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BY RACHEL F. GOLDBERG

Property
management
software
improves
the apartment
lifestyle.



The ever-increasing use of tablets and smartphones is driving technological changes in property management software. Residents and prospects want to handle their affairs on their own terms—in their homes, offices or cafés and on their schedules. Staff can accomplish more and senior management can be advised on property performance. Multifamily housing property managers and their software providers recognize that the increasing use of mobile devices is changing the way people conduct business both as consumers and providers. Consider these scenarios:

Making Leasing Available 24/7

Busy residents searching, leasing on their terms: Time, location and price.

Midnight. The community is quiet. The leasing office is locked. Onsite staff members are sound asleep.

Across town, a woman is settling in for the night. She is searching for a place to live while the clock ticks toward midnight. For her, tomorrow is another busy day.

12:15 a.m. Cozy on the couch with her tablet, the woman searches for apartment communities in the vicinity of her new job. She views photos of several communities, reads about amenities and evaluates floor plans.

12:45 a.m. One community catches her eye. She checks the community's reputation on several review sites. The prospective resident likes what she reads. She texts her friend across the country to get a second opinion. Taps "Send."

12:55 a.m. Friend confirms it's a good find. The size, the community amenities, the rate and location are just right. From the pictures she sees online, the community and apartment are well taken care of.

1 a.m. The prospect pulls up the rental application on her tablet, completes the form, submits it and pays the application fee. She plugs in her tablet to charge and goes to sleep.

8 a.m. Leasing agent arrives at community, unlocks leasing office and turns on lights. Leasing agent opens her tablet to look at her automatically scheduled property tours for the day and discovers that a vacant apartment has a prospective resident. The application is complete, application fee has been deposited, the prospect was screened automatically and the lease was generated.



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Prospects and residents interact with communities in ways different than ever before, because of the greater mobility afforded by new technology and increased user friendliness made available by property management software.

"It used to be hard for our residents to take off from work and come sign their lease or renewal documents. Not any longer; 2 a.m. is no problem," says Cali Ritter, Senior IT Analyst, CWS Apartment Homes. "We really are leasing apartments 24/7."

These online capabilities not only play a role when the leasing office is closed, but also factor in during open hours, too. Ritter explains, "Even if the entire team is busy during the day with other clients, [the software] is still there taking our leasing calls, setting appointments and responding to all of our Internet leads."

In fact, leasing agents with Morgan Management take their tablets with them while giving property tours. They can close on

an apartment home on the spot. All information is entered into the tablet with the prospective resident so the forms are complete, application fees are collected by credit or debit card and screening is performed automatically.

Morgan Management's Training Director, Richard Shoap, says, "Leasing agents have told me that [a tablet] has allowed them to close a deal

easier by running the app and closing the deal with a prospect, as opposed to everyone getting back in their cars after the tour and heading back to the office." He says that he expects closing ratios to increase with this strategy.

Property management software automation saves staff members' time by removing tasks such as rent collection and service requests from their duties. If prospective residents and residents can receive automatic reminders, pay rent and request maintenance without troubling staff, they are happy to control their part of the transaction and office staff can focus on building relationships.

"With our prospect and resident portals' capabilities growing, we can stop doing day-to-day activities such as the guest card," notes Kristen Covington, Director of Property Management Software, Landmark Apartment Trust.

While leasing agents are able to focus where they are needed

most, the resident gains control in the leasing process or other transactions. This change is significant because an increasing number of prospects shop for apartments the same way they would shop for books, clothes or cars: By comparing prices and features online.

“The way people shop on Amazon or comparison shop is being replicated in apartment shopping, with competition

being all those communities online and the transaction being more of a buying process and not a renting process,” says Jake Harrington, Co-Founder and CEO, On-Site.com.

More people are seeking automated processes, just as they desire automated shopping experiences. This is evidenced through an increase in device use. “Smartphone use is growing overall

across most age groups from Boomers on down,” says Nat Kunes, Director of Product Management at AppFolio. Millennials and Gen Xers are leading the charge, but all age cohorts are showing increases, he says.

In tune with online shopping, Andrew Hull, VP Business Systems, FirstService Residential Realty, sees the possibilities of increased visibility with Internet Listing Services. More review sites and Craigslist give PSRR properties greater visibility, he says.

However, this came with a downside. Hull recalls, “We discovered in a particular area for one of our properties that our Craigslist leads were not well qualified.” His property management software helped identify how prospects came in. Ultimately, he says, “We were able to take more steps to prequalify leads before walking them through the property,” making “a better experience” for the staff.

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Article 2 of 4

Every year in America, undetected water leaks cost property owners millions of gallons of lost water and millions more in related costs.



With water rates rising in nearly every city (Atlanta is now up to almost \$30 per thousand gallons), underground leaks, irrigation leaks and catastrophic pipe bursts are draining budgets all across the country.

Droughts and water restrictions also emphasize the need for conservation.

A new technology from WaterSignal now empowers companies such as Cables, Cortland, Greystar and Johns, Lang, LaSalle to manage their water conservation efforts through real time viewing of usage.

For the first time, immediate detection of water spikes related to leaks can be communicated to a manager for quick action that can save owners thousands of dollars.

WaterSignal: A Breakthrough

Some maintenance supervisors routinely read water meters. But if a leak were to occur after the read, after hours or over a weekend, no one would know of the excessive usage spike until the next read, by which time thousands of gallons

could be lost.

Water utilities typically read meters monthly. A property manager may not realize there is an unseen leak until a large water bill is received 30-60 days later.

WaterSignal's breakthrough technology features a self-contained, non-intrusive device that listens to the pulse of a water meter in real time.

Through the process, data is collected and sent wirelessly to a secure website portal where managers and owners can view a property's water consumption for the entire month, day, or even down to the hour.

Much like an energy surge that pops a circuit breaker, when water spikes above the preset hourly or daily limit, the device detects the problem to immediately alert property staff via SMS text and/or email.

Also, if a building has more than one meter being monitored the manager can quickly determine which meter spiked in order to isolate the problem area faster for repair.



Please visit watersignal.com
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Phone-Friendly, Of Course

“Recent innovations have caused renters to grow accustomed to the mobility and convenience afforded to them by their smartphones. Engadget.com reports that the rate of users accessing the Internet from a mobile device doubles every year and there are no signs of a slow down.

“Consider that renters are consumers of rental real estate. The key to leasing success, especially lease-up success, is to meet consumer demand and deliver a leasing experience that falls into this new paradigm. This means providing a 100 percent online solution, available 24/7 that allows renters to go from listing to lease in one seamless process.”

—OnSite blog, “When the Construction Stops, the Consternation Begins, How Online Leasing Technology Can Alleviate Your Anxiety About Lease-Ups,” October 2013

Piping-Hot Service

Maintenance requests submitted right on time.

10 a.m. A college student residing at a private community on his college campus rolls out of bed and ambles to the shower where he begins getting ready for his first class of the day.

10:15 a.m. After a hot shower under a low-flow showerhead, he meanders to the kitchen to get his morning coffee before hitting the books. There in the kitchen, he is fully awakened by harmonizing drips. One corner of the kitchen offers the aromatic drip of a coffee pot. The other corner echoes with a drip under the sink.

10:18 a.m. Student pulls out his smartphone and logs onto the resident portal. He completes a work order form and taps “Submit.”

10:25 a.m. A service request pops into the maintenance technician’s schedule for the day.

10:30 a.m. Student finishes his coffee. As he leaves his drained mug on the counter, a text message chimes on his phone. The note is not his classmate making study plans; it is an automatic response from community management thanking him for notification of the leak and informing him that a maintenance technician will be out for repair.

10:45 a.m. The maintenance tech finishes his current job, records his notes on the service log on his tablet and checks his schedule for the day. He retrieves any additional supplies and tools and heads off to the next apartment in need of attention.

11 a.m. The student receives a second notice from his management company saying when he can expect the technician to enter his apartment for repair.

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Electronic work order filing is the path forward. Residents initiate the process, maintenance techs enter information as they work on a situation and managers can monitor progress. All the while, residents are automatically kept in the loop on the status of the requested repair through property management software suites. “With a click of a button, the property manager can fully monitor how the work order process is carried out and what the resident can expect,” says Adriana Keresztes, Senior Vice President, Residential, Greenwin.

“A lot of residents love that we’re corresponding more and they love emails. If we’re in their apartment they will know within 5 to 10 minutes so they’re not, ‘Oh my gosh, someone was in my apartment’ when they get home and they are not waiting for a slip on the door,” Keresztes says.

Automated processes and mobile computing improves the work order process as it does the leasing process. FSRR’s Hull



says mobile devices allow maintenance workers to see more easily the things they have to do, enabling them to use their time more efficiently. “They don’t have to input at a desk, or have incomplete information,” he explains. Residents enter all necessary information and the maintenance tech adds his notes, comments and photos while in an apartment.

Photos from an apartment can be handy for many reasons. One is substantiating damage in a residence. Imagine that a former resident complains that she didn’t receive her full security deposit refund as she expected. Will she believe there is pet damage in her former apartment? She swears she didn’t have a pet. Perhaps a picture would change her mind.

Covington explains the community can capture evidence of damage because maintenance staff “can take a tablet to an apartment that just moved out and take pictures, upload them into the cloud, mark them as we’re in [the unit] into the tablet, and note issues that we have to fix.” With the tap of a key, a photo can be emailed to the resident proving negligence.

Senior management also appreciates having work order data in one place. For them, a big picture view of site maintenance can provide information about a building itself. Catherine Moran, CFO, Greenwin, says they track work orders to see “complexities and nuances of a building.”

They can follow trends in a building, track costs associated with repairs and use the data to make strategic business decisions.

“I know that property managers and VPs are able to go in and see how a building is responding if there is an unusual number of calls. [The software is used] as a high-level management tool to utilize staff better,” she says.

Tracking Performance From the ‘Road’

Asset information accessed, discussed with staff from any location.

1:30 p.m. Property management company CFO returns from her lunch appointment and preps for her afternoon teleconference. Today she will brief the owner on second quarter results from the new revenue collection strategy at a specific community. Working in her office, she reviews data on her desktop computer.

1:55 p.m. Mr. Regional Property Manager (RPM) is traveling to visit communities in various states. At this moment, he is finishing a soda from his lunch while sitting in the frequent flyer lounge at the airport. Anticipating the call from the management company’s CFO, he pulls up the community’s data on his tablet.

2 p.m. Mr. RPM’s smartphone buzzes and the two executives discuss revenue collection while reviewing the same data in real-time on different devices in different cities.

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Viewing data in real time at any time allows owners and managers to make well-informed decisions about business strategy from marketing to building mainte-

nance and capital projects to lease up, to name a few.

“Having real-time data available to property managers and owners at any given point enables them to control, anticipate and make changes in the way they operate a building,” Kresztes says. Data can show when things aren’t going as planned, and management can respond with a course correction to be more profitable, she explains.

Property management software reporting capability is growing. “We used to manually do a very simple Tuesday Morning Report to give the weekly snapshot at every community,” Ritter says. “It took nine reports and a couple of hours to pull together.” Now, with their property management software the custom report is generated automatically. “No human error and no time taken away from the community managers,” she says.

Compiling Tuesday morning reports and first of the month rent payments have become easier with advances in property management software. More automation, more mobility and greater user friendliness make report creation easier for office staff and payments simpler for residents.



Influx of Venture Capitalist Funding Is Fast-Tracking the Private Cloud Market

As the examples of the owner at the airport, the student in his apartment and the prospect on the couch show, the demand for mobility will only increase. Cloud computing—relevant software and related data reside in designated space outside of the management company’s physical office—does the trick. As long as portals are optimized for any device, residents through senior executives can access information in the cloud.

According to Yardi’s blog: “...recent initiatives by Microsoft, GoDaddy, expansion by industry pioneers like Amazon, and an influx of venture capitalist funding have fast-tracked the private cloud market for major growth. This long-awaited innovation in computing has arrived as a cost and efficiency saver for companies of all sizes.

“...options for cloud users are nearly endless, with service providers offering a wide range of options for network configuration, security, replication and access protocols.” (“In the Private Cloud,” by Leah Etling, Jan. 10, 2014).

For multifamily housing, cloud computing allows property management companies to serve clients more readily. —R.G.



Friendly Reminders: Let's Stay In Touch

Residents Communicate With Each Other; Management Builds Sense of Community

5:30 p.m. Residents arrive home from work, school, grocery shopping or walking their dogs. They blindly pass the community bulletin board because their attention is turned to neighbors they haven't seen in a while, the barking dog, their tired children or the grocery bags they are juggling.

5:40 p.m. Residents unload their immediate concerns in their apartments.

5:50 p.m. A resident reads her email to learn that her closet door hinge was repaired and someone had been in her apartment that day. Another resident receives a text message stating that a package is in the leasing office for him to pick up at his earliest convenience. A third resident gets a pizza delivery as a birthday gift from onsite staff.

5:55 p.m. Residents log in to their community's portal to explore the social events of the evening. They check out the community calendar and learn that a movie will be showing in the clubhouse at 8 p.m.; a happy hour will start soon on the rooftop; pet relays are in action on the lawn.

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These scenarios are all feasible with property management software trending toward greater user friendliness

and more welcoming sites for residents. Residents can communicate with one another, and property management can help build community among residents, turning a property into a community. The more intuitive a site's functionality, the more likely residents are to delve in.

One location held a meet-and-greet to introduce residents to their new portal and encourage them to partake. "They've seen it in front of them, and they've seen the user friendliness," says Greenwin's Keresztes. Because of this, for the past seven months, "month over month we've seen more residents enrolling in programs."

As resident portals continue to grow along with social media, property management software's role in electronic communications will continue to expand.

"Software... will pull every aspect of the resident experience into one area," Ritter says. "[Residents] can follow the social events at the community and the local area, sign their lease, pay

rent, submit service requests, post items for sale, the list goes on and on. It is all about making it easy for the residents."

Enabling residents to retrieve and provide information is one side of the coin. On the other side, management proactively communicates with residents by pushing out information.

"A lot of residents love that we're corresponding more and they love emails," Covington says. "Residents love rent reminders..."

and they aren't feeling, 'Oh my gosh, it's the first and I have to pay rent.'"

Residents also appreciate communications about emergencies that can be communicated via automatic emails and texts. "For example, if the water is out in a building and it's 3 p.m. and they're coming home at 5, they get information instantly, and know what to expect," Covington says.

The software offers more and more resident services. For example, the resident participating in the pet relay may have shared a photo with the onsite team to include in a file. This is useful, says Tom Gwyn, President of Apartment Dynamics. "If we find a cat or dog walking around the property that got out we can find whose dog it is. And we can call Bob and say, 'Bob, looks like your dog got out. Would you like me to put him back for you?' and we can put the dog back in the home for him."

Pet or no pet, residents can choose

to be interactive or not, but the key is to "do business with them the way they want to interact with you," says On-Site's Jake Harrington. "Don't make them call you, don't make them visit your leasing office whether completing a work order or paying rent or notifying them. It is about user experience, but it is recognizing that the user is the renter."

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6:55 p.m. Leasing agents and all site staff have a full day. They bring their tablets back to the leasing office, restock brochures and generally tidy up.

7 p.m. Site manager turns off the lights, follows everyone out and locks the door.

7:10 p.m. Leasing agents are finished working for the day, but the prospect and resident portals remain open for business.



Gone Home, Still Open For Business

Even though the physical leasing office is closed, all aspects of property management still run with cloud computing. A maintenance technician who is called for a burst pipe emergency after hours can log the call and make notes on what he did; a resident can post a chair for sale; an automatic email can remind residents rent is due in two days.

The current trend is “movement toward the cloud,” FSRR’s Hull says. “It will be interesting to see in the next year how [property management software] companies race to reach higher organization demand: Whether the smaller guys can capture enough market and move faster or if big things can be implemented into a cloud solution.”

The path forward includes more and more technology to bolster the ways in which residents and property managers connect to each other and to enhance business operations.

AppFolio’s Kunes notes, “Property managers are creating goals in 2014, that, in addition to growing unit counts and company size, they are adding more automation and mobile technology.”

Rent Manager’s Andy Williamson concurs on the importance of mobile computing and user friendliness. “Companies are continuing to simplify and make products more at your finger tips,” he says. “Mobile devices are more important with everyday business, such as inspections online, putting in pictures and work orders.”

In sum, “As far as trends go, software should really be intuitive from a usability standpoint,” says Dave Bateman, CEO, Property Solutions. Making the system intuitive, device compatible and easy to use are the current keys to conducting business in the multifamily housing industry. ■■

—Rachel F. Goldberg is a freelance reporter based in Alexandria, Va.



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