

**THE WORK
OF CARING:**

AN INTERVIEW
WITH WORKFORCE
EXPERTS

**NO TURNING
BACK:**

HOW TECH HAS,
& WILL, IMPACT
SENIOR LIVING

WHAT MAKES

AN EFFECTIVE
EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR?

**STATE
SUPPORT**

FOR AGING ISSUES

PROGRESS & POSSIBILITIES

CALA
News & Views

NO *TURNING* *BACK:*

How Tech Has, and Will, Impact Senior Living

By Katie Cappello

Technology in the senior living space is not new. Before the pandemic, communities regularly had technology assisting in the daily operations of various departments. But as the world closed their doors, they stepped in front of screens, and technology became more than just helpful...it became necessary.



While it looked at just one region of the state, a 2020 study titled “Social Isolation and Loneliness Among San Francisco Bay Area Older Adults During the COVID-19 Shelter-in-Place Orders¹” captured a snapshot of how older adults felt about the dependence on technology during the pandemic. In open-ended responses, participants identified both the challenges (“I do not have a working tablet to get on the Internet from my apartment.” “I really wish I could use the computer...It’s time I learn a little technology.” “Computer and I have been fight[ing] since the day I got it.”) and the positives (“I am communicating more than ever, I have a new friend.” “Zoom opportunities have substituted for some religious and exercise programs that I previously would attend in person.” “I have help from my granddaughter or others if I have a technology issue.”). Overall, the study found that proper access to and support for technology led to better outcomes and lessened feelings of loneliness and isolation.

It’s a result that **Kate DeCamp, CEO of RSN Technologies**, noted as well. “Residents faced a level of isolation never faced before. The rapid adoption and use of technology like Zoom, FaceTime, and other virtual call software made a tremendous difference in keeping the residents connected with their loved ones during times when the communities were under quarantine.”

Liz Hamburg, President & CEO of Candoo Tech, concurs, adding that the pandemic acted as a tipping point for technology adoption among older adults. “Frustrations still exist, but older adults are realizing that they have to make the leap. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have seen that people are feeling more confident and realizing how much they can do. There’s no turning back.”

She says increased technology use can benefit older adults in three critical areas: safety and health, staying connected, and engaging in activities. But the key is to have the support available to teach people how to use their devices and be there to help when needed. For instance, she says “Telemedicine has gone up 300 percent, and while more older adults are liking telemedicine—they don’t have to bundle up and sit in a waiting room—it’s not just a one-click process, so there’s frustration.” Lessons on how to download physicians’ apps, log in for appointments, and research medical conditions can all be important parts of the process.

And what’s more, that support should be geared specifically toward older adults. “You may think at first to simply ask your residence’s IT professional or a volunteer. But we really believe that it’s important to keep the needs of older adults in mind. When providing tech support to an older adult, consider impairments— hearing, vision, etc.—then make sure the tech is accessible to them. In addition, we avoid jargon, instead using simplified terms that everyone can relate to.”

“Everything is moving into a digital age,” she says. “Instead of a menu under the door, the menu is on your phone or tablet. Everything from the calendar and weather on your device to smart lights and sensors in rooms...there’s no turning back.” By recognizing this forward trajectory, providers can make sure that they are prepared to provide proper technology support to residents, whether it is on-site or outsourced.

DeCamp notes that there might even be an opportunity for resident-to-resident support. “We’ve found that the formation of resident technology committees is a very effective approach;

it gives your resident techies something fun to do, a way for residents to help each other, and creates a sense of ownership of the technology.” She suggests looking for ways to integrate tech into daily life at the community as well. “Invite guest speakers to discuss the latest technologies coming to the community, or cybersecurity tactics to keep safe. Ask your IT department or technology concierge service (we’re seeing them growing in popularity and filling the gap at the community level) if they will contribute to the monthly newsletter or conduct some live or virtual Q&A sessions. Keeping residents engaged through technology-based activities will certainly help them understand and embrace current and new technology.”

But wherever support comes from—a technology vendor, a concierge service—make sure, DeCamp says, that chosen vendors “understand and are aligned with the senior living field.” She points out some key questions to ask during the contracting process to make sure that the integration of new technology will go smoothly, regardless of the size of your community:

- **IS** your chosen vendor in it for the long haul?
- **WHAT** is the level of responsibility expected of you when entering a contract with a vendor?
- **IS** the community expected to provide the customer service on behalf of the vendor, or is there ample vendor support available?
- **DO** you and they have a strategy for staff and resident buy-in?

This last question is particularly important to ensure that staff members receive adequate support— as well, since their daily processes will be impacted as well. DeCamp explains, “We’ve all had experiences where a new technology has made our life or job life harder, so any new initiative can be met with distrust by staff. Your vendors should understand that the real work begins after they’ve made the sale. A targeted approach to staff training—including in-person sessions to establish a relationship and trust—is a must.”

DeCamp points out that the final piece of the puzzle is to make sure that a community’s IT infrastructure can support the new technology. As traditional services like cable TV are replaced with streaming services and smart home devices like sensors tracking bio signs and providing safety alerts become more commonplace, “having a solid infrastructure in place—including an updated and managed network, a robust Wi-Fi system, IT security solutions, and a scalable TV/internet/phone provider—is the foundation that all other technology builds upon.”

But regardless of what the future of senior living and tech looks like, DeCamp agrees with Hamburg that the necessary response to COVID was a huge leap forward. “None of us were ready for the challenges we faced,” she says, “but what we learned will help to drive more advanced technology integration in the future.” ■

¹ Kotwal, Ashwin, Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Rebecca Newmark, Irena Cenzer, Alexander Smith, Kenneth Covinsky, Danielle Escueta, Jina Lee, and Carla Perissinotto. “Social Isolation and Loneliness Among San Francisco Bay Area Older Adults During the COVID-19 Shelter-in-Place Orders.” *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* 69:1 (October 9, 2020) 20-29.