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OPINION

Thank Boomers for Buffing Up Brain Market



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As members of the baby boomer generation attempt to retain good health into old age, they have spurred the development of technology designed to keep the mind sharp. While some so-called brain fitness regimens are more helpful than others, the development of the industry will lead to benefits for all age

groups.

This month America's first baby boomer, Kathleen Casey-Kirschling, signed up for the Social Security benefits she will start to collect in January. The new phase of life that she and her generation are entering is creating demand for new industries that affect everyone, one of which involves "brain fitness."

Brain fitness is exactly what it sounds like -- a workout program for your mind beyond simple activities like crossword puzzles or sudoku. The brain buffing scene doesn't seem to feature a character like fitness legend Jack LaLanne just yet, but many companies, particularly in the tech sector, vie for the title. [MindFit](#), [Happy Neuron](#) and [Lumosity](#) all offer [programs](#) designed to "pump up" brain power.

More Than Fun and Games

Yet with so many anti-aging products flooding the market these days, some might question whether brain fitness is a true concept or just another snake-oil marketing  plan. While some programs on the market are more entertainment than science, like [Nintendo's](#)  "Brain Age," scientific studies show that when properly targeted, [computer programs](#) can have a dramatic impact on brain health.

Short-term studies show that after four to six weeks of using structured brain workout programs like [MindFit](#) or [Posit Science's](#) Brain Fitness Program 2.0, users see marked improvement in areas like auditory [processing](#) or short-term memory, according to Alvaro Fernandez, CEO and cofounder of San Francisco-based [SharpBrains](#). This could be helpful in the long term because results published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* show that benefits from well-designed cognitive training programs can last for five years even after the training is finished.

Implications for Younger Set

All of this complements longitudinal studies conducted in individuals over 50 showing that mental stimulation and lifelong learning can reduce the risk of developing the nasty symptoms of Alzheimer's by 35 to 40 percent, even after controlling for physical exercise and nutrition. That's good news for the older generation, but are there any applications for those in the Gen X or Y category?

The answer is yes, and the range of applications confirms what 18th century philosopher Adam Smith said: When individuals follow their self-interest, benefits accrue to the entire community. That is true of boomers battling the effects of aging, but to keep employees of all ages sharp, some corporations are already using brain fitness programs. This area is expected to grow rapidly. SharpBrains's Fernandez, who spends his time analyzing the market, says that the 2007 market for brain fitness was US\$225 million; \$25 million of that being corporate. However, there are other fascinating applications as well.

The education market is worth about \$50 million, and many schools across the country are helping children overcome reading problems using programs like those offered by [Scientific Learning](#) or [Lexia](#). There are even basketball teams like the Memphis Tigers who use a computer-based cognitive training program, Intelligym, to get a leg up on the court. It will come as no surprise that the U.S. military is using brain fitness programs too.

The Future

One day, it may be routine practice to get a baseline assessment on brain fitness from one's doctor, a change that would bring the brain, an important part of the body, more fully into wellness planning. Indeed, in the future it will probably be shocking that today most doctors fail to conduct routine brain exams, especially since the technology for a rudimentary exam already exists.

It could be possible to use neuron-imaging technologies in order to tell a person what areas of their brain are most active, but such a test is expensive and not normally offered to the average consumer. Fernandez says that he could imagine brain imaging technology used in conjunction with cognitive training on a more widespread basis within 10 to 20 years. Hopefully, the technology will move quicker than that, and if it does, we can thank the boomers for what some see as their anti-aging crusade.

The next time someone complains about the baby boomers' obsession with youth, a good response would be to evoke Adam Smith. Remind them that self-interest in a free market creates enormous benefits for society, including new ways to keep our brains healthy. [ECT](#)

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