



Sandwich Generation Using Technology for Long-Distance Caregiving

Ecumen Taking High Touch, High Tech Approach to Enhance Independence and Empower Customers

By Kay Harvey

November 2007

Lynn Pitet arrives in her office in Cody, Wyo., at 8 o'clock on weekday mornings and promptly turns on her computer to check a daily e-mail she knows will be there.

It comes from a "friend" of sorts -- a computerized program that assures her that her 87-year-old mother, living alone in her home 800 miles away in southern Minnesota, is doing just fine.

A series of green dots on the screen tells her that Helen Trost got out of bed at a normal time, opened her refrigerator and her medicine cabinet and is moving about the house in the usual way. If a red dot appears, the computer has recorded a variation in her normal activity pattern. "I can click on that to see

a more detailed report," her 60-year-old daughter explains.



Helen, Alison and Lynn connecting via technology

It's all the work of a high-tech system called QuietCare, a GE product, which uses sensors placed in strategic places in Trost's home to monitor her movement about the house. If sensors were to detect anything potentially alarming, Pitet and her sister, Alison Trost, already would know it. QuietCare would have immediately dispatched professional help to their mother's home in Mankato, Minn., and telephoned her daughters, too.

The three women jointly chose to include the technology option as part of a package of services Helen Trost receives from Pathstone Living, an Ecumen community in Mankato, Minn. "It's a peace-of-mind thing, more than anything," says Alison, 57, who lives a 1 ½-hour drive away in a Twin Cities suburb. "I envisioned myself calling Mom and no one answering," she says. "I thought, 'Then what would I do?'"

Alison checks her daily QuietCare e-mails during afternoon breaks in her job as a dental hygienist. She and her sister, who works as a museum grants administrator, find the daily reports and built-in safety net reassuring. She and her sister know help will be there for their mom if it's needed.

After their father suffered a stroke last July, it quickly became clear their mother would need help living at home, her daughters say. Because macular degeneration limits her vision, “Dad was the only driver, and he did all of the medication dispensing for her,” Lynn says. While he was being cared for at Ecumen’s Pathstone Living after his stroke, the sisters picked up information about home-care services, Alison says. After he died in August, Helen Trost signed up. The package includes a Lifeline pendant she wears with a button to push that will alert help in an emergency. A home-health aide visits twice a week, as does an Ecumen caregiver coach.

Armed with high-tech skills as well, Ecumen’s Gregg Johnson installed the sensor system in Trost’s home. The systems that became a standard feature two years ago in Pathstone Living apartments are widely used in Ecumen senior communities, he says. They’re newer in people’s private homes in the Mankato area, where Pathstone maintains an average of four per month at a cost of \$199 for installation and \$85 per month for the QuietCare system only. Its use by people who live independently is growing, he says, and the trend is “expected to go up with the demographics.”

By monitoring human movement, the sensors can recognize when people aren’t eating regularly or taking medications on schedule. They recognize excessive bathroom use, often a predictor of urinary tract infections, a problem some people hide because of embarrassment. The system can detect falls, which can result in head injuries that land people in the emergency room and then the nursing home, Johnson says, and quick response is important. “The faster the response time, the more likely they’ll return to independent living.”

Much like a life coach, Johnson’s role as a caregiver coach guides the process rather than telling adult children what to do. “The caregiver will say, ‘Here are the problems,’” he says. “I help them to come up with the answers.” The job extends beyond office hours and covers a range of individual needs and concerns. The family often “all meets at Mom’s and Dad’s house on a weekend,” when the adult children can be there,” he says. “One woman just needed companionship,” and he has been working with her son and his wife on that.

Ecumen sees this integrated approach of connecting human touch and high tech becoming the norm.

Helen Trost’s daughters tailor caregiving roles to their locations and busy lives. Lynn traveled to Mankato from her Wyoming home for a 10-day stay after her father’s stroke. She telephones her mom every morning as a reminder to take her pills. “I ask her what she’s doing today, and who’s coming over,” she says. “She asks me what I’m doing and what’s going on at the museum.” Lynn rarely needs to ask about the pills, she says. Her mom brings them up. “She says, ‘Yes, I’ve taken them,’ and she knows how important it is.”

Alison spends a day every week with her mother, accompanies her to doctor appointments and drives her wherever she wants to go. She totes her mother’s bills home to her husband, who manages her mother’s finances. Alison hopes her mother will decide to move to the Twin Cities to be closer to her Minnesota family, but she knows that’s a hard decision. “You hate to take them out of their home,” she says.

Helen Trost remains active in community organizations and receives help from others as well. A friend who cleans her home provides rides for her, too. A volunteer group offers help with household chores and will do repairs and lawn work.

Helen Trost feels secure in her situation, she says. And her Ecumen package of services has brought a low-tech, high-touch bonus. That is Sarah Reiman, the home health aide and nursing student who spends two hours twice a week with Helen and helps in any way she can. "She reads to my mom and writes letters for her," Alison says. "Mom really likes it when Sarah comes."

Sarah runs the vacuum cleaner, irons and has baked cookies and brownies for her, too, Helen says. On a recent weekday, their activity was more low-key. "Today we sat and did a little chatting, and we were watching a movie," Helen says. "We've gotten to be friends."

Kay Harvey writes for Eldr Magazine and reports on aging, demographics, gender and psychology for the online newspaper MinnPost.com. She previously was an editor and reporter for the Saint Paul Pioneer Press.