DESIGNING FOR SENIORS

WHO'S MINDING THE FOLKS?

BY BRIAN JUSTICE

Pew Research currently identifies 47 percent of American adults as members of the "sandwich generation," people between 40 to 59 years old who care for a parent while raising a minor child – or supporting an adult one. And there are going to more. More than 14 percent of people in the United States were over 65 in 2013, and that figure is projected to increase to more than 19 percent by 2030.

What this means for millions of people is that as parents are less able to fully care for themselves, their children have less time than ever to provide that care. And as many as 40 percent of the caregivers report extreme levels of stress, according to the AARP.

Industry and innovation is providing some relief. CarePredict in Florida has developed Tempo, a sensor worn on the wrist that detects motions, such as walking, running, sitting, standing, lying down, and the wearer's location. Products such as Tempo are created with seniors and their caregivers in mind. Their use of technology varies and while the fully tech savvy senior is not unknown, they are rare. And none of them grew up with smart phones, laptops and iPads.

"If you design a product thinking of the needs of all different kinds of users, there is a great deal of overlap," says Betsy Goodrich, Vice President of Design for Boston based Manta Design, who worked with CarePredict on Tempo. "So something that can be easily used by a senior means that it can generally be used easily by most people. And the same can be said when we take into account certain handicaps that people may have. If you design for their easy use it is usually a win-win for everybody else."

Tempo works by receiving data about the user's habits, physical abilities – or lack of them – and the software then uses machine learning to further refine the profile and create an individualized rhythm journal. A small "hub" that plugs into an outlet tracks data about the wearer's movements and transmits it over the internet. The caregiver logs onto a private account to see the data, receive alerts or change who may access the journal. Privacy is respected in that the device tracks movement, not activity, and the caregiver controls access.

The device is small and is worn on a band that can be changed out to look like a bracelet or a wristwatch, and it represents a step forward for motion tracking devices in that it allows for multiple users in one household, tracking the individual movement rhythm data for each person.

Another advantage of the device is that it addresses the concern of many seniors who "don't want to bother anyone," says Satish Movva, CarePredict's CEO, and it meets the caregiver's needs and concerns, as well.

"That the system makes the call when there's cause for concern takes the senior out of the loop, so there's no fear of 'crying wolf,'" says Movva. "And the system is for the adult children, too. They're busy with everything else so we are serving the adult children of seniors, as well. It does have a dual purpose."

Technology designed for seniors will increasingly be created with their caregivers in mind, especially as the numbers of both continue to rise. Knowing where Mom and Dad are, literally, in an unobtrusive and private manner means that as more people move through these life stages they will do so with peace of mind.