The basic conflict: Confidence vs. uncertainty

These boomers adapt to their perceptions of future risks, often investing large amounts of time, money, and even their identity into preparedness. They are confident, but still vulnerable to the nagging uncertainties of what the future will actually bring, and whether their investments in themselves will ultimately prove the best adaptations.

They learn new skills but worry if they will be the most beneficial in future situations. They wonder if their physical interventions will be sustainable or flexible enough not to compromise their health in the face of unforeseen risk. They invest in preventative health care but wonder if it will be the right kind of prevention ten years in the future.

While they don’t spend every waking hour stressing about these paradoxes, questions about whether or not they’ve done the right thing always linger in the backs of their minds.

Lifestyle: Always time for reinvention

While other boomers reinvent themselves at predictable points in their life, these boomers make it a persistent practice, manifesting again and again in different domains of their lives. They are avid re-sequencers—starting families late in life, resisting the biological effects of aging, retraining and starting second and third life pursuits. They embrace new surgeries and technologies, emerging work fields, delighting in the beauty of the urban environment, and the glories of modern life. They attempt to be as agile as possible, ready to adjust where the circumstances require, but usually make adjustments in anticipation of what may come.

Expectations: Continuous self-improvement

Boomers who reinvent the self appreciate the resources they have used for those reinventions and expect those resources to be available in the future. They rely on lifelong institutions: public libraries, universities and city colleges, certificate programs, and online or distance learning courses. The structures that have supported them in their reinventions empower them: churches and study groups, self-help organizations, families, and social networks. They navigate medical and financial institutions to obtain what they want and need. Although these boomers adopt new structures, they will support and fight for those institutions that best served them in the past.

While they rely on external institutions and resources for advice, education, vocational training, and support, these boomers remain internally focused. All of their efforts are in the interest of perfecting the self for the present and, most importantly, the future. These boomers do not maintain multiple identities but instead after their own identities to change. They do not maintain a state of personal “ thaw” and then enough time in those identities to accept and adapt to whatever the future holds for them.
Action Ecology: Reinventing the Self

The Action Ecology illustrates the complexity with which boomers anticipate, plan for, and deal with changes in their lives. The inner portion of the ecology highlights resources, sorted into four categories: people, information, institutions, and capitals. The outer ring, organized around our seven dimensions of decision making, describe practices and strategies through which boomers put their resources into action. Finally, there are the “decisions in suspension,” questions that these boomers don’t have answers to just yet.

DECISIONS IN SUSPENSION:
- What is the next health practice to try?
- When to contemplate a new vocation?
- When to invest in current community or to go international?
- Whether to go back to school?
- How to reconsider financial investments?

Extended Capacity: Changing body and mind
ADAPTING THE SELF
- Drastically changing diets
- Having preventative or cosmetic procedures
- Training for a new vocation/retraining in a current vocation

Resequencing Life Stages
- Nothing is impossible

ENACTING THE NARRATIVE
- Becoming a grandparent

AUTHORING ONE’S PATH
- Pursuing an emerging career field
- Trying unorthodox health practices
- Taking a personal retreat
- Identifying as “single” even when in a relationship

Self-Help 2.0: Optimizing life
- Anticipating the unexpected
- Re-machine the unexpected
- Mitigating risk
- Financial planning
- Pursuing career advancement
- Creating a year plan with milestones
- Using a preventative health plan
- Maintaining multiple forms of insurance

CAPITALS
- Self
- People
- Close friends
- Later life partners
- Trusted teachers

INFORMATION
- Health practitioners
- Social networks

INSTITUTIONS
- Medical providers
- Learning centers and colleges
- Self-help organizations
- Religious institutions
- Libraries

INVESTING IN THE NEW
- Participating in online communities
- Building new business models
- Packeting new learning agendas for self reinvention

New Sociability: Reinventing positive communities
- Sharing our story
- Engaging with others
- Finding new communities in religious
- Building the instrumental network
- New forms of community
- Engaging with networks of other people reinventing themselves
- Using social relationships to communicate new identities

Wealth Generation: Anticipating the unexpected
- Optimize life
- Financial planning
- Pursuing career advancement
- Creating a year plan with milestones
- Using a preventative health plan
- Maintaining multiple forms of insurance

CULTURATING PATH
- Planning our story
- Resequecing life stages
- New sociability
- Wealth generation
- Resequecing life stages
- New sociability
- Wealth generation

Global Transparency: Exploring the global
- Willing to explore medical treatment
- Looking forward to international travel for work
- Considering a move abroad

Wealth Connection: Anticipating the unexpected
- Financial planning
- Pursuing career advancement
- Creating a year plan with milestones
- Using a preventative health plan
- Maintaining multiple forms of insurance

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These boomers adapt themselves to cope with a changing world. Retraining, retooling, and recalibrating their minds and bodies are their favorite strategies. They adopt vigorous regimes of exercise, extreme diets, new surgeries, and drugs to enhance their bodies, constantly striving toward the ideal self-image. They demonstrate sensitivities to changes in their environments, but in the end, the decisions they make come back to themselves.

Rather than reacting to specific events, these boomers take their own initiative to resequence the landscapes of defining variables. They assess the shifting landscapes around them and choose a path that they find satisfying, unbridled by habit or the limits of their bodies. The timing of their self-interventions allows a reliance on self-selection and internal inspiration, not reactions to cultural narratives.

When these boomers decide what they want, they know how to get it. They care deeply about the legitimacy of products and services and seek high quality at a reasonable cost. They navigate marketplaces confidently. They are flexible and well informed and have the initiative to become fluent in new areas with remarkable speed. If they don't find what they want, they persist until satisfied.

Boomers who reinvent themselves value their relationships and put those relationships to work. They learn about many of their reinvention practices through social networks, which are also used to vet options for providers, products, services, and courses of action.

While these boomers love new things—new careers, processes, technologies, and procedures—they often pursue these through established institutions. While flexible structures of personal and professional networks play a key role in these boomers’ decisions, they do not replace the trust and legitimacy of traditional institutions—provided that these institutions continue to meet these boomers’ changing needs.

Reinvention-oriented boomers are aware of things that might threaten their satisfaction and success. They have gained confidence in their reinventions but are also vigilant against financial and health risks, the specter of aging, and the fear of irrelevance. But these fears are secondary to an enduring belief that their interventions will pay off.

The Dimensions of Decision Making

The boomers we talked to helped us discover the key dimensions of the seven big stories that emerge at the intersection of aging, cohort, and period effects. For each story, we found a pair of defining actions—two poles of behavior that turn the stories into scales. We then used these scales to define the action types, each of which represents a unique profile.
Profiles & Quotations

Each of these profiles describes a person who embodies the Reinventing the Self action type. These three personal stories best illustrate the decision-making lens of the action type but are not the only interviewees who shaped the type. The profiles represent actual people and their words, although their names and some details about their lives have been changed to protect their identities.

Cindy Emmett

Age: 47
Rural South

In 1994, after working as a mail clerk for 15 years, the explosion of the Internet inspired Cindy Emmett to go back to school for a computer science degree and start working in the tech industry. She weathered the recession of 2001 with a series of startups, but she soon realized that education was needed to gain a better education in order to stay relevant. In 2002, she took advantage of her company’s $3,000-a-year education subsidy and enrolled in an online program. The same year she became a grandmother, Cindy earned a technology-specific Master’s degree. Satisfying her educational desires made her realize a need for spirituality, and she returned to her faith, attending church regularly again as she had as a child. A year ago, she underwent gastric banding surgery to address health problems plaguing her for years, which would have prevented her from fulfilling her dreams. Cindy now lives with her boyfriend in a fashionable urban area in Colorado. Cindy relies on traditional medicine—available through her boyfriend’s health insurance—for preventative testing and regular checkups. She is only marginally satisfied with the quality of her care, believing that she knows what she wants and needs better than her doctor. The next thing on the horizon is getting a Master’s degree in Public Health, a move motivated by a desire for professional growth.

On reinvention and the future:
“I’m all about continual self improvement. I view it as just continuing what I’ve already started… And I don’t want to be at that stage in my life where I am right now and still have a clue as to where I want to be in the next 10 or 20 years. The next two years are going to be more exploring, and then the latter ten years will be more concrete, processes of anything that can make my life better. I’m not going to jump off a cliff but I’m trying to understand and become more… so I can land softly.”

On managing health:
“I knew I had to do something about my weight and my health because I’ve got a lot of plans. I can’t have these future plans if my health isn’t very good. Now I work out just about every day at the y and stay as active as I can and plan on continuing that. I follow all of the instructions from my surgeon — I don’t hesitate to go to the doctor, although I don’t want to necessarily take a lot of things.”

On work as the key to mobility:
“I don’t think about staying here. I own myself and want to move. My company has offices here and I was up here in Cambridge. And there’s work in New York, the actual company offices around the world…. so there are endless possibilities. I don’t even envision not working. Retirement, no, not gonna happen. And research says there’s gonna be a huge shortage of people with the skills and ability to do a premium.”

Trudy Klein

Age: 59
Urban Rocky Mountains

Trudy Klein worked as a high-powered corporate sales representative before becoming dissatisfied with her work environment and the high-stress lifestyle her job demanded. She tried a few different things before a friend introduced her to a networked-marketing business that sells personal care products. Now she balances her self-directed work at that business with part-time work at a local computer store, where she feels connected to young people and new trends. She has reinvented her body several times through exercise regimes and health products. She now lives with her boyfriend in a fashionable urban area in Colorado. Trudy relies on traditional medicine—available through her boyfriend’s health insurance—for preventative testing and regular checkups. She is only marginally satisfied with the quality of her care, believing that she knows what she wants and needs better than her doctor. The next thing on the horizon is getting a Master’s degree in Public Health, a move motivated by a desire for professional growth.

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On being passionate about wellness:

“When I was growing up, I was a little fat girl. When I was really young, my life was all about deprivation. So I started swimming for fitness and changed my whole body, changed my whole life. And that’s how, even probably why, I’m so passionate about wellness. It’s because I went through that … I focus on wellness and I help people who want to create a healthier lifestyle and who also want to create financial health.”

On preparing for the future:

“I’m moving forward. I’m not at the point where I have enough residual income that I could just walk away and do nothing. But I personally believe that through my network-marketing business, through my investments and managing them properly—and being aware and being cautious—I should be okay.”

On directing one’s health care:

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On writing your own narrative:

“With the advanced course, the concept is that you’re designing your life. Then you explore how to take what you’re creating and designing and create leadership within your communities … A major thing I’ve learned was that most everything we have in our medical is a story that we’ve made up and that I can make up happy stories as opposed to sad stories. Because who knows? I mean it’s just a story!”

After leaving a career as a corporate communications manager, Liz Gallagher pursued a Ph.D. in Education. Combining a rediscovered passion of youth with her new professional perspective in education, she plans to leverage her renovation toward reviving music education in public schools. While making educational and professional improvements, she also made adjustments in another domain of her life. From a junk-food lover attempting to control her weight with a diet of hard candies and popcorn, to a health-conscious cook creating whole meals with fresh ingredients, Liz completely overhauled her diet, leaving years of poor nutrition and a chubby body behind her.

Invigorated by her healthier new body, and inspired by her sister and neighbor’s experiences, she started a course of anti-aging hormone treatments that her new doctor tells her will make her feel young again. Although she has always identified as a single person, she and her boyfriend of eight years are considering the possibility of moving in together.

On overcoming nagging uncertainties:

“I knew I needed something new … I wanted to do it, but I had a lot of fears. And then when I did go back to work, it was part-time, and I was scared to death. How [was] I going to continue this pace of school and work too? And it worked out just fine because I was doing a different program and it wasn’t the same stress level that my previous job was.”

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On connecting with the anti-aging movement:

“Word of mouth. Then all my friends have been suffering, you want rehabilitation. The minute you start telling them about your energy and how good you feel, and then you throw in how great your sex life is, they’re like all ears—because that’s gone. It’s ‘going, going, gone’ if you don’t do something about it.”

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Liz Gallagher
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Decisions in Context

At a glance

Self-reinventing boomers are prepared to make drastic decisions when it comes to anticipating the future. They are willing to listen to professional advice, but will only act if they feel it's in their best interest to do so. They are committed to balancing beauty with flexibility and readiness with spontaneity.

**Work:**

Worth a premium

Far from planning their retirement, these boomers are looking to the next satisfying vocational endeavor. As their peers retire en masse, self-reinventing boomers who have already engaged in several lines of work are ready to find new value and meaning from work, combining their past experience with learning and education. They carefully plan their working-life reinventions, anticipating society's future needs while fulfilling a personal passion. Working is something they enjoy because it is a venue for expanding knowledge and skills. While their emphasis on bodily reinvention has its own value, it is in part a prerequisite and an integral part of their long-term career ambitions.

**Housing:**

Here today, gone tomorrow

Even when comfortable in their current homes and neighborhoods, this group of boomers sees many possibilities for moving on. Some consider international travel or even expatriation in order to expand their educational and professional horizons. For others, mobility lies on more modest scales—moving to an urban condo with a partner, or relocating to a major urban center. Housing can sometimes be the focus of reinvention, but it is always lower on the list of priorities than interventions into their bodies and skills.

**Food:**

A new body, a new joy

These boomers have experienced dramatically different relationships with food over the course of their lives. Although not necessarily a given with boomers of this action type, weight loss factors dramatically in the lives of most of these boomers, accompanied by the revelation of a love of good food. The joys of simple cooking, rich flavors, and the rituals of eating are stabilizing and very intense for them. They give a lot of thought to the components of food and how it affects their bodies, their health, and their overall energy and productivity. They focus on small quantities, freshness, and quality, which translate into daily shopping trips that punctuate their routines.

**Finances:**

Financing continual self-improvement

Reinvestment-focused boomers have invested quite a lot of capital into their bodies, their educations, and often their health. It’s a gamble: They hope and believe that these investments will help them secure enjoyable lifestyles over the coming decades. They have financed their self-improvement efforts through savings from their former careers in stressful fields, and sometimes through the support of parents and partners. Their experiences have given them confidence in their own resources, and they rely on traditional medical assistance. However, they are always wary of uncertainty and take an active role in managing the assets they have.

**Health:**

Exceeding expectations

Both in reality and identity, these boomers are healthier than they—and the medical institutions that serve them—ever expected. After observing their siblings’ and peers’ ill health, and struggling with health issues and risks of their own, they have taken drugs, used devices, undergone surgery, and combined their knowledge and optimism with a desire for as long a life as possible. They are committed to understanding the risks they face and will push for any preventive intervention they believe will enhance their long life that will allow them to realize their ambitions. They value their longevity and pursue interventions that enhance its legitimacy, even if they pursue alternative and non-traditional pathways and sensible to them. They will, however, argue and fight for what they want, seeing several opinions, appealing out of pocket, even going overseas as medical tourists if they feel it is to their advantage.