

Embracing Technology (For Your Residents!)

By Jack York



An elder in an aged care facility in the United States can be heard screaming through the hallways, "Maam, I have to get up and fly my plane today, right now".

Comments like that from "Charlie", an elder in the later stages of dementia who used to be a pilot, could easily be ignored by overworked staff. Charlie would most likely be lead politely back into his room or into some other diversionary activity.

How about this response instead; "Charlie, let's grab the joystick, what city should we fly to today?"

We like that answer, or at least I'd like that answer if my dad was Charlie. It can be done; we're seeing it happen every day.

Technology, ready or not, is exploding in the world of long term care. It's exploding in a variety of applications that are destined to make the world of nursing homes more efficient. Browse through any trade journal, wander through an exhibit hall at a long term care conference, talk to the CFOs at large nursing home chains and the message is clear – technology has the potential to improve the fiscal health of nursing homes, and improve the efficiency of the mounds of data that need to be collected and distributed. Is there something missing in all of this? Is there a group of people that seems left out of the equation? Our answer and our experience is yes – the person left out of the equation is the life that the industry is supposed to be trying to improve, to sustain, to grow..... the person who actually calls the nursing home his or her home.

The mission of our company (It's Never 2 Late) over the past 6 years has been to try and set up adaptive computer labs that provide activities, engagement tools and unique experiences for older adults with physical and/or cognitive disabilities. We have seen all over the United States how these types of experiences can

improve the lives of the thousands and thousands of older adults throughout the country who have lived full and meaningful lives and who deserve to have their last few years be as rich as possible. We have been delighted and astounded at the success that our systems have had in places where the staff have embraced the technology and run wild with it.

Here is the "typical" experience of a nursing home or assisted living community that is trying to set up a computer lab for residents. A well meaning company or individual is upgrading their own computer, and is

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happy to donate their used machine to a nursing home. An enterprising activity director takes that computer and as inexpensively as possible tries diligently to get residents to try it out. Two or three extremely motivated residents will stick with it, and they have very positive experiences. The other 98% of the residents either don't try it or give up after a couple of frustrating experiences. The general consensus after this experience plays out is that "the residents weren't interested", or "it was just too difficult" and the program usually dies a slow death without any further investment. We've seen that play out in dozens and dozens of senior living communities throughout the country. It doesn't have to be that way.

We have been fortunate to work with several organisations throughout the country that have been willing to try another way. They have embraced our platform, and are applying our systems in ways we never could have conceived on our own. They have given their staff leeway to try something new. Here are some of their stories.....

Pinon management, based in Colorado, was the first multi-site user to embrace our work and set up programs throughout their entire network. Their CEO, Jeff Jerebker, proclaims that the ability to stay connected with the outside world through technology is not a privilege for the few; it's a right for all of his residents. Beth Irtz, Pinon's Vice President of Life Enhancement, provides her perspective. "Pinon has a culture of change that resonates throughout all of our communities. In a person centered model of care," explains Irtz, "It's Never 2 Late" provides access to the outside world for

elders living in nursing homes. An elder can email family and friends, staying in touch with grandchildren, receive photographs, find fun or educational websites, listen to their favorite music and continue to learn and grow.

We have worked with the *The Good Samaritan Society* to set up systems throughout the United States. Our relationship with Good Sam started in Ft. Collins Colorado, when an innovative activity director, Donna Gruis, was looking for ways to engage many of her residents who lamented that the outside world had been shut off to them. The success that Donna had with her lab caught the attention of the Good Samaritan headquarters, which led to the successful implementation of the pilot programs throughout the country. Barb Hartman, activity program consultant and the person who has managed the IN2L rollouts, gives her feedback. "Adaptive computer equipment provides a successful means for persons with disabilities to not only communicate with family and friends, but to also engage in life-long interests and learning opportunities. We're seeing

examples of how those experiences positively impact the health and well being of these individuals."

These types of stories and anecdotes, replicated all over the country, are living proof that organisations and individuals willing to think outside the box can look at the computer/resident experience in entirely different ways. We are particularly excited to have launched a national partnership with the Eden Alternative. Their commitment to positively impact the lives of elders in long term care is unparalleled; their input into our development process will take us to worlds we could not have imagined on our own.

One of the primary focuses of our company has been to find creative ways to embrace the world of dementia from a technology perspective. In a world where millions upon million of dollars are rightfully so being spent to try and find a cure for the disease, our efforts are 100% focused on making today's experiences more meaningful and engaging. Our preliminary results, we are delighted to say, have been encouraging. The exploding world of high tech multimedia (integrating pictures, video and music) provides limitless opportunities for enhancing the quality of life for the "greatest generation". Our touch screen systems allow users to simply touch pictures of Frank Sinatra for the crooning to start, touch a picture of their granddaughter to hear her singing Happy Birthday,

touch a picture of a waterfall to launch to a musical screensaver of waterfalls, etc. etc. The possibilities are endless. Our first lab customer, the Christian Living Campus in Colorado, recently set up a system in their dementia specific assisted living unit. The results have been positive, especially from the family's perspective. "When we first set up the lab", explains Mary Grace Smigiel, Executive Director of CLC, "we weren't sure of how it would be perceived by the residents. We brought the families into the experience from day one, and several family members have remarked that they finally have a stress free activity to come in and experience with Mom and Dad!"

It's a delight to see what is being accomplished at innovative organisations throughout the country. As excited as we are at what we are experiencing today, we are just starting to scratch the surface of where we can be going. Continuing advances in computer technology, new applications for virtual reality, and new platforms of distributing content via broadband connectivity are just a few examples of how technology can benefit the greatest generation.

Many of you are making the right decisions in embracing technology. Keep making those infrastructure investments in how your operations can run more efficiently. Keep looking for ways that technology can improve the delivery of your health care and your medical records. However, at the

end of the day, do a little reflecting on how you can have some of those investment dollars be directed at improving the quality of life of the individuals who you're caring for. This generation of elders developed the infrastructure for all of these technologies. From vacuum tubes, to transistors, to complex semiconductors, the greatest generation invented all of the tools that we now take for granted and use every day. Since they invented the technology, they certainly deserve to enjoy it!

Charlie, send me an email after you land!



"It's Never 2 Late" is delighted to be embarking on a process to bring "It's Never 2 Late" to Australia. We are in discussions with ACSA and aged care providers to work out if our service can be established in Australia and will work together to that end – so watch this space!

