Tool, Infrastructure, Partner:

Technology's Changing Role in Longer Lives



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Over the past decade, technology's role in longer lives has changed more profoundly than technology itself. The story is not simply one of faster processors, smarter algorithms, or more connected devices. It is a shift in role: from *tool*, to *infrastructure*, to *partner*. What began as technologies designed to solve individual problems is becoming an ecosystem that supports everyday life and, increasingly, a partner to help people navigate it.

This evolution did not happen by chance. Each role emerged from the convergence of demographic realities, technological capability, and changing expectations about how we live. Together they describe not just what technology does, but what it is becoming.

The first role was technology as a *tool* to address individual tasks, often related to health and safety. As an aging population became more visible to entrepreneurs and investors, they discovered both a growing need and a global market opportunity. Sensors became smaller, more affordable, and more reliable. Design focused on usability. Connectivity became nearly universal, and millions of older adults gained greater safety and independence. Families gained confidence.

Together, these forces fueled the rapid growth of agetech. Thousands of companies focused on individual challenges: detecting falls, reminding people to take medications, or measuring sleep and activity. One problem. One device. One solution at a time.

The second role emerged as technology became *infrastructure*. This is fundamentally different from a tool that performs a task. Infrastructure coordinates many tasks, often invisibly—changing what is possible in daily life. The pandemic accelerated this shift as the home became a service platform for delivery, mobility, and health care, not just where people age in place.

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As technology became infrastructure, the design challenge evolved with it. The problem was no longer whether a device worked, but whether an entire ecosystem could be trusted to work invisibly and reliably, across years and decades of changing needs. The notion of Design for Longevity makes that imperative concrete: Rather than building products for discrete life stages, it asks how homes, communities, services, and technologies can be designed to evolve continuously alongside the people who live within them.[46]

Imagine a refrigerator that understands an older adult's nutritional needs, automatically replaces and recognizes low or expired food, and coordinates restocking through a trusted service before anyone returns home. The older adult and the family never see the transaction. They experience only the outcome of a seamless infrastructure: a kitchen that simply works. The innovation is no longer the appliance. It is the ecosystem connecting retailers, logistics, payment systems, trusted access, and the home itself.

A third role is now emerging: technology as *partner*. Artificial intelligence is advancing just as longer lives are becoming more complex. Individuals make decisions about health, finances, caregiving, housing, work, and mobility over decades rather than years. The challenge is no longer finding information. It is sense-making: knowing what matters, what comes first, and what to do next—not just for someone like me, but for *me* specifically.

This emerging role also creates opportunities for longevity planning. Rather than focusing only on retirement or health care, longevity planning integrates health, caregiving, housing, mobility, finances, and social participation into an evolving life strategy. AI can support this process by helping people anticipate future needs, explore scenarios, and make more informed decisions over time.

The MIT AgeLab's Longevity Preparedness Index makes the urgency visible. Of the eight domains it measures, care received the lowest preparedness score, just 45 out of 100.[47] People know caregiving will likely become part of their lives, yet few have assessed their ability to provide or receive care or to prepare for either possibility.

Consider an adult daughter caring for her aging father. As his memory changes, insurance paperwork accumulates and worries about driving emerge, an AI partner does more than provide search results. It organizes information around her father's circumstances, prepares questions for his physician, identifies transportation options, and helps her think through the next steps.

Technology begins to extend human cognition. It becomes less a source of answers than a partner in thinking. It does not replace judgment. It helps make better judgment possible.

Technology's role will continue to evolve as better tools emerge, infrastructure becomes more connected, and AI partners become more capable. The defining innovations of the next decade, however, will not be measured by the intelligence of our technologies alone. In an era of longer lives, technology's greatest contribution may not be helping us live longer but helping us live better.

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2026

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