

the Atlantic



Print | Close

An advertisement for The Atlantic iPad app. It features a magazine cover with the headline 'THE SOLDIER: DEFYING THE PRESIDENT'. The text reads 'BOLD IDEAS. NEW FORMAT.' and 'The Atlantic for the iPad. Get full issues of the award-winning magazine plus video, slideshows and more. Download now >>'. There is also an 'Available on the App Store' logo.

The Next Tech Revolution Is for Seniors

By Derek Thompson

As the world's elderly population explodes, so too will technology to help the old



The number of people over 65 will double worldwide in the next four decades. In the U.S. alone, 80 million baby boomers will enter their 60s and 70s in the next 20 years. For Washington, this offers a financial headache, with rising Medicare and Social Security costs. But for tech companies, it offers a remarkable and historically unique opportunity to target older consumers.

Seniors spend a greater share of their total income; after all, many have spent their life saving for retirement. That makes them ideal and willing consumers for products with the right combination of intuition, simplicity and utility.

That's why you see [multinational companies like Intel](#) chasing "wellness enhancement" technology that will appeal to seniors without insulting their intelligence. Phones with comically large digits? Not a hit. More popular are simple products that assist the elderly without visually telegraphing the message, "You are old and I am designed to condescendingly remind you of your age." A smart

pillbox that reminds seniors to take vitamins, computers with word games, and mobile robots to facilitate video chats with loved ones thousands of miles away: These are the kind of technologies that are taking off, as Natasha Singer [explains](#).

But if you want to bet on the epicenter of the "gray tech" revolution, you'd look to Japan, where the population is aging faster than any country in the world. By 2015, one in four Japanese citizens will over 65. The country's world class labs are responding aggressively to the population shift by trying to lead the world in age-friendly technology.

Already, the country has witnessed an [explosion in gaming](#) for seniors and retirement homes. The government has guaranteed to roll out a fleet of nurse robots by 2014. Sony's [new GPS chip](#) for seniors will help families track their loved-ones while miles away. Creepy? Maybe. Useful? Heck yes.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg. Japanese companies are also developing robotic bathtubs to help the disabled wash without more than one assistant; an inflatable sleeve with sensors that strengthens the wearers' muscles; and a full-body suit that "detects when a user's muscles are trying to lift something heavy and initiates support from air pumps."

"We hope that the Japanese robotics industry will continue to be the industry leader by preparing necessary guidelines for service robots," ministry of trade and industry official Motoki Korenaga told the [AARP Global Network](#). "As aging of the population is a common problem for developed countries, Japan wants to become an advanced country in the area of addressing the aging society with the use of robots."

Age-friendly gadgets could help seniors live more comfortable, more richly satisfying lives. But like any technology, it could have a disruptive impact on the economy. Consider that home care and homes health aides are among the [fastest growing jobs in the U.S.](#) What happens when they get replaced by superior robots and pharmaceutical advancements, the same way robot arms replaced human arms on assembly lines? For the last 30 years, health care has opposed the decline of manufacturing by offering double-inflation growth opportunities to low and high skilled workers. What's good for our nursing homes is good for America, but it's not automatically good for all Americans.

This article available online at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/02/the-next-tech-revolution-is-for-seniors/70930/>

Copyright © 2011 by The Atlantic Monthly Group. All Rights Reserved.