Can Long-Term Care Providers Use Technology to Stay Ahead of Competition?

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By Keren Etkin, MA
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Long-term care for older adults is, and always has been, a people business. However, in recent years, as technology has become so prevalent in every part of our lives, it has become apparent that these older Americans, and those who provide services for them, can’t be left behind. The long-term care industry, like many other traditional industries, has gone through a major digital transformation in recent years (Markendahl & Laya, 2014). Operations that used to be run with pen and paper are now in the cloud, entered on computers with dedicated software. Staff can be seen carrying tablets around senior living facilities, sensors adorn facility walls, and in home care, electronic visit verification and scheduling software help streamline communication and operations.

The agetech revolution, featuring startups and companies that create technology specifically aimed at older adults, is underway (Etkin, 2020). Can long-term care providers use it to gain competitive advantage? And what sort of products is agetech driving?
An Agetech Boom

Agetech is also called gerontech, silvertech, or elder-tech. Gerontechnology itself is an inter- and multidisciplinary academic and professional field combining gerontology and technology (Wikipedia, n.d.). In layman's terms, agetech is technology that was specifically designed to meet the needs and aspirations of older adults, and by extension those of their family caregivers and long-term care providers. Ideally, tech that is to be used by these stakeholders should also include them in the design process, and indeed, that has become common practice more often than not.

Although older adults can be grouped by age, they are a diverse population that can also be stratified by functional ability, socio-economic status, and other factors (Guido, Pichierri, & Pino, 2018). It should come as no surprise then, that agetech comprises several tech verticals (Task Force, 2019) including digital health products, devices for activities of daily living (ADL) independence, products for those with sensory or other functional impairments, and technology to maintain social connections. Finally, there is an entire category of technology that's specifically designed for long-term care providers, such as senior living (where different areas may require different technology) and home care.

Current Technology

In addition to off-the-shelf products that are available to anyone, like customer relationship management (CRM) software and smart speakers (such as Amazon’s Alexa), long-term care providers have at their disposal unique hardware and software solutions that were designed to meet their needs. Resident engagement solutions have been specifically designed for senior living, and to cater to the needs of not only older adults, but also staff. One such example is iN2L’s It’s Never Too Late, a tool that connects care staff, family, and support staff in one place (iN2L, n.d.). As a staff member at one facility remarked: “Family members love when we show them how we use iN2L to create a personalized profile for their loved one. When they see how we get to know our residents and make sure we’re focusing on their passions and interests, they can feel good about having their loved one move in. Plus, we show them how we use iN2L for video calls, nighttime tuck-ins — whatever they need to put their mind at ease.”

Scheduling software is specifically designed to meet the changing needs of home care providers and streamline operations. ClearCare is a platform that handles everything from training certified nurse assistants (CNA)s with state-specific compliance protocols to managing the entire billing operation. Aimed at home care agencies, it contains videos that explain to potential customers of the care provider why, by using the tools available in ClearCare, their business will offer the best care experience, and even provides customizable, monthly articles. It will also track referrals and automatically send out emails (ClearCare, n.d.).

Monitoring solutions like CarePredict allow care providers to know whether clients are moving, eating, or sleeping, and they can also help with contact tracing using special locating beacons that are available for senior living facilities.

Autonomous car company Voyage is testing a beta model of its G3 robotaxi in senior living communities, where the driverless cars will enable residents to hop in for a visit to the doctor or other errand without needing to find a driver. A commercial Chrysler Pacifica hybrid vehicle provides the mechanical platform, which is paired up with artificial intelligence “brains” and camera “eyes” (Cameron, 2020). The robotaxi is slated to go into production this year.
It is obvious that there is much to be gained from using technology not only for day-to-day operations, but also resident/client engagement and safety, including families in the care circle, and so much more. Is it possible to use technology to gain a competitive advantage in long-term care? I sat down to a Zoom conversation with two leaders in the space to hear their take on things.

The Interview

Ian Bongaardt co-owns multiple Comfort Keepers territories with offices around the Philadelphia area. He learned about caregiving by helping with the care of his grandparents and by working alongside his parents at Comfort Keepers. Bongaardt has a BA in Economics and a background in financial services at Vanguard, New York Life, and PNC Bank.

Michael Skaff is chief operating officer for Jewish Senior Living Group in the San Francisco Bay Area, which provides on-site and off-site enhanced living opportunities for residents at its nine-acre campus. Skaff brings more than twenty-four years of experience in enterprise technology, including technical architecture and global strategy. In addition, he is a published author and speaker at industry events.

MAKE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

According to Bongaardt, using tech to become more competitive is definitely possible. “Streamlining your operations, making yourself more efficient, but also being able to maybe lower the price point of the care” is a good strategy, Bongaardt says. “If you can, use technology in the home, rather than a caregiver, to meet the needs of the family. If you have someone with dementia who may be wandering off at night, rather than having to put somebody in the home overnight you can use a technology solution to monitor whether they are leaving the apartment at night.”

For senior living facilities, things are a bit more complicated. Skaff notes that senior living, as an industry, is so broad and deep that different technologies are applicable more, less, or not at all in some cases based on the specific part of senior living you’re talking about. So something that might be a competitive advantage in independent living, for example, may not even be applicable in skilled nursing.

An example of technology that is very applicable in certain parts of senior living is fall detection technology. Whether it’s wearables or safety equipment, fall reduction technologies are moving so fast, says Skaff, and there’s such a diverse set of approaches to fall reduction technologies in independent living, assisted living, and memory care, that it can absolutely be a competitive advantage to apply some of these technologies early on. Although individual residents may arrive with their own Apple Watch (with anti-fall tech), it’s usually the facility that pays for, and owns, a technology system that covers all, or most, residents.

MOVE EARLY TO TECH

Bongaardt concurs that if competitive advantage is a priority for a care business, it has to be an early mover and adopt new technology solutions before they become common practice and everyone else has them. “A few years ago, when we started using ClearCare and their family room (the part in ClearCare’s platform that families can log into and view care logs, calendar, pay the bill, and more), that was very innovative,” says Bongaardt. “That was a differentiator at times. The same thing with the GrandPad, when that was first rolled out, that was a differentiator at the time.”

Skaff says that not only do you have to be an early mover, but you also need to constantly be on the lookout for innovation, and keep your finger on the pulse.
when it comes to new technology that’s available in your industry. “Even the very act of partnering with some of these technology companies to demonstrate that you are open to innovation may actually be a competitive advantage,” says Skaff. “A recent example of a fruitful collaboration is our work with CABHI and Baycrest in Canada on a shared applied research project around the use of intuition robotics in reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation in older adults,” Skaff says. “Partnerships like these help advance the state of the art for the industry as a whole, our residents seem to enjoy participating in the research, and our staff sees which innovations may be used to help improve the quality of life of the myriad constituents we serve.”

COVID SPEEDS UP TECH ADOPTION
COVID19 has accelerated tech adoption in many areas of our lives, and long-term care is no exception. Remote work, telehealth, virtual visits, and virtual tours have become the new norm.

“We are doing virtual tours right now,” Skaff tells me. “We’re actually walking around with a camera. We are really differentiating ourselves because we can walk up and show people their actual unit that they are reserving, and give people a visual of where their couch is going to go, and where their table will be. In this isolated time, they get a walkthrough of their future home, which is absolutely a differentiator. This is a means of getting people excited about their future home in a very real, tangible way right now.”

Before COVID, in-person home visits were preferred by both staff and clients considering home care. These days, it is safer for older adults to minimize unnecessary social interaction. For Bongaardt, Zoom visits and interviews have become part of the way he operates his business, and virtual training for caregivers supplements hands-on training. “We use Zoom for interviews or for virtual visits. We rolled out CareAcademy for caregiver training to supplement anything face to face that we were unable to do,” he says.

How do seniors feel about the virtual visits? “They appreciate it, especially now during these circumstances, some of them don’t want us in the home,” Bongaardt notes. “They want to minimize how many people are coming in and out. Having that additional touchpoint and still being able to be involved with them, still meeting the client’s needs is important. It’s worked well.” Bongaardt believes that although virtual visits are more time efficient, in the long run, they won’t be replacing in-person visits. “You’re not spending time traveling from person to person, so they can be effective,” he says. “I don’t think they will ever replace in-home visits, but they’re certainly a great substitute or a great addition.”

HOW CAN PROVIDERS GO ABOUT FINDING THE RIGHT TECHNOLOGY TO IMPLEMENT IN THEIR BUSINESS?
According to Skaff, to get the most out of technology, you don’t want to focus on the technology first. “You always have to ask why you’re doing this,” he says. “What are you trying to achieve?”

Involving different stakeholders in the design process is important. Especially when these stakeholders are front-line staff members who are working closely with residents, Skaff says. “It should always be done with the people who are delivering care involved from the very beginning, because they’re the people who are taking care of people, hands on, and they will be able to tell you what will work and what will not,” Skaff tells me. “Engage early and actively with your end-point caregivers. Learn from concierge services, learn from hospitality services. Really remember to ask yourself why and remember that technology can and will be a strategic tool for you. It’s better to embrace this now and move forward as quickly as possible.”

Another word of advice from Skaff is to focus on partnerships. “Partnerships, partnerships, partnerships. It was always important. It is even more important in this fragmented world that we are living in now. It will drive progress in meaningful ways. Let people specialize in what they do. We should specialize in what we do, and we can all advance the state of the art by working together,” Skaff says.

Bongaardt makes sure he stays well informed, and uses different methods for sourcing new technologies to implement in his business. “The best way I’ve found (to find new technology) is to read,” he says. “Read different articles, check the CSA Journal, Home Health Care News, McKnight’s. We’re fortunate enough that our franchise does a lot of that (perusing sources for innovative tech options), too.” According to Bongaardt, staying in touch with colleagues and attending events is also important. “I’ve attended a number of health-care networking events in the Philadelphia area where I’ve met different providers doing different things or coming up with alternative solutions,” he says. “I’ve also met a couple of vendors at these networking events that are maybe still in pilot. When it’s up to the level for us, we can possibly implement it.”

WHAT’S NEXT FOR AGTECH IN LONG-TERM CARE?
America is graying. Data from the U.S. census leads scientists to predict that by 2035 there will be more
older adults than children under the age of eighteen (Vespa, 2018). This gigantic market offers long-term care providers an opportunity. I asked Bongaardt and Skaff where they see the long-term care industry, when it comes to technology, going in the next few years.

Skaff believes that there’s a lot of opportunity. “In five or ten years, I hope that large technology companies and small technology companies will consolidate their approaches,” he says. “So you get a benefit of the end-point sensors with the platforms that have the analytics and the modeling of what these large amounts of data mean to people’s health, to people’s lives, so that we actually get meaningful benefit from the potential that is absolutely there. From improving people’s safety, to optimizing people’s health and wellness, meaningful impact is absolutely a possibility as the quality of the measurements improve, which they will, for everything from cardiac measurements to fall prevention, to management of nutrition, wellness and health, fitness, and sleep quality. While many of these things began their evolution in isolation, we are starting to see the companies put them together in interesting ways.”

Skaff emphasizes the importance of usability and consolidation, and predicts that it will continue to improve with time. He says that basic components like “battery life have not progressed enough for people to have a useful sensor on them for an extended period of time, but passive technologies that you don’t have to remember to plug back in and recharge are also progressing,” which makes him optimistic. “When those are good enough in combination with the rest of the sensors, we stand a chance of having an ecosystem of sensors that actually does enhance our life… I know it’s possible and we’re right on the cusp of it getting there,” Skaff says. “It’s a very exciting time for all of this to be moving forward.”

Bongaardt speaks of technology as an enabler for home care to finally be recognized as an important pillar in the health-care system. “I think it could take us to new heights,” he says. “I think it could take us to being a mainstream member of the health-care infrastructure and community, rather than being a supplement or kind of like the redheaded stepchild of health care. It can be an integral part of the healthcare continuum, and be looked upon as a resource for care that’s much more cost effective.”

As the ecosystem of agtech continues to grow, both in the number of companies that address issues that are relevant to long-term care, and in the size of the companies addressing those challenges, it will benefit the long-term care industry and improve the lives of the older adults it serves. At the end of the day, that’s what we’re all here to do. –CSA

Keren Etkin, MA in Gerontology, is the founder of TheGerontechnologist.com, a website that covers the global agtech ecosystem. She’s also the co-founder and Vice President of Product at Sensi.Ai, which developed an AI-based solution that enables long-term care providers to remotely assess the quality of care. Previously, she worked at Intuition Robotics, the startup behind ElliQ, the world’s first social robot designed with, and for, older adults.

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