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"We've got things going on in our labs that are mind-blowing."  
—TIM COOK

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SPECIAL REPORT  
2021

## Tim Cook Pivots to Fitness

WHY APPLE'S CEO WANTS TO MAKE HEALTH AND WELLNESS THE COMPANY'S GREATEST LEGACY **BY MICHAEL ROBERTS**

**MOMENTS AFTER** a red-tailed hawk lands on an oak tree outside the Steve Jobs Theater, Tim Cook walks up with a smile. It's a warm fall morning, and the raptor is just one of many birds in the sprawling landscape of restored native habitat that surrounds the massive ring-shaped second headquarters Apple opened in Cupertino in 2017. Having an office here, Cook tells me, "is like working in a national park." He ticks off a couple of well-known stats: more than 80 percent of the 175-acre campus is greenspace; there are more than 7,000 trees. The design, says Cook, "brings the outside in and the inside out."

Before the pandemic caused most of Apple Park's 12,000 employees to work remotely, many of them held meetings in the building's fruit-tree-filled central courtyard. "You would see people riding bikes from one meeting to another," says Cook, who, along with roughly 15 percent of his workforce, still regularly goes into the office. "You would see people running. It's a two-and-a-half-mile track around the place, so put in a couple of laps and you've got a good workout for the day." Restrooms and coffee bars are spaced apart, he adds, encouraging employees to walk more.

Apple Park may have been Steve Jobs's utopian vision, but it was built for Tim Cook's lifestyle. This is not a man with a closet full of black turtlenecks. The 60-year-old Apple CEO is both a nature nerd and a fitness obsessive. Standing before me in a snug-fitting navy polo shirt, skinny gray jeans, and white Nikes, he appears to be among that breed of tech titans who start their mornings with kettlebells and protein smoothies. He wants to talk about his love of *actual* national parks (he visits several a year), his need for exercise ("it's the thing that keeps stress at bay"), and Apple's company-wide health and wellness challenges (this month: mindfulness).

"We all know intuitively, and now with research, that physical activity is a key part of longevity and quality of life," Cook says. His own training time is sacrosanct, the one portion of his day when he's unreachable. "I'm off-grid for that period," he says. "And I am religious about doing that regardless of what's going on at the time."

No surprise that he pays close attention to the fitness data captured by his Apple Watch. "I want to know what I'm doing, not what I think I'm doing," he says. "Because I can always convince myself that I'm doing more than I really am. So for me, it's a motivator."

A few weeks before we spoke, Apple introduced the Watch Series 6 with the slogan

"The future of health is on your wrist." Now, as we walk along a pathway winding between shrubs and dry grasses, Cook makes the case that the Watch has ushered in a new era of fitness tracking, and not just for dedicated athletes. He cites letters he's received from users of the device claiming that it literally saved their lives by detecting early signs of heart problems. Then there's the fact that tens of millions of people now wear a device that monitors key health metrics and allows them to anonymously share data with researchers, which many do. (Some 400,000 Watch users participated in one Stanford study.) This enables scientists, says Cook, to "democratize research by having much larger constituencies that are able to participate."

"I really believe," he adds, "that if you zoom out to the future and then look back and ask, 'What has Apple's greatest contribution been?' it will be in the health and wellness area."

COOK HAS SAID this before, almost word for word. The first time was in January of 2019, in an interview with CNBC's Jim Cramer. It has since become a mantra that he repeats to journalists and investors. But repetition hasn't made it sound any less radical. The company that revolutionized personal computing with the Macintosh, that upended the music industry with the iPod, and that laid the foundation for the modern smartphone with the iPhone, will go down in history as... Nike?

Maybe. Apple is the world's most valuable company, with a market cap over \$2 trillion, and it has the resources to make very big things happen. Before launching the Watch in 2015, Cook and his team created an elaborate fitness lab on their original campus, complete with temperature-controlled rooms, all manner of exercise machines, and sensors to track the metabolic responses of athletes to exercise. They went on a hiring spree, bringing on Jay Blahnik—a fitness-industry veteran who helped create the Nike+ FuelBand—along with dozens of physiologists, exercise scientists, and medical professionals. In 2017, they tapped Dr. Sumbul Desai, the executive director of Stanford Medicine's Center for Digital Health, to be Apple's vice president of health. The company has also acquired a number of wellness startups and collaborated with major research institutions on a range of projects, including a study with the University of Washington, announced in September, to see if the Watch can catch early signs of COVID-19.

Since its debut, the Watch has been positioned as a tool for improving your health. And while the first edition didn't wow reviewers looking for a breakthrough fitness device, it was a hit with consumers: early sales were stronger than the first iPhone and iPad. After making smartwatches mainstream, Apple has maintained its dominance of the growing sector. According to the Pew Research Center, about one in five Americans currently use a smartwatch or fitness tracker. In the first quarter of 2020, the Watch accounted for roughly 50 percent of the global smartwatch market. (The closest competitors, Garmin and Samsung, are both below 15 percent.)

There's good reason to expect Apple to hold on to its market share, in part because the Watch keeps getting new features that make it more appealing to users who aren't already Apple obsessives. With the Series 2, that included built-in GPS and water resistance. Then came an altimeter, an electrocardiogram (ECG) app, a compass, and fall detection. Meanwhile, third-party developers created a bevy of sport-specific apps for hikers, cyclists, and surfers.

When the Watch Series 6 launched in September, the headline news was the addition of a blood-oxygen sensor. But the more intriguing story for those charting the trajectory of Apple's health investment was the announcement of Fitness+, a subscription-based content ecosystem that delivers guided studio workouts to your iPhone, iPad, or Apple TV screen while integrating real-time data from your Watch. Already leading the wearables race, Apple was doubling down and claiming the mantle of digital home fitness just as the market was booming in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

None of this guarantees that Apple's greatest legacy will be as a health and wellness innovator. But in the post-Jobs era, the company is clearly positioning itself that way.

AS COOK AND I make our way into the Apple Park courtyard, he explains how, in 2018, Apple found itself developing sensors and software for the Watch that could detect atrial fibrillation, or A-fib—an irregular heartbeat that can be deadly if not properly managed. This was not something the design team had planned to do. Like many of the Watch's features, it came about after learning how the device was being used.

"When we first came out with the Watch, I started getting notes from people saying, 'I found out I have a major problem with my

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**Clockwise from top left:** Watch Series 6; Apple's Fitness+; the ECG (left) and Wikiloc apps; last fall's "It Already Does That" ad; inside Apple Park

heart. And I wouldn't have known to go to the doctor had it not been for the Watch," Cook says. "At first these were trickling in. And then it was like a faucet. You realize that there's something here. That led to A-fib. It led to ECG. It led to notifications if your heart rate gets too low or too high."

For Cook, these services allow Watch users "to own their health in a way they haven't been able to in the past." That's certainly true, though some medical professionals will point out that this can lead to a lot of stressed-out people racing to the doctor unnecessarily. A study by the Mayo Clinic published in September found that only 11.4 percent of people who went to the hospital after their Apple Watch detected an irregular pulse ended up with a "clinically actionable" medical diagnosis. The problem isn't primarily with the Watch; it's that nonstop self-monitoring will inevitably turn up signs that something might be wrong. Your doctor knows how to interpret these signs within the context of your overall health, but you probably don't.

Not that this will slow Apple's push to add more tech. The clever Watch Series 6 commercial that ran in the fall had a narrator boldly predicting far-out capabilities of an imagined device, only to be told repeatedly by a diverse cast of adventurous users—surfers, cyclists, astronauts—that the Watch "already does that." I asked Cook if this suggests that

Apple is shifting its focus toward how to interpret health metrics versus developing new hardware to collect ever greater quantities of it. His short answer: No.

"Never discount the amount of innovation that can be in the future," he says. "We've got things going on in our labs that are mind-blowing. To use a baseball analogy, we are in the early innings."

OK, sure. But the thing is, Apple's breakthroughs are usually about design, not new technologies. The triumph of the first Watch was offering an alluring, intuitive way to chase fitness goals: a series of three concentric activity rings representing daily exercise, movement, and time standing. It's a far more compelling motivator than reaching a single number, like steps taken or calories burned. Now Apple expects to repeat that formula with Fitness+. When *Outside* columnist Alex Hutchinson asked Blahnik what made Fitness+ revolutionary, Blahnik spoke about the menu design and the search functions for the library of studio workouts.

Yet there's an X factor at play with Fitness+ that no amount of elegant packaging could ever hope to address: the athletic trainers leading the sessions. When the platform launched in December, that squad included cycling instructors, running coaches, and yoga teachers. This is a new kind of relationship with Watch users, one that hinges on the

**Cook makes the case that the Apple Watch has ushered in a new era of fitness tracking, and not just for dedicated athletes. It enables scientists to "democratize research."**

trainers' personalities. Peloton quickly mastered this dynamic, amassing a cultish legion of at-home exercisers even before COVID-19 had everybody rethinking their gym membership. But Peloton is a core fitness brand that knows how its audience likes to sweat. This kind of intimate connection with users, I suggest to Cook, is new territory for Apple. He doesn't see it that way, insisting that Apple has been developing a similar relationship with customers for years through its stores.

"In a way, we've been in this business of coaching. It's just that we've been coaching about something else," he says. "If you go into a retail store, the thing you're most likely to be looking for is help—to create something,

to learn something. Fitness+ is taking that personal touch into the wellness space.”

A major benefit of the platform, he suggests, is helping Watch users explore workouts they never would have pursued on their own. “Hopefully, we’ll get people out of their genre and looking at alternate things because they can do it so simply,” he says. “Maybe they go back, or maybe they expand their universe a bit.”

THAT SOUNDS promising enough, but there is a strong argument to be made that the greatest impact Apple can have on our overall wellness is by helping us take more breaks from our screens. When you spend your workday

So what is Apple doing to help us put down our devices so we can experience some of that stress relief? And what about all those people pulling out their iPhones on sketchy cliffs in national parks to get a winning selfie? Shouldn’t Apple be addressing that?

“My advice to everyone who goes to a national park is to leave your selfie stick behind and just soak in the beauty of the park itself, because that will stay with you a lot longer,” Cook says. “But it’s a difficult issue. As a platform owner, we have a responsibility for how a product is used, and not just to throw something out there and see what the implications of it are. But everybody doesn’t have that frame of mind, unfortunately.”

spend looking at a specific app or website, and to help them set limits for themselves. “For me personally, it was my estimates versus the reality that were very different,” he says.

Does he remember the numbers?

“They were high,” he offers with a laugh. “So I started asking myself, Why do I need all these notifications? Do I really need to understand things in the moment that they’re happening? And I started taking a meat ax to some of the things that would grab my attention but didn’t need to.”

Screen Time is something, I suppose. But it hardly feels like a robust commitment to the problem. Simply informing us of our usage level and encouraging us to self-regulate sets us up to feel bad without helping us do better. It’s like giving someone who’s trying to be more active a step counter but no help setting target goals. Where’s the motivating activity ring for stepping away?

Near the end of our conversation, we sat at a picnic table in the Apple Park courtyard. Cook had admitted that Apple didn’t have all the answers when it came to helping users unplug more often, and he assured me that there was “more to do.” But I wanted to circle back to the topic and offer up a proposal. What if Apple made teaching customers to use its devices more wisely its number one priority? Wouldn’t that be the ultimate mission for a company that has long asked us to Think Different?

“We take the challenge to continue innovating in that space just as seriously as we take the challenge to keep innovating in each of the product categories we’re in,” he responded. “My simple rule is, if you’re looking at your device more than you’re looking in somebody’s eyes, you’re doing the wrong thing. I recognize that there are many people who are doing that. And some number of those are unhappy that they’re doing it, and some number are not. And where we’ve placed our energy thus far is on making people aware, not playing the heavy hand to tell them what’s good for them.”

It wasn’t the answer I was hoping for. At this stage of the game, we’re not getting much benefit from simple awareness. We need vigorous tools to help us pull away from our devices—Screen Time with teeth. Or maybe the solution is more of a gentle nudge. The Watch, after all, comes preset to remind users to stand up and move for at least a minute of every waking hour. In two months of wearing one, I’ve started shrugging off at least half those reminders with an eye roll. But other times I do stand up and pace my home office or even step outside into the sun. It’s enough to make me believe that technology really can make us healthier, if only those who make it would fully embrace the moment. **1**

*Executive editor Michael Roberts hosts the Outside Podcast.*



An employee exercising at Apple Park

in front of a computer and your downtime doomscrolling news sites or double-tapping Instagram photos, a cardio routine on an iPad is perhaps not the greatest choice.

Apple knows this. The company goes to extraordinary lengths to demonstrate its appreciation for natural environments. As Cook proudly told me, its leafy headquarters and preponderance of inviting outdoor space was an idea “unheard of in Silicon Valley,” where the norm has been monolithic buildings that aim to keep employees cloistered inside. “We all operate on inspiration and motivation,” Cook said early in our conversation, and nothing provides him more of both than the natural world. “When I’m in nature, I feel so small in the scheme of things that the issues of the day become fractions.”

It sure feels like Cook is pointing the finger at other tech companies, but I can see why. He doesn’t run a social media property that feeds on our incessant clicking and liking, or an advertising colossus that wants to mine our user data. He’s emphatic that Apple has no interest in owning our attention. Apple’s business is selling us hardware, along with the software and services that go with it.

“We’ve never designed our products to dominate people’s lives,” he insists. “That’s never been our purpose. We’ve never been into ‘How long is somebody spending on our property? Let’s try to figure out a way to make that as high as possible.’”

Cook points to the Screen Time feature on iPhones and iPads, introduced in 2018 as a tool to make people aware of how long they