

The Right Technology in the Right Hands Will Make a Difference

by Majd Alwan

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Majd Alwan, Ph.D.

Majd Alwan, Ph.D., is director of the AAHSA Center for Aging Services Technologies (CAST). A CAST commissioner since its inception, Alwan became the center's director in 2007. FutureAge asked him to tell us about AAHSA's vision for aging-services technology.

The use of the right aging-services technologies—such as those having to do with information, telemedicine and telehealth, care tracking, care coordination and documentation—creates value that touches caregiving on many different levels. The degree of value is determined by perceptions of a technology's contributions to service administration and integration, care quality, health outcomes and quality of life for the seniors we serve.

Technology-enabled care can exploit the capabilities of several types of technologies at once. These include embedded sensing, ambient intelligence¹, interoperability² and interconnectivity between different devices, and much more. Such technologies can make it possible to automate the continuous assessment, documentation and communication processes in aging services and, in doing so, enable the delivery of high-touch care through a network of professional and family caregivers. This is the vision depicted so well in the award-winning CAST video, *Imagine—The Future of Aging*, which can be viewed at www.agingtech.org.

As the video illustrates, technology, employed correctly, augments but does not replace the essential work of caregivers. It is merely a powerful enabler—an “accelerator,” to use Jim Collins' term in his book, *Good to Great*. Technology is never a substitute for the right staff who have their hearts in the right place. Without the professional caregivers and providers in the loop, this vision would surely fail, especially when family caregivers live hundreds of miles away!

Using Technology to Attract Talent

Some of the aging-services technologies, particularly those for care tracking, coordination and documentation, can also empower caregivers with information and make their lives easier by streamlining the workflow, reducing paperwork and balancing workloads, while improving the caregivers' efficiencies. So the right technology can potentially lead to greater caregiver satisfaction and help organizations retain the right staff, and possibly attract new talent.

¹ A vision of the future where we are surrounded by electronic environments, sensitive and responsive to people.

² Interoperability: the ability of two or more systems or components to exchange information and to use the information that has been exchanged.

Choosing the Right Technology

For a recent report, CAST reviewed existing technologies and others under development. The report presents examples of these technologies along with their advantages, disadvantages, conditional requirements for attaining the expected value proposition, and the available evidence of such value from the published literature.


The report was commissioned by the Blue Shield of California Foundation and will be made available to AAHSA members, decision makers and the public to create awareness of these applications and their potential. The report will be available soon on the CAST and AAHSA Web sites.

Reviewing this report is a step in the right direction to choosing the right technologies for your organization. Important, as well, is engaging your frontline caregivers in identifying needs, then selecting and preliminarily testing a few promising applications. Ease of use by those in the trenches, who will either be using the technology or pushing it aside, is of paramount importance. Once the staff has zeroed-in on a specific technology that is easy to use and may serve your needs, a small-scale pilot evaluation of the technology is wise, to ensure that it makes a difference before it is adopted on a larger scale. CAST can assist AAHSA members in such outcome-oriented evaluations.

Living the Vision and Sharing the Story

Pioneering AAHSA members have not only embarked on the vision of technology, but are actually living the vision and blazing trails for others by sharing their stories and case studies with CAST.

Leading organizations—Eskaton, Elant, SelfHelp, Ecumen and Asbury, to name a few—are using care tracking, documentation and coordination technologies. Others—among them Volunteers of America, the Evangelical Lutheran Good Samaritan Society, Morselife and Lutheran Homes of Michigan—have either pilot tested or are now actively engaged in testing these and other types of technologies. They, and other providers, are making a difference every day not only in the lives of the people they serve, but also in the lives of those they employ, as case studies published on the CAST web site (www.agingtech.org/pilots.aspx) indicate.

Without such pioneers, their tremendous efforts and their willingness to share stories and lessons learned, the promise of aging-services technologies would be only a pipe dream instead of the plausible, attainable vision we know it to be. 

During AAHSA's Future of Aging Services Conference, CAST will showcase two examples of care documentation and tracking at the April 2 "Technology as an Accelerator" session. With case studies of Erickson Retirement Communities and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Senior Living Corporation, the session will illustrate how these providers chose the right technologies, highlight staff's experience with them, and discuss the impact on caregivers and the care process.