encore careers, have engaged in social entrepreneurship, helping to improve the economy, public health, the environment, education, and other arenas where innovation, commitment, and passion are needed.

Older adults interested in encore careers can find information at <http://www.encore.org>.

Reference

James, J.B., Besen, E., Matz-Costa, C., & Pitt-Catsouphes, M. (2012). *Insights on activity in later life: Insights from the Life & Times in an Aging Society Study*. Chestnut Hill, MA: Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College.

The Study At-a-Glance

We invited 1,338 applicants/nominees (including those designated as fellows and winners) to complete a 45-minute survey. These people were selected from nearly 7,000 applicants/nominees. This subgroup included those who not only met the application eligibility criteria (for example, minimum age of the applicant/nominee) and who had current contact information but also those who led projects that aligned with the criteria of the Purpose Prize. Two hundred people responded to survey questions (18 of whom engaged in phone interviews), for a response rate of 14.9 percent. The respondents included a slightly higher share of women (55 percent). The average (mean) age was 71 years. About half (52.6 percent) of the respondents said that they had applied or been nominated within the previous two years (with the mean average year being 2010). Forty-three percent of the respondents reported that they are financially compensated in their encore careers.

About Encore.org

The Purpose Prize® is a program of Encore.org™, a national nonprofit organization promoting the big idea of second acts for the greater good. Encore.org is building a movement galvanizing the millions of people who are in their encore stage – devoting themselves in the second half of life to solving some of the world’s most pressing problems. Through an inventive program portfolio, original research, strategic alliances and the power of people’s own life stories, Encore.org demonstrates the value of experience in solving serious social problems.

For more information about Encore.org, please visit: <http://www.encore.org>

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About the Center for Social Innovation

The Center for Social Innovation promotes “innovation from within.” Our mission is to foster effective, sustainable social innovations that enhance social justice. We strive to build capacity within the social sector by preparing tomorrow’s social service leaders, promoting the capacity of existing social service agencies to respond to current and future social issues, and building the evidence base for social innovation.

For more information about the Center, please visit:
<http://www.bc.edu/schools/gssw/csi.html>

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About the Sloan Center on Aging & Work

Established in 2005, the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College promotes quality of employment as an imperative for the 21st-century multigenerational workforce. We integrate evidence from research with insights from workplace experiences to inform innovative organizational decision-making. Collaborating with business leaders and scholars in a multidisciplinary dialogue, the center develops the next generation of knowledge and talent management.

Since our founding, we have conducted more than 20 studies in collaboration with employers: for example, studies on “Age & Generations,” “Talent Management,” and “Generations of Talent.” Studies under way are “Assessing the Impact of Time and Place Management” and “Engaged as We Age.”

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For more information about the Center, please visit: <http://www.bc.edu/agingandwork>

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