

REAL ESTATE

Smart Doesn't Always Mean an Easy Home

By ROY FURCHGOTT JULY 8, 2016

There's a reason they call them Smart Homes, not Easy Homes.

Just ask Ken Hutchinson. Mr. Hutchinson is a tech professional who wanted the option of controlling the lights at his family's century-old, eight-bedroom Brooklyn Victorian by phone, to make it look occupied when the family was away. In 2013, he bought Z-Wave wireless home automation components to control the outdoor and indoor lights, some wall outlets and a door lock.

But setting up the system turned out to be a "herculean task," Mr. Hutchinson said. Eventually, he got the lights to work remotely, but the door lock never did, so he quit trying.

Still, Mr. Hutchinson didn't give up entirely on home automation. Last fall, he installed an internet-connected thermostat from Ecobee, with remote temperature sensors in various rooms. And this time around, it was a very different experience.

"It's so much easier," he said. "It's ultimately what I am looking for: Fire it up, take some time setting it up, then it just works."

These days, even a technophobe can set up a remote-control light switch or

thermostat and operate it by phone. Improvements in technology, including voice recognition, artificial intelligence and more affordable sensors, have made home automation easier to use. Cheaper, too.

The smart home still isn't perfect — or easy, exactly. But if you haven't used any of this technology yet, it might be time to start thinking about it. Here's what you need to know first.

What Is This Stuff?

Smart home technology is a catchall term that includes household appliances and devices that connect to the internet, so you can see and control them remotely using a phone, tablet or computer. That can mean being able to turn on a single lamp, or controlling and monitoring almost everything in a house, including heating and cooling, security cameras, lawn sprinklers, televisions, stereos, robotic vacuums, a doorbell, door locks, lights, air quality, fire alarms, baby monitors and more. It means you'll always have the answer to the question, "Did I leave the stove on?"

Smart devices address household problems great and small. For Adam Justice, a vice president of Grid Connect, the ConnectSense outlet made by the company ended a perpetual spat. "It solves the problem of my wife and I both being in bed and arguing over who is going to get up to turn out the lights," he said. "So you could say it solves marital problems."

Internet-connected thermostats tackle a larger issue, energy conservation, although most people probably buy them to increase comfort and save money. Nest, another company making smart thermostats, says it has saved 7.3 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity since 2011, enough to power 10,000 homes for seven years, and estimates its average user has an annual cost saving of around 13 percent, or about \$138.

Making Connections

If you stick to a single system — say, all lights or electrical outlets from the same manufacturer — setup is pretty easy. But chances are, you'll want to use products

from more than one company, and that's where the difficulty comes in: Different brands use different technology, and they don't always talk to each other.

To solve this issue, various companies are vying to become the universal translator and central controller for all your home devices. The leaders in this effort at the moment are Apple, with HomeKit, and Amazon Echo, with the Alexa assistant. Both use voice control, so you can tell your various lights and switches what you want them to do without having to open a separate app for each one. Apple and Amazon share software with other manufacturers, so many companies' products work reliably with their central controls.

Other contenders include Google, which is working on its own home voice-control system; Samsung, which has a system called SmartThings that works with Alexa; and possibly Microsoft, which has hinted that its voice assistant, Cortana, might eventually be used for home control.

The chief appeal of Apple's HomeKit is that it's comparatively easy to set up and use. Devices are paired with your phone or tablet, in much the same way you'd connect a Bluetooth headset or speaker, only with more steps. And the company's next software update, due this fall, will group all the controls on one screen, so you can run your whole house from a single app. The downside: HomeKit doesn't have as many accessories as some other systems do.

Amazon Echo's Alexa is more versatile. Some users find that the system's voice recognition works better than Siri's, and there's an IFTTT app (an acronym for the computer command "if this then that") that allows you to devise your own commands. Users can also share the commands they make, like one that automatically turns off a GE Wi-Fi Connect oven when your phone, watch or tablet is out of Bluetooth range or another that sends your phone a picture of anyone who rings your Netatmo Welcome camera doorbell.

But tricks like these take some know-how to set up and manage. And neither Apple nor Amazon makes the plugs, switches and sensors that their systems run, which is why these systems can be a technological patchwork. Some of the accessories communicate by Wi-Fi; others use Bluetooth, radio or electrical lines, or a combination.

Of course, there are smart home accessory manufacturers that have their own complete systems. Insteon, for example, makes a hub that translates signals, allowing Siri or Alexa to talk to more than 100 devices it makes, the company says. But while investing in any fast-changing new technology is risky, going with a less prominent brand could be even riskier. Ask those who bought smart-home hubs from the company Revolv. The hubs they invested in are now entirely useless, since Google bought the company in 2014 and shut down Revolv's servers.

Beyond the Basics

Once you've installed and run a simple accessory, like an on/off switch, you should feel comfortable enough to try something a little more complicated.

You might start by creating "scenes," which send instructions to several devices with a single voice command. This can take some time to set up, as you have to tell the central control what you want each of the individual devices to do. But by issuing a simple command like "Let's watch a movie," you could have the curtains close, the lights dim and the television and DVD player turn on.

Many people are introduced to the world of scenes by Philips Hue lights. Blake Rutledge, who works on web technology at the advertising firm Ogilvy & Mather, bought Hue bulbs after reading that light therapy could help his insomnia. He set the bulbs to a stimulating white-blue during the day, and then, by using the "scene" feature, programmed them to gradually dim and change to amber in the evenings.

"Every hour on the hour, there is a new scene," Mr. Rutledge said. And he didn't stop there. He created other scenes for watching television, listening to music, eating dinner — more than a dozen in all. "At this point," he said, "I couldn't go back to a normal bulb."

Future Smart

As far as smart home technology has come, it still has a way to go. It needs to be simpler and more reliable, said Phil Dumas, the president of UniKey, whose software works the Kwikset Kevo internet-connected door lock. Kevo makes a door lock act as

many car locks already do, unlocking when a recognized phone or fob gets close. And it goes one step further, linking with the Nest thermostat to adjust the room temperature according to what the person walking in prefers.

Even so, that's not enough, Mr. Dumas said. If you follow a predictable routine, he explained, "After a few times, it should ask, 'We notice when you get home and it's dark out, you turn on the hallway light, then turn on ESPN; do you want us to do that?'"

But that's easier said than done.

"It's so simple to comprehend the internet of Things 2.0, and people think we are there, and we aren't," Mr. Dumas said. "We are at 1.0, and there is a lot of value there, but 2.0 is where we need to go."

A Guide to Smart Home Devices

Most of the smart home devices I tried were pretty simple to use. But the more I piled on the network, the glitchier things got. My suggestion: Stick with as few brands as possible or resign yourself to using some apps in lieu of voice control.

Apple HomeKit

All HomeKit-certified products use Apple hardware and software, which makes for an easier setup and a more reliable connection; adding a Lutron outlet to control a light is nearly as easy as adding a Bluetooth device. But as usual, Siri occasionally misunderstood me, attempting a phone call when I was trying to adjust the thermostat. And when I moved beyond Wi-Fi range, I couldn't use voice control at all, because I don't have a third-generation or later Apple TV to relay the commands. (A software update this fall promises to address the problem by allowing an iPad to serve the same function.)

Amazon Echo

Alexa, the Amazon Echo's voice-control assistant, mixes control of your smart-home devices with other personal assistant tasks, like calling Uber or checking your credit card balance, which might be problematic if Alexa weren't such a good

listener — often much better than Siri. But it's not portable like your phone, so you'll need a \$30 Bluetooth voice remote (like I used) or a \$90 Echo Dot (a mini version of Echo) if you leave the room where Echo is installed. And Alexa can sometimes be maddeningly picky, understanding what you're saying but asking you to rephrase it anyway.

Lutron

Lutron, a company that has made dimmers since the 1960s, sells one of the smaller smart-home light switches, and it was easy to substitute for an existing switch in my home. The company also makes larger, boxy outlets that hang on the wall, convenient for renters who want to take their controllers with them. The best part was the way the switch elegantly dimmed the lights to darkness when I turned it off.

Elgato

Elgato makes lots of accessories, including an indoor air-quality sensor, a weather station and a compact wall plug that tracks energy consumption. They're all easy to connect with Bluetooth, but the range is limited: When I wanted to check the outside temperature, I had to walk to the door nearest the sensor. Outside, you'll need an Apple TV (or after the software update, an iPad) to relay commands, and the accessory needs to be within 25 feet or so of it.

Philips Hue

The initial setup wasn't hard, but it took a bit of doing to find some of the Philips Hue controls. And I could never get Siri to operate it, although that may have been because I didn't set it up correctly — which would suggest that setup could be a little easier. Like many LEDs, Hue bulbs are pricey (a hub-and-three-bulb starter kit is nearly \$200), but they last far longer than standard bulbs, so I would use them in my hardest-to-reach sockets.

For weekly email updates on residential real estate news, sign up [here](#). Follow us on Twitter: [@nytrealestate](#).

A version of this article appears in print on July 10, 2016, on page RE1 of the New York edition with the headline: Smart Homes, Now Simpler.

© 2016 The New York Times Company