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Staying in Touch With Technology

By Sam Grobart
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Here is the problem with typical "elder tech" products: There's not enough "tech" in a phone that uses an oversize keypad but offers limited features, for one example. Advancing age can rob people of their abilities, and products that help mitigate that are good things indeed. But what if the need for that kind of assistance is still decades away? Today's baby boomers are just now crossing the retirement line, but that does not render them incapacitated. Far from it. It may, however, render them out of touch.

"What's developing is a digital divide," said Ken Dychtwald, the chief executive of Age Wave, a research and consulting organization that focuses on population aging. "New technologies are largely oriented to people under the age of 50," Dychtwald said. "If you're older than that, you have to muster the courage to ask your family how things work."

New technologies are most commonly encountered through co-workers or as part of a corporate system. "The workplace is a breeding pool for learning about and sharing new technologies," he added. "If you're home, you don't have that environment around you." But many mainstream technologies become even more valuable when people leave the office. There are products available to help 18-year-olds and 80-year-olds alike stay active, informed and entertained, and help keep them in touch with family and friends.

Getting familiar with some of these products will help ensure that technology, much like youth, is not wasted on the young.

Some easy picks

Want to stay active? Buy a video game console. Forget about first-person shooters and psychedelic mazes. Gaming systems like the Nintendo Wii, the Microsoft Xbox 360 and the Sony PlayStation 3 all have accessories that get gamers out of their chairs and moving on the floor, whether it is in a virtual dance competition, an exercise program or a sports simulator.

In addition to the benefits of simply moving around, recent studies have shown an improvement in balance among some older people who used the Wii (around \$180) and its fitness programs like Wii Sports (around \$24).

The Xbox Kinect (\$300) from Microsoft is the most advanced gaming system available, with built-in cameras and motion sensors that can see a player's body and its position.

Using a fitness program like Your Shape (\$50), Kinect can not only show you what exercise moves to do, but can also see if you are doing them correctly and offer tailored advice to improve your form.

Want to stay in touch? Get a webcam. While nothing replaces in-person visits, videoconferencing gets pretty close. If your computer does not have a built-in webcam, get an external one. Logitech makes a wide range of cameras, but its C310 model, for around \$30, is suited to chats with friends and grandchildren.

In addition to the hardware, you will need an account with Skype, Gmail, iChat, AIM or another service. Placing and receiving video chats is simple and costs nothing. As long as your loved ones have accounts on the same network, you can talk face to face for as long as you like.

Want to stay informed? Pick up a tablet or e-reader. The intuitive interface of a touch-screen tablet can suit anyone who dreads a traditional keyboard and mouse. Among the growing number of tablets, Apple's iPad (starting at \$499) remains the best choice.

It is easy to use, and its wealth of apps makes it the perfect digital companion. Also, the iPad's pinch-and-pull zooming feature turns any text - whether from an e-book, website or e-mail - into large type in seconds.

If a tablet seems like a step too far, for either financial or technological reasons, consider an e-book reader. Amazon's Kindle (\$139) is the leader here. Its "always on, never pay for it" wireless Internet connection means you can download books most anywhere within seconds.

You can also subscribe to Kindle versions of newspapers and magazines (and adjust type size as well). Furthermore, the Kindle is light, weighing only half a pound, and you can store up to 3,500 books on it.

Want to stay productive? Get some apps. When you were at work, you had some structure. You had some organization. If you want to maintain those things in retirement, there is software that can help. Evernote is one such application. It bills itself as a personal digital assistant, but it is actually the world's greatest file cabinet.

Evernote allows you to copy and paste almost anything you find online into searchable "notebooks." Find a picture you like online? Copy and paste it into Evernote. Highlight a portion of an e-mail and store it in Evernote. Post a link your friend sent you to your Evernote account.

It is easily accessible from almost any device with an Internet connection (and some devices can even store data offline as well, thanks to things like the Evernote iPhone app). There is a free version of Evernote, and a premium version for a \$45 annual fee, which has no ads and some expanded features.

A piece of software worth considering is the Dragon Dictation program from Nuance. Available for Windows computers (for \$100) and Macs (for \$200), Dragon employs industrial-strength

voice-recognition technology to accurately transcribe whatever you say. You can speak naturally, adding spoken punctuation, and dictate an e-mail.

The application can also execute voice commands for your computer, so saying "search Amazon for Stieg Larsson" will automatically direct a browser to Amazon.com and search for those words. You can tell your computer to open and close programs, scroll up and down the screen and select words and lines to copy, delete or paste.

Want to be entertained? Stream movies right to your TV (via a high-speed Internet connection). Movie rental stores are losing appeal, and the costs of pay-per-view/on-demand cable programming can add up. But \$60 will buy a Roku box, and that opens a world of inexpensive video programming.

When combined with a monthly \$8 subscription to Netflix, you get access to the company's library of thousands of movies and TV shows with a click of the remote. Other subscription services, like Amazon Instant Video and Hulu Plus, are also available.

AppleTV, at \$99, also offers Netflix, and includes access to Apple's iTunes library of shows and films. It also features a more current selection - Netflix does not have current TV shows; iTunes has them the day after they are broadcast. Apple's service also has more current movies. Unlike Netflix, iTunes is not a subscription service, but works on an a la carte basis: TV shows can be rented for 99 cents and bought for \$2 or \$3. Movies can also be rented or bought at a range of prices.

Want to see who's doing what? Get a digital photo frame. Digital photo frames are not new, but the growth of wireless connectivity gives the years-old technology some worthwhile new features. A good example of the latest advances can be found in Pandigital's Photo Mail digital photo frame, for \$180.

At first glance, it looks like many other digital picture frames - a simple dark rectangle surrounding an 8-inch display. And like other digital frames, this model can display photos from a camera's memory card. But what sets this frame apart is its ability to receive new photos, wirelessly, from friends and family.

The Photo Mail frame, like Amazon's Kindle, has an always-on, no-cost wireless connection to AT&T's wireless network. The frame also has its own e-mail address. That means that anyone who has the address can send pictures to the frame, where they will appear instantly (a note on the display indicates when new photos have arrived).

If the grandchildren are at the beach, their parents can e-mail photos as they take them, and they will show up on the frame at home.

And unlike other picture frames that have a similar function but require a Wi-Fi network, getting the Photo Mail frame set up takes almost no time at all.

These products and services are not radical departures from everyday life, but they can make measurable improvements, allowing people to be more connected, efficient and informed. And since those goals are not age-restricted, neither should the products that help attain them.

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