

LEGAL MANAGEMENT

THE MAGAZINE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF LEGAL ADMINISTRATORS

The Smart Home Evolution

We've tried smartphones, smart watches, smart shoes, even smart socks — so we thought it was time to bring this smartness home, literally.



BILL & PHIL

*The Bill and Phil Show
Tech News & Reviews*

From the plethora of connected devices now appearing on retail store shelves, it is quite apparent that the era of the “smart home” has arrived. The choices are myriad and a little overwhelming, so our advice is to do like we did and take one step at a time. In other words, we decided to take an evolutionary approach and make our homes smart by introducing new devices and teaching new tricks a little bit at a time. We call this the “smart home evolution.” It’s in full swing, with many new exciting gadgets coming down the pike.

The first thing we have noticed about the evolving smart home market is that there are a lot of players with competing products, as we witnessed at this year’s Consumer Electronics Show (CES). Iris, Wink, Insteon, WeMo and Philips are just a few of the major players in this market, and all have similar product offerings.

There is no law that says you have to use devices from only one brand; however, product integration (smart lights, for example) can be easier when they are all of the same brand and controlled through a central hub.

Probably the most common smart device that many consumers have already been using is the smart thermostat, which provides a touchscreen interface, Wi-Fi connectivity, programmable controls and learning capability.

The popular Nest thermostat (now owned by Google) has been around for a few years and is very easy to install and operate. The Honeywell Wi-Fi Smart Thermostat is another popular option that we have been using. It has many cool features, but to be honest, the only smart feature that we use quite a bit is the ability to adjust the temperature setting remotely via a smartphone app. We most certainly will get around to training the thermostat to predict our daily temperature preferences, but, alas, we are too busy programming all of our other home gadgets.

The key is to take it one step at a time and let your smart home evolve.

EXPANDING YOUR SMART HOME ECOSYSTEM

Probably the simplest way to ease into the smart home “ecosystem” (we hate that word, but all the tech gurus seem to really like it, so we want to play the part) is to purchase a smart switch. This is

simply a Wi-Fi-enabled outlet extension that plugs into an existing electrical outlet.

We opted for the Belkin WeMo Switch because it was available on the Best Buy shelf and not terribly expensive at \$39.99. You can make any device “smart” by plugging it into the WeMo switch.

We plugged the WeMo switch into the wall outlet and then plugged a regular “dumb” lamp into the switch. We then downloaded the WeMo app, which promptly found our new switch and allowed us to name it whatever we wanted. We decided on the innovative name “lamp.” Now, we can turn on the lamp from anywhere in the world by simply bringing up the WeMo app on our phone and flipping it to “on.”

So the easy way to make a home smart is to get a number of these switches and plug regular devices (lamps, coffee makers, crockpots, radios, televisions, etc.) into them.

Controlling regular home devices via a smartphone app is cool enough, but taking a step up the coolness ramp is when you can control these devices with voice commands. Oh yes! Apple has a HomeKit product that allows compatible devices to be controlled via Siri voice commands. Google also has an app that allows control of smart home devices via voice commands.

However, our choice for voice control is [Amazon's Echo](#), a gadget that we purchased a few months ago and fell in love with. It was evident that Amazon had a hit with Echo when many smart home products from different manufacturers were touting Amazon Echo integration at CES.

For instance, our Belkin WeMo switch that we deployed first is compatible with Echo. So instead of turning the lamp on or off via the smartphone app, we can simply say “Alexa, turn on the lamp,” and like magic the lamp flips on. Now *this* is home automation that we can get excited about. It is our view that the Amazon Echo is going to be an integral piece in the smart home ecosystem going forward. (There's that word again. Impressed?)

Now that we have the basics down, it is time to continue the evolution of our homes into smart havens of cool technology. The question is, what do we deploy next?

We could go with the smart doorbell. Ring is a popular option here, which provides a video alert on your phone when someone rings the doorbell. We could start replacing regular lightbulbs in our house with smart LED bulbs, which allows us to control individual bulbs via app as well as change the color of the light emitting from the bulb. We could feed our morning passion for coffee with a smart coffeemaker called BrewGenie (it also plays music while it's brewing a fresh pot to wake you up). Maybe we need to invest in a smart vacuum that can be programmed to clean our floors at a certain time every day (or via a voice command).

The choices are endless and growing. The key is to take it one step at a time and let your smart home evolve rather than burying you in an avalanche of new technology. To be sure, the choices that are around the corner are even more breathtaking and exciting — smart refrigerators, smart walls, smart toilets ... well, we'll just leave it there. Have fun making your home smart.

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