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Meeting People Where They Are: Human-centered Innovation

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Tech adoption among older adults and within elder care organizations has gained massive momentum in recent years. During the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers were making significant tech purchases—some for the first time—and senior living communities were shifting their mindset from viewing Wi-Fi as an amenity to treating it as essential infrastructure.

However, despite this rapid progress, it seems that the sense of urgency has subsided in some sectors of elder care, often because immediate operational challenges take precedence. Meanwhile, technology continues to advance at breakneck speed. The rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Large Language Models (LLMs) has created a flood of new tools, leading to a sense of overwhelm for anyone who is not a “tech insider.” For most older adults and family caregivers,

keeping up is unrealistic. It is a significant challenge simply to know that technology exists to help with aging, let alone to choose the right solution.

This is the critical role of Certified Senior Advisors (CSAs). In an era of fragmentation, uncertainty, and accelerating change, aging professionals must serve as the connective tissue that translates lived experience into better solutions—and that includes technology.

The Reality of Fragmented Systems

One of the key universal challenges for older adults and families is the fragmentation of services. Whenever there is a major life transition—whether it is retirement or a sudden health crisis that impacts someone's ability to live independently—older adults and families struggle to figure out their next move. They must prioritize an ever-growing list of tasks,

identify which organizations to contact for support, and decipher what their insurance covers.

In 2026, older adults and families already understand that technology can be part of the solution. Tech adoption among older adults is the highest it has ever been (AARP, n.d.), and family caregivers are already utilizing AI for everyday caregiving tasks (Wynn, 2025).

However, the tech ecosystem is just as fragmented as traditional community services and can be as difficult to navigate as the healthcare system. Tech companies often market themselves by showcasing sleek design and impressive features, but these are not necessarily what older adults and their families prioritize. When they search online for “the best solution for X,” they often find generic articles that do not address their specific situation. In AgeTech, there is rarely a one-size-fits-all solution.

Meeting People Where They Are

Empathy is a guiding principle in Human-Centered Design (HCD). HCD is a problem-solving approach that involves the human perspective in all steps of the problem-solving process (Dam, 2025). Tech startups and product teams who practice it aspire to collaborate with older adults, family caregivers, and elder care professionals to understand the “lived experience” of their users.

The goal is to understand needs, motivations, and goals—which are not always aligned—to build the right product. The end result should solve a specific problem for a specific user persona. For example, one person may want a wearable device for fall prevention and detection, while another might refuse to replace their existing watch and prefer a wall-mounted sensor. A family might be concerned with scammers calling their loved one and install a call-screening phone, while another family might prioritize monitoring bank accounts for suspicious activity.

Innovation that truly matters in aging is, and must always be, human-centered (Digital.gov, n.d.). When innovation aligns with lived experience, it creates systems that support autonomy and dignity rather than adding to the confusion.

Beyond the Device: Housing as a Social Determinant of Health

Innovation in aging isn't just about the gadgets we carry; it is about the environments in which we age. One of the most critical components in our environment is the house that we live in. Our built environment has long been recognized as an important social determinant of health, and due to the economic realities,

the number of older adults experiencing homelessness has grown dramatically over the past few decades (Stevens, 2024). When an older adult faces a sudden transition, such as the inability to navigate a two-story home after surgery or the financial strain of maintaining a big house on a lower fixed income, the primary goal isn't “finding tech,” it's finding safety.

A compelling example of a startup working to solve this is Upside; they work with health plans to provide housing stability for vulnerable populations. While Upside is powered by a sophisticated technological backbone, the core of their mission is deeply human. As founder Jake Rothstein (2025) explained in a recent interview for The AgeTech Podcast, housing is the “foundational relationship driver” that builds the trust necessary to engage on other health needs like nutrition or medical transportation.

In this model, technology serves as the “back-end” supporting the main event which is providing housing stability. Upside uses AI and automation to handle administrative burdens. For example, they match housing inventory to older adults who are currently looking for housing solutions so their “Care Guides” can focus on the high-touch, empathetic work of helping people in crisis (Etkin, 2025).

As I've been reviewing and tracking the AgeTech ecosystem for the past few years, I've noticed that many of the startups in it aren't just about the tech. Instead, tech is the enabler for aging with freedom and dignity. Technology is what allows us humans to help other humans navigate the fragmented systems of housing, healthcare, and daily life—at scale.

The Role of CSAs

CSAs have a dual role to play in this ecosystem: as advocates and as connectors.

First, they can be advocates for better innovation. CSAs can impact the creation of new technology by bridging the gap between developers and users. Startups in the “AgeTech” sector often appreciate the perspective of elder care professionals and seek to interview them during the preliminary user research phase. CSAs can point innovators toward the problems that are most critical to solve right now, and where existing solutions fall short. They can also connect startups with older adults and family caregivers who can guide development through their lived experience.

Second, CSAs can help families navigate the ever-changing landscape of technology. This means looking beyond marketing hype to evaluate whether a solution is a good fit. It does not require subscribing to dozens of tech newsletters; rather, it requires the skills to evaluate solutions based on the client's unique context.

For example, consider the challenge of falls. There are countless options, from AI-enabled wearables to personal emergency response systems (PERS). Solutions range from high-end wall-mounted sensors costing thousands of dollars to mid-range wearables and subscription-based PERS. If a professional does not start by looking inward and understanding what is important to (and possible for) the client, comparing these products will not be helpful.

Human-Centered Innovation in Practice

When helping families with care navigation, CSAs can triage the situation by understanding not just the most urgent challenge, but also the available resources the family may not be aware of, such as insurance reimbursement or tech that's available through an area agency or an employer. For example:

- **Care Coordination:** Tech-enabled solutions sometimes offered as employee benefits can connect family caregivers with experts and help them find hyper-local information. Apps that can assist with tracking appointments, meals, and care shifts while coordinating between paid and family caregivers might be available for free.
- **Dementia Care:** Solutions designed specifically for caregivers of those with dementia, such as Map Habit or Zinnia TV, can support daily routines and engagement. These may be provided through an area agency on aging.
- **Legacy and Storytelling:** Platforms like LifeBio may also be available through an Area Agency on Aging to help capture life stories.
- **Digital Organization:** "Digital vaults" can keep important documents in one secure location for access during caregiving and after. This would typically be a subscription service, but some vendors offer free versions with limited storage.

With so many solutions already available on the market, CSAs are uniquely positioned to serve as advocates during the design process. They can also assess the needs of older adults and family caregivers and help them determine which of the readily available solutions would be best for them.

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As a CSA®, you are uniquely qualified to help your clients when it comes to technology. Here are some tips:

Assess Tech Readiness: Before looking for a solution, ask about the client's infrastructure and habits. Do they have Wi-Fi in their home? Do they wear a watch daily? Are they comfortable with sensors, smart speakers, and other smart home solutions that can support aging in place?

Check Financial Fit: Innovative solutions often have varying payment models. Verify if a device is reimbursed by Medicare Advantage or long-term care insurance, or if the client prefers a one-time purchase over a monthly subscription.

Focus on the Problem, Not the Feature: Clients rarely care about "AI" or "algorithms." They care about safety, connection, and autonomy. Frame the technology search around the specific problem it solves for their daily life.

Inquire about tech support: If you find a suitable solution, is there anyone available to help with set up and provide ongoing tech support? Some tech companies only offer tech support via chat and expect the user or their family to be able to troubleshoot using written online help articles—which may not be suitable for all families.

tions to build human-centered solutions. Keren is a frequent speaker on innovation in aging.

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