



Senior Living Idea

The New Business Case for Engagement Technology in Senior Living

Three Trends Signal a Major Change in How Engagement Tech Is Used and Valued

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed communities to think beyond the traditional definitions of activities and life enrichment. Community leaders and staff have worked incredibly hard to provide personalized engagement, social connection, and a sense of purpose to residents, despite precautionary social isolation—and engagement technology has been an invaluable enabler. Their efforts have helped to:

1. Accelerate fundamental changes in how senior living communities use engagement technology
2. Demonstrate the value engagement technology delivers

As a result, there's a growing consensus that engagement technology needs to be embedded into an organization's DNA. A 2020 survey of community leaders showed a 60% increase in the number of leaders who believe engagement technology is extremely important now, versus before the pandemic, and a 100% increase in the number of leaders who say there is definitely a return on investment for engagement technology.¹

Maximizing this ROI will require an evolution in how we think about the role of technology. There are three key shifts in how engagement technology is being used and how it will positively impact the bottom line. These emerging trends will result in a lasting change in how engagement technology is viewed and valued.

The Role of Activities and Life Enrichment Is Evolving

Fundamentally, the role of activities and life enrichment is shifting. The traditional way of thinking about activities—discrete, scheduled events convened in large groups, directed by staff—is making way for experiences that are organic, resident-directed, and that permeate every aspect of community life. In the new model, engagement happens in small groups and individually, with a focus on creating purpose. Tailoring engagement to a resident's specific interests is still a top priority, but it's becoming table stakes. Communities will need to move beyond this traditional thinking, designing engagement technology into the fabric of daily community life to stay competitive.



The pandemic has helped communities realize that engagement is more than simply attending group activities—engagement is purpose and connection, which can also happen on an individual level. For example, just because someone doesn't want to participate in a large group activity doesn't mean they don't want to be engaged.

Communities that embrace this perspective look beyond tailored activities and engagement to create a true sense of purpose for each resident. The way they view engagement technology has shifted as a result. They now see it as an enabler that can help provide the experience residents want. Thanks to purpose-built engagement technology and an internet connection, residents can find many ways to self-direct for a sense of purpose.



Almost three-quarters of residents and 78% of family members say activities specifically tailored to the resident are **absolutely essential or very important to their well-being.**

According to a recent report, retirees say they miss people and purpose, not paychecks, when they stop working—but almost a third of recent retirees struggle to find purpose in their new stage of life.² Older adults not only want to be engaged but also want to keep learning and growing—with control over how they do so. Residents, especially those in assisted living settings, often feel a loss of control over their lifestyle or ability to fulfill aspects of daily living they used to manage independently. But if a resident can use their own device, such as a touch screen tablet, to access experiences that truly interest them, they can reassert their independence in a meaningful way.

The bottom line? Engagement technology can no longer be relegated to the activities or life enrichment department. To get the most ROI, these solutions must become part of every facet of resident life, empowering seniors to create their own engagement experiences to feed their purpose.

Social Connection Is the Leading Factor in Satisfaction and Referrals

Facilitating social connection is vitally important for residents and the health of the community. A June 2020 SageAge survey found that when asked about the most challenging aspects of COVID-19, 30% of residents cited the lack of social interaction, while 11% noted boredom and a lack of things to do.³ These findings should raise a red flag for communities, since when asked about the biggest benefits of senior living, the majority of respondents cited socialization.

An April 2019 study from the American Seniors Housing Association (ASHA) showed that the primary reason for residents not feeling at home in a community is loneliness and difficulty making friends. Many residents said that it was hard to make friends because they could not find people in their community with similar interests or abilities. Less than 20% of residents and families surveyed in the study felt a strong sense of camaraderie within the community, yet 50% of their reported willingness to recommend a community is impacted by camaraderie.⁴

This compelling statistic aligns with findings from a recent IN2L study, which revealed that the top reason family decision-makers would not recommend a community is if opportunities for socialization among residents are lacking. At the same time, 2 in 5 community leaders surveyed said it's of average or little importance to give residents the ability to digitally connect with one another.⁵ This significant disconnect implies that there's a strong need for the senior living industry to reframe what "engagement" is. To do so, communities must go beyond checking the box of providing activities to implement longitudinal, resident-led solutions for preventing loneliness and facilitating friendships. Communities can bridge this gap by leveraging engagement technology solutions that empower residents to connect with each other over shared interests.

Friendship Is a Vital Ingredient for Community Success

Community leaders agree on the importance of friendship: 99% say that having friends impacts a resident's well-being, and 98% agree that having friends inside the community impacts a resident's family's satisfaction with the community.⁵ Despite this, only 41% of communities say that using engagement technology to facilitate interaction among residents is absolutely essential during the pandemic. An almost equal number (43%) assert that using engagement technology to give residents the ability to digitally connect with one another is of average or little importance.

Why the disconnect? It could be that leaders have no knowledge of or have never observed engagement technology being used for this function. The belief in the importance of camaraderie, despite a lack of prioritization to facilitate it, provides an opportunity. Communities that recognize how digital connection between residents facilitates critical friendships will clearly have a competitive edge to impact resident and family satisfaction and families' willingness to recommend.

Top 3 Reasons a Family Member Would Not Recommend a Community:

- 1:** No opportunities for my loved one to socialize with other residents
- 2:** No opportunities for engagement activities that interest my loved one
- 3:** No opportunities for my loved one to socialize with family or friends living outside the community



Five Ways Residents Can Use Engagement Technology to Connect With Friends

1. Host events using social media livestreaming tools, such as YouTube Live or Facebook Live
2. Attend game nights with fellow residents or family members
3. Participate in virtual resident group activities
4. Join interest groups within the community online
5. Discover others with similar interests

One of the biggest lessons the senior living industry learned during the pandemic is how vital technology-enabled social connection is. Residents must have a way to connect with each other and maintain friendships, and engagement technology can help facilitate all kinds of interactions. Even after the need for precautionary social isolation passes, communities will need to remain flexible in offering both group and individual opportunities for social connection.

Technology Engages and Gives Purpose to Staff

The senior living industry has always struggled to prevent turnover. More than 90% of senior living operators report a shortage of direct care workers, licensed nurses, and other critical staff. Additionally, it's projected that an estimated 1.2 million workers will need to enter the senior living workforce through 2025.⁶ Engagement technology can help drive workforce development across the industry.

Engagement technology doesn't just benefit residents—it's also a key component for staff engagement, satisfaction, and retention. The most impactful opportunities to increase employee engagement are through inspiration, human connection, and innovation. Here are three ways these goals can be achieved:

- 1. Seize on the positive stories emerging from the pandemic.** There's growing awareness of the importance of both the senior living industry and its frontline heroes. People want to work with residents who are satisfied and living their best lives. Engagement technology can help communities demonstrate that principle as they share resident engagement success stories that position their organization as the employer of choice.
- 2. Uncover purpose.** Staff purpose leads to satisfaction and retention and a higher quality of resident care. When employees' purpose is discovered, their motivation to succeed at work can be strengthened. To help employees discover their purpose within your organization, work with each staff member to develop a personal contribution statement and to discuss how their contributions align with the organization's core values, mission, and promise.
- 3. Include employees in resident engagement initiatives.** Enabling employees to use engagement technology will help them feel connected to residents and will increase employee engagement—which is key to driving sales and increasing occupancy. Data shared by Activated Insights at an October 2020 industry conference show that employee engagement has dropped 2% overall in senior living and care, and although engagement increased in April and May as community staff rallied to protect seniors, that engagement slipped over the summer and remains stagnant.⁷ Involving staff can be as simple as having employees create their own personal profile in the engagement technology. Not only will that approach help them connect with residents and forge friendships and bonds, but residents will also enjoy consistency among staff who work in their communities and care settings.

Staff engagement can have a significant impact on the bottom line. In communities with happier team members, prices were an average 5% higher than in communities with less content team members, and occupancy averaged 2% higher.⁸ These communities are offering fewer discounts and incentives for move-ins because the sales and marketing teams are happy and sell their community's value proposition more effectively. While labor markets were a problem before COVID, and will continue to be a challenge, there is opportunity created as a result of the pandemic to emphasize the importance of people.

Leverage Engagement Technology to Improve Resident & Staff Satisfaction

When senior living residents were asked to list factors that contribute to their happiness and satisfaction, they ranked camaraderie among residents, staff, and family—as well as the quality of their relationships with staff—at the top of the list.⁸

Loneliness is pervasive in senior living:



More than two-thirds of residents reported experiencing feelings of loneliness, even before the pandemic.⁹



Even 15 minutes of virtual socializing per day can mitigate the effects of loneliness on seniors.

— Administration on Aging

What engagement really means to seniors:

Personalized activities that facilitate connecting to interests and others are ranked as key drivers of happiness and well-being.⁹



Tailored Activities

Three-quarters of residents say activities specifically tailored to their interests are “absolutely essential” or “very important” to their well-being.



Social Connection

Two-thirds of residents report being social with others is “very important” or “absolutely essential” to their well-being.

96% of residents felt joy all or most of the time after interacting with personalized content and activities via iN2L engagement technology.¹⁰



Older adults who use video chat have a 50% lower risk of developing depression.¹¹

Happier employees = happier residents:

Staff-resident connections are imperative to the satisfaction and retention of both.



Staffing churn at senior living facilities ranges from 40–70% per year.¹²



Enabling staff with tools that make them feel more successful, efficient, and fulfilled in their work can impact employee satisfaction.



In communities with happier team members:¹³

↑ 5%
higher average price

↑ 2%
higher occupancy

Conclusion

Senior living communities must transform the way they're thinking about and using engagement technology. The role of engagement technology is changing and permeating every aspect of the resident experience as it becomes a conduit for overall social connection—whether it's with fellow residents, staff, loved ones, or people around the world. No longer siloed within the activities function, or relegated to twice-daily large group activities, engagement technology is becoming part of how communities create and nurture purpose for residents and staff. These shifts are what forward-thinking organizations are undergoing to grow their return on investment and future-proof their communities.

Sources

1. iN2L, *Senior Living 2020: The State of Engagement and Technology*, Report, 2020.
2. Edward Jones and Age Wave, "The Four Pillars of the New Retirement," White Paper, August 2020.
3. SageAge Strategies, *COVID-19 & Its Effects on the Senior Living Industry*, Report, May/June 2020.
4. Margaret Wylde, Ph.D. and Kristen Paris, Ph.D., *People, Place, Programming: Quality of Life in Assisted Living* (Washington, D.C.: American Seniors Housing Association and ProMatura Group), 2019.
5. iN2L, "New iN2L Research Demonstrates Vital Role of Social Connection and Engagement for Older Adults," Dec. 16, 2020.
6. Argentum, *Building an Engaged Senior Living Workforce: Employee Retention Leads to Quality Care*, White paper, October 2018.
7. Kimberly Bonvissuto, "Sales, marketing teams need to 'reshape the story' to sell senior living post-COVID," *McKnight's Senior Living*, Oct. 23, 2020.
8. Promatura, "Here Are the Top 3 Factors That Influence Whether Residents Would Choose Your Assisted Living Community Again," March 10, 2020.
9. iN2L, *Bridging the Loneliness Gap: Exploring Perceptions of Socialization, Engagement, and Satisfaction Among Key Senior Living Stakeholders*, 2020.
10. Ennis Care Center, internal data shared on company flyer.
11. Alan R. Teo, M.D., et al., "Using Skype to Beat the Blues: Longitudinal Data from a National Representative Sample," *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 27, no. 3 (March 2019): 254–62.
12. Nationwide, "Senior Living: Industry Overview and Trends to Watch," 2020.
13. Kimberly Bonvissuto, "Sales, marketing teams need to 'reshape the story' to sell senior living post-COVID," *McKnight's Senior Living*, Oct. 23, 2020.

