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4 AI robots your aging parents want in their homes

From digital assistants to handy robots, AI could dramatically change the way people age in place.

[Concept rendering: courtesy Yanguo]

BY DEVIN LUDDIG AND SHENG-HUNG LEE 中信公 · 6 MINUTE READ

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Most of us want to remain in our existing homes as we grow older. The practice of "aging in place" aligns with preferences for familiar places and routines and preserves our sense of independence. These preferences, though, raise questions about what support seniors want and need in their current homes.

Japan has advanced the use of robotics specifically for this purpose, with mixed results. Despite these early results, the continued development of robotics and artificial intelligence to assist those aging in place seems obvious. What's less obvious is how seniors foresee AI and robots living alongside them and what specifically they envision these things doing.

To better understand how seniors want AIs and robots to help in their homes, we asked them. We recruited seniors from the MIT AgeLab's research cohort—each around 70 years old and in the early stages of retirement—and then engaged in wide-ranging conversations about their aspirations and fears about these technologies.

This framework distinguishes between digital and physical AIs and outlines the key ways they're meant to help people in their homes. [Image: courtesy Yanguo]

During these conversations, we explored various forms of both digital and physical AI—everything from digital assistants to handy robots—each with different capabilities and limitations. The result: Here are four types of AIs that could operate in the future lives of seniors, along with what present-day seniors think of them, and the key considerations they'd need to account for when designing them.

ADVISOR AI

A digital presence that suggests solutions to problems, surfaces opportunities, and helps its person remember to do things. Examples: The AI helps verify the veracity of unfamiliar communications like scam phone calls; identifies activities of interest and assists in planning how to participate; offers timely reminders to take medications; and prompts calls to friends and family members on their birthdays.

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What seniors think: Thanks to established assistants like Amazon's Alexa and Apple's Siri, seniors say they're already familiar with this form of AI, both inside and outside their homes, and can easily anticipate its further evolution. Moving forward, though, seniors want more from the Advisor archetype: They want the Advisor to go beyond pragmatic help with reminders about daily life and grow into helping them with their social well-being. This will mean providing actionable support with emotional concerns, especially social isolation, by surfacing and facilitating a senior's human connections.

BUTLER ROBOT AI

A physical presence that attends to its person by assisting with dynamic needs, such as deliveries, health, and home monitoring. Examples: The AI robot lifts a delivery from the porch to the foyer; assists in turning off the water at the source of a leak in the kitchen; and renders assistance—and summons help, if needed—in the event of a fall.

What seniors think: Due to the confluence of connected personal devices like smartwatches and earbuds with connected home devices such as smart thermostats and automated lighting, seniors believe there are increasingly complex interactions between their bodies and their homes. So they see how an AI robot helping to manage these complexities could reduce their cognitive load. They also acknowledge, though, that this form of AI in the home is far from simple in its creation and requires a lot of features and expansive capabilities. Just like a human butler, here there's a distinct possibility of robots just for rich people, which will require breakthroughs in manufacturability and new business models to avoid.

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CONDUCTOR AI

A digital presence that operates connected systems of modules such as wheeled porters and object lifters. Examples: The AI responds to voice commands to transport meals from the kitchen to the living room with a wheeled porter; elevates an adjustable-height table adjacent to the dryer to ease folding clothes; and summons an autonomous vacuum to address a spill.

What seniors think: This is a challenging archetype for seniors to conceptualize in their homes since it exists beyond any present-day solutions. Nonetheless, they're compelled by the prospect of an overarching, digital administrator of a set of modular, task-driven devices. Perhaps because it's the least familiar to them in terms of having existing corollaries, seniors are less confident in speculative interactions with this archetype because an AI with a lot of control must earn a lot of trust. At the same time, they see this form of AI as capable of adapting to their changing physical needs as they age simply through the addition of new connected devices. This will mean creating sets of modules that can be added and subtracted, potentially through subscription models.

VALET ROBOT AI

A physical presence that attends to its person by helping with everyday tasks, such as cleaning, dressing, and grooming. Examples: The AI robot replaces a light bulb in high-ceiling recessed lighting; helps a person put on their socks and pants; cleans everyday surfaces such as kitchen and bath countertops; and dusts bookshelves and framed prints.

What seniors think: Seniors equate the possibilities of this form of AI in the home with early home robots such as iRobot's Roomba vacuum. While the focus of this archetype is on "everyday" tasks that include common housecleaning (versus the "dynamic" tasks of the Butler Robot AI archetype), it also includes help with personal-care tasks like dressing and grooming. Interestingly, here seniors have some concerns about this form of AI helping in ways that bring it into physical contact with their bodies. This will require forms of this AI that are aesthetically compatible with seniors for such personal interactions.

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We asked the world's most creative people how they're using AI. This is what they said

Fast Company polled hundreds of our "Most Creative People in Business" list to get a snapshot of AI usage among the creative elite.

[Source Photo: Freepik]

BY BRENDAN SAUDNER · 7 MINUTE READ

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How are the world's most creative people using AI to drive their work forward? This was the question at the heart of an in-depth survey *Fast Company* recently conducted in partnership with Whalar Group, a global creator company.

We found that, for most, AI has become a routine part of the creative process—and a return to an AI-free working life has become almost unfathomable. Yet the survey also found the world's creative elite are grappling with a technology that gets more powerful and useful every day but remains unwieldy, error-prone, and not entirely trustworthy.

"I want people to understand how well it can augment and enhance the thinking process—not just the creative and generative thinking process, but the thinking process itself," said one respondent. "If AI is used responsibly, it's a wonderful collaborative partner and needn't be feared."

We sent the detailed (anonymous) survey to a diverse cohort of people who have been honored in Fast Company's "Most Creative People in Business" list over the years, plus a selection of independent content creators, and got 100 responses. The result offers a close look at how the world's leading creatives are using this revolutionary technology to shape the future of their industries and the wider world.

"The internet first revolutionized the playing field by democratizing publishing and audience access," says Neil Walker, cofounder and co-CEO of Whalar Group. "Now, AI is creating the next massive rebalancing, this time in creative production capability. What excites me most is watching creators, who are inherently nimble and unburdened by legacy systems, adopt AI tools with remarkable speed."

EARLY AND ENTHUSIASTIC ADOPTERS

First, here are some key stats on the respondents:

- Forty-seven percent of those who responded were founders, partners, or principals of their companies, and 63% were 40 years old or higher.
- The top industries were tech (22%), design (16%), and entertainment (14%), and substantial numbers came from healthcare, science and research, and the nonprofit sector.
- The size of their organizations ranged from global behemoths to solo creators. Twenty-two percent of respondents booked more than $1 billion in revenue in 2024. Twenty percent did less than $1 million.

Unsurprisingly, these folks are not new to AI, for the most part. More than a third (39%) have been aware of AI usage in their industry for more than five years, and 19% began using it themselves that long ago. Another third (30%) began using the technology two to three years ago, a timeframe that aligns with the arrival of ChatGPT in November 2022. "Eighty-three percent have incorporated AI into their creative process, and nearly half (48%) rely on it five minutes or more a day."

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Brendan Saudner is the editor-in-chief of Fast Company. He has worked in magazines, book publishing, and digital media for more than 25 years. His work has appeared in Publishers Weekly, The Atlantic, Medium, The Random House Publishing Group, Esquire, Insider, and Conde Nast Portfolio. More

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