

# VOICE TECHNOLOGY FOR SENIORS: ARE WE LISTENING?

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Consumers are becoming increasingly comfortable with voice technology. This includes older adults, caregivers and service providers, who've come to recognize the advantages of voice-driven applications for the senior population in particular. Question is...Is our industry listening? Have we heard the message revealed in the data and the trends? Or, somewhere along the way, did we buy into the assumption that such technology is not meant for people of a certain age? Did we buy into the stereotype that seniors are not technically savvy enough to adopt such innovations? And, in so doing, are we failing to invest in new solutions that have the potential to foster a greater sense of connection and improve the quality of life for residents?

Let's start by taking a look at the statistics, which are astounding:

- There will be an estimated 21.4 million smart speakers in the US by 2020.<sup>1</sup>
- 72% of people who own voice-activated speakers say that their devices are often used as part of their daily routine.<sup>2</sup>
- 65% of people who own an Amazon Echo or Google Home can't imagine going back to the days before they had a smart speaker.<sup>3</sup>
- 41% of people who own a voice-activated speaker say it feels like talking to a friend or another person.<sup>4</sup>
- 50% of all searches will be voice searches by 2020.<sup>5</sup>
- The Echo Dot was the best-selling product on all of Amazon in the 2017 holiday season.<sup>6</sup>
- 43 million people over the age of 18 in the US own smart speakers, and 22% of Americans, age 55 and older, own smart speakers<sup>7</sup>

When it comes to technology, it can often seem easier to maintain the status quo. After all, many technologies tend to emerge and disappear. And, if they do stick around, the senior population is often left out. It would be a mistake, however, to think of voice technology as a passing fad. The evolution of Natural Language Processing, combined with progress in Artificial Intelligence and machine learning, are game-changers for people of all ages<sup>8</sup>, and the growth of voice-assistive technologies like the Amazon Echo, Google Home and Apple HomePod has been explosive.

The statistics tell the story, and the profound benefits being received by users demonstrate the remarkable opportunity this technology represents for seniors and those who provide them with care and services: the nearly blind resident who quickly adapted to asking Alexa just about anything, from simple things such as telling the time to more complicated topics that could be accessed on the Internet; the IT director who worked with a resident's audiologist to set up his hearing aid to work with Bluetooth and connect to the Echo; the residents with dementia who were soothed as Alexa played their favorite music.

Voice technology is rapidly enhancing the senior living experience, and our industry must adapt to the changing landscape

as speakers begin to take the place of screens. Voice assistants, wearables and mobile apps are already becoming mainstream, and this is being accelerated by the "silver tsunami," i.e., the incoming wave of baby boomers. Voice technology should be integral to the resident experience, and those Life Plan Communities that act upon this understanding are best positioned to attract vibrant people and support successful aging.

Let's embrace voice technology together and encourage residents to welcome the enhancements it brings to everyday life, from shopping and sharing photos to playing music or ordering meals. Let's also embrace voice technology for the improved quality of life it brings to people with impairments in regards to vision, dexterity or cognition. And let's embrace voice technology to allow seniors to age in place, avoid social isolation and enjoy a greater sense of confidence and connectedness with family, neighbors and doctors.

Listen to the message in the data. Listen to the stories from users and caregivers. Voice technology is not something to which we should turn a deaf ear, and seniors should not be left out of the conversation.

1 *Think Again: Tech & Media Outlook 2017*. Activate, 2016. <https://www.slideshare.net/ActivateInc/think-again-tech-media-outlook-2017-67604099>. Accessed 13 August 2018.

2 *Google: 5 ways voice assistance is shaping consumer behavior*. Think with Google, 2018. <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/consumer-insights/voice-assistance-consumer-experience/>. Accessed 13 August 2018.

3 *What Do People Use Smart Speakers For?* GeoMarketing, 2017. <https://geomarketing.com/what-do-people-use-smart-speakers-for>. Accessed 13 August 2018.

4 *Google: 5 ways voice assistance is shaping consumer behavior*. Think with Google, 2018. <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/consumer-insights/voice-assistance-consumer-experience/>. Accessed 13 August 2018.

5 *Just say it: The future of search is voice and personal digital assistants*. Campaign / ComScore, 2016. <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/just-say-it-future-search-voice-personal-digital-assistants/1392459>. Accessed 13 August 2018.

6 *The Echo Dot was the best-selling product on all of Amazon this holiday season*. TechCrunch, 2017. <https://techcrunch.com/2017/12/26/the-echo-dot-was-the-best-selling-product-on-all-of-amazon-this-holiday-season/>. Accessed 13 August 2018.

7 *The Smart Audio Report, Spring 2018*. National Public Media LLC, 2018. <https://www.nationalpublicmedia.com/smart-audio-report/latest-report/>. Accessed 13 August 2018.

8 *The Future of Voice First: Technology and Older Adults 2018*. Aging in Place Technology Watch, 2018. <https://www.ageinplacetech.com/page/future-voice-first-technology-and-older-adults-2018>. Accessed 13 August 2018.