AARP
Real Possibilities

Hacking Life Shifts

A c-level read-out of key insights from this groundbreaking study of how three generations of Americans are navigating profound changes along the aging journey



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Hacking Life Shifts

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Shift Happens

Most of us are creatures of habit. We get comfortable with our routines. We form attitudes and values that guide and influence our behavior. But then change happens. And that's part of life.

As we get older, change can be difficult and profound. When it comes suddenly, change can disrupt not only our routines, but also the very direction of our lives—sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. How we navigate change is a reflection of not only who we are, but also who supports us and how. Change creates needs for new types of help. And, that's where brands have a role to play.

It's important to understand that Life Shifts are not discrete. To the contrary, they're often intertwined. Nearly half of adults aged 45 and over (47% to be exact) find themselves in at least one of the five Life Shifts studied. So, there's a decent chance you (or a loved one) are currently going through one or more these changes.



If you haven't yet experienced a major Life Shift, imagine how you'll feel when…

You become entrusted with the daily physical care of your partner or a parent.

After many years of marriage, you find yourself by yourself, without a partner.

You move away from the home and community where you raised your family.

You experience the joy of becoming a new grandparent, assuming a new role as your family adds another generation.

After settling comfortably into your career, you find yourself doing something completely different.

Will you be adrift and rudderless or inspired and exhilarated?

That's what Hacking Life Shifts is all about: understanding five profound changes that happen along the aging journey and examining their implications for brands and organizations. These changes bring new challenges and meaning to life and real opportunities for brands to provide smart solutions and empathetic support.

This eBook introduces you to the five Life Shifts by weaving together a few key insights coming from this project.

Caregiving

Those who find themselves providing primary care for a loved one see themselves through another's eyes. This new vision and identity can be rewarding but also pressure-filled, all-encompassing, and overwhelming.

Priorities change and tradeoffs become a daily decision. Those at the older end of the aging continuum are typically caring for a spouse or partner; those at the younger end are mostly caring for a parent, including 45% of Boomers and a growing 42% of Gen Xers.

Caregiving now affects four generations in the US, with perhaps the most troubling statistic being that 117 million people need care, and only 47 million are available to provide it, which is the lowest ratio ever reported.

Caregivers feel that they're *called* to the role, often because there's no one else to step up. They approach their responsibility with a delicate balance of gratitude, grief, and guilt. Those who are able to use paid care assistance, despite some financial pressure, feel more control over their lives, including their jobs, relationships, and daily schedule.

Most Caregivers are aware of products and services to help them care for their loved one, yet fewer are aware of products or services that can help them manage their own lives.

The story of two types of Caregivers leaps out of the data: those caring for parents and those caring for spouses or partners. Though their attitudes are similar, their approaches to care differ. Most notably, more of the latter group use outside help. Those without the benefit of help suffer in terms of emotional and mental health, often feeling lonely and isolated with little time or energy to take care of themselves.

Revealingly, most Caregivers are aware of products and services to help them care for their loved one, yet fewer are aware of products or services that can help them manage their own lives. Being a Caregiver is often a wake-up call to pay attention to one's own well-being (which presents a meaningful opportunity for brands and organizations).

Aging Single

Heartbreak is difficult to move on from, because it disrupts your life plans and dreams. Only 42% of Aging Singles feel fulfilled. And, many feel they've lost control of their lives; consequently, their emotional and social heath suffer. Divorce rates in this country are at an all-time low, except for those over 50, where the rate has more than doubled over the past three decades. And, divorce (more so than widowhood) is the common path to this Life Shift.

This is a Life Shift not planned for; so, it's not surprising that most Aging Singles feel the sting of no longer having a life partner in a world that feels created for couples. Sometimes the partner who's no longer there earned most or all of the couple's income. And, sometimes that partner took sole financial responsibility, leaving behind unanswered questions and even debt or secrets. So, this is the group most struggling with life. Their shift might be best characterized as trying to restart life after loss.

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Navigating financial responsibilities is tough enough; dealing with health issues as an Aging Single can be traumatizing. Those going through this Life Shift describe it as a period of self-reflection and a time to reevaluate priorities. The goal for most is a sense of peace with the events that brought them to this shift.

Although some of this segment feels compelled to navigate the world of dating, others wish there weren't so much pressure on getting into a new relationship. They'd prefer to find ways to make their single life more fulfilling. And, for some, being single presents an opportunity for self-growth—to explore and enjoy newfound independence through reevaluating priorities and learning to live for themselves.

Grandparenting

If you want to see pure joy through someone else's eyes, talk to a new grandparent.

Grandparents feel they're in life's "sweet spot"; 60% happily claim that their "best years are now." Fewer grandparents than those in the other Life Shifts report feeling daily stress. Grandparents are also in the demographic sweet spot; most are married Boomers (or living with a partner), often still working, with higher-than-average incomes. Their average age of 56 will continue to rise, based on a host of demographic trends. A full quarter have a multiracial grandchild, a sign of this country's increased diversity.

And, despite the idea that grandparents feel they have license to spoil their grandkids (and spend on them they do!), they feel less financial pressure than those in the other Life Shifts. Still, nearly one-third provide financial support for their children and/or grandchildren, which is a high number relative to past generations.

But, life isn't all a bed of roses for grandparents. For one, more Gen X grandparents than Boomers and Silents help with basic expenses, which partially explains why they feel more stress in their new role. Xers are the new sandwich generation, with many caring for their aging parents while putting their own children through

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school (who often come back to nest for a spell before launching their own households).

Grandparents actively seek financial-planning information relevant to their new role, which they then share with their children. So, reaching grandparents with financial advice and products carries this convenient trickle-down benefit.

Tellingly, grandparents have more access and live closer to their daughters' children than to their sons'. And, in the midst of all their joy, some grandparents are discovering boundaries with their children (and kids-in-laws) that they didn't know existed.

But talk about a Life Shift that catapults you to do better for yourself. Becoming a grandparent often changes how you think about your own physical and financial health. Grandparents feel a renewed reason to be around and physically capable, so that they're able to help, support, and enjoy the next generation in their family.

Grandparenting, as described by one respondent, is *the cherry on top of life's sundae.*

Career Encoring

There are two divergent reasons why aging adults fall into the Career Encoring Life Shifts. And, these reasons paint distinctly different pictures.

Those who have made their own decision to enter this stage in their life enthusiastically embrace it. Those who've been "forced into retirement" struggle. Both segments worry about boredom after retirement. And, those in the latter group describe feeling aimless as they search for a meaningful life path.

Fortunately, 75% of Career Encorers fall into the former category, and they feel reinvigorated -- they're ready for a new challenge and a welcome change. They see this Life Shift as an opportunity to experience and contribute more. Their life—at least the professional side—has been rebooted. Think about how you'd feel if, after many years of pursuing a career or having a job to go to that was a big part of your identity, that important part of your life suddenly vanished. Such a sudden shift can be frightening. But those who've opted into this shift typically feel refreshed and motivated. No wonder the data show that this group of Career Encorers is highly motivated, well-rounded, and emotionally healthy.

No longer having a steady income is a paradigm shift, as people switch from saving some of their income to spending it down.

As with most older adults, the idea that life is short becomes a guiding light in choosing what to do next. And, for the 75% of this group for whom this shift was in their plans, their "encore" is more for the social and emotional benefits of working than the financial. The 25% who found themselves out of work, not surprisingly, are less positive about life. Adding color to the story is that more of this segment say they've experienced ageism in the workplace. And, even if they've planned for retirement, they might not be ready for it financially: a full third of Career Encorers feel at least some financial strain.

Regardless of whether retirement was planned or unplanned, no longer having a steady income is a paradigm shift, as people switch from saving some of their income to spending it down. That change can be scary at any income level. And, the switch from private insurance to Medicare often creates anxiety in choosing coverage and in making all sorts of health-related decisions, the number of which only grows with time.

Changing Living Situation

As with a couple of the other Life Shifts, the data reveal two disparate outlooks that tell two very different stories.

Perhaps nothing signals to you more that you're aging than your home is no longer suitable for you without some significant retrofitting. On the other hand, leaving behind bedrooms you no longer use and a yard you no longer want to deal with can be liberating. Either way, moving out of the community and home in which you raised your family can be disruptive.

Right-sizing. Empty-nesting. Downsizing. Snowbirding. Different motivations for moving correlate to different attitudes and stresses that you can speak to and help solve.

Changing Living Situation is by far the most common Life Shift; it's also often a result of another shift. So, this is the largest group and the one with the most overlap with the others.

Life Shifts, of course, don't exist in a vacuum, and this is particularly true here. More than 40% of Grandparents, a third of Caregivers and Career Encorers, and a fourth of Aging Singles are also Changing Their Living Situation. Most will own their new residence and live with someone else. And more than

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half plan to go mortgage-less, paying for their new home in full. Yet only 13% have checked out financial resources and advice to help with their move.

Sure, it may be difficult to leave behind memories. And, the idea of packing up and moving always is stressful. But, many see the light at the end of the move, looking forward to greater independence, purpose, and control.

Nearly one-third of this shift feels financial strain. Tellingly, the level of reported strain is similar among those who are planning their move or have recently completed it. This fact begs the question of whether and why the move didn't ease the financial strain as intended.

This Life Shift, as the most sizable and the one with the greatest overlap with others, is ripe with compelling opportunities for brands. This overlap creates nuanced product needs and communication requirements to reach these sub-segments.

About Hacking Life Shifts

In 2018, together with AARP and the Business of Aging, Collaborata released the foundational study, "Hacking Longevity," which was the first ever to examine how three generations of Americans are embracing increased longevity. This research revealed a number of key inflection points along the aging journey when change is particularly disruptive.

This new project, "Hacking Life Shifts," released at the end of 2019, builds upon those learnings in great depth and nuance. It focuses on on five profound Life Shifts that present challenges, opportunities, and a renewed sense of purpose for those in the throes of these transitions.

Methodologically ambitious and innovative, this work included qualitative, quantitative, and behavioral-tracking phases. This research was led by RTi Research together with subject-matter expert Lori Bitter of the Business of Aging.

As a Collaborata-powered multi-client project, "Hacking Life Shifts" benefitted by the collaboration of its 10 key sponsors, including AARP, who championed this work.

About Collaborata

Collaborata incubates large-scale, original insights projects, bringing together strategic partners to collaborate and fund the work, executed by a full-service research strategy agency paired with a subject-matter expert. Clients share the insights and the costs.

For the complete "Hacking Life Shifts" report and to learn more, contact: jimmy@collaborata.com

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