# Podcast 6: Technology to Support Older People in the Home Transcript

Voiceover: This podcast is brought to you by the RNIB Older People and Complex Needs team.

Marion: Hi there, I’m Marion MacMillan from RNIB and today I’m going to be talking to Hannah Rowlett, who’s one of RNIB’s Technology for Life Co-ordinators, based in Cardiff. I’m here in the studio in Glasgow so we’ll be chatting long-distance with help from the studio staff at RNIB Connect Radio. Today, Hannah will be chatting about using technology to support independent living, and how to support a person with sight loss to use technology. It must be very rewarding when you can change someone’s life in some way by just helping them with some technology that they didn’t even know existed.

Hannah: Absolutely. Technology can be really transformational and can really change a person’s life, their outlook, and connection to the world and it can be incredibly rewarding and fulfilling when you support somebody who is achieving something they thought that they never would.

Marion: Technology is all around us, it’s never been more popular, or, as my daughter would believe, absolutely essential. But can people with sight loss use it, Hannah?

Hannah: Absolutely, although having said that, it’s a common perception that just because you have sight loss, you can’t. So there are lots of different sorts of solutions available and devices and it’s about exploring which is the best one for you.

Marion: What sort of things are out there?

Hannah: So, the most popular types of technology used these days are things like smartphones and tablets. Even though you can buy specialist products, mainstream devices on the market come with built-in accessibility features. So this means that pretty much any device on the market can be made accessible and usable by people with sight loss.

They come with lots of different features, so for example, you can make visual changes like changing the font size or even the colours on the screen to make it a bit easier to see. They also come with great features, like being able to zoom or magnify what’s on the screen, as well as built-in screen readers. So this is a feature that will read aloud any text or information that’s on the screen, meaning that you’re able to write text messages, send emails, use Facebook and have everything read aloud to you.

Marion: That sounds really interesting. There is lots more built-in accessibility than I was aware of. There are so many uses for tech these days - are there any specific things for people with sight loss?

Hannah: Yes, absolutely, so there are loads of different apps or applications that are available for the devices. These applications have features like being able to read aloud a document to you. So, for somebody with sight loss, it’s a common problem that they face every day, is being able to read their mail. You can get apps where you can take a picture of the letter you’ve received, and the app will read back to you the letter. You can also get features on app which will identify colour, identify money, or that will act like GPS so that when you’re out and about, they will tell you what street you’re on, or if you’re approaching a junction.

Marion: So, there’s an amazing range of apps that can really help out there. Hannah, I was going to ask, I’ve heard about, like, smart devices for homes?

Hannah: So, smart devices are speakers that you can talk to. So, one of the most popular ones on the market is called the Amazon Echo., which has been all over TV, lots of great adverts demonstrating how they can be used by people with sight loss. So, you very basically, ask it a question and it will give you the answer. So, there’s a ‘wake’ word that will ‘wake up‘ the speaker, you ask the question and then it gives you the answer. With the smart speakers you can do all sorts of different things like, very basically, adding items to your calendar to remind you to do things which I use quite often because I’m very forgetful!

Marion: (laughs) Oh dear!

Hannah: You can create shopping lists, so very basically, you can ask it to add something to your shopping list so you don’t forget it when you’re doing your shopping. Or you can use it for the very basic: listening to the radio, listening to Connect Radio, or listening to your favourite audiobooks and as well for company, you can ask it questions and it will tell you the answers. Sometimes, they’re very funny answers about how they’re feeling and what they’re doing that day and yeah, they’re fantastic devices that just really enable independent living and access to information that otherwise sometimes people who are blind ro partially sighted don’t get access to. So, I do have Alexa here but let’s see if you can hear her. Alexa, how are you feeling today?

Alexa: I’m feeling happy. I’ve been listening to some cheesy music. Ask me if I like pina coladas and getting caught in the rain.

Hannah and Marion both laugh.

Hannah: So, I’ll just ask her some things. Alexa, what’s on my shopping list?

Alexa: You have four items on your shopping list: tea bags, victoria sponge, milk and apples.

Hannah: Alexa, what’s in my calendar for today?

Alexa: In your calendar for today: there is one event remaining. At 2pm, there is a doctor's appointment.

Hannah: Another fantastic feature of smart speakers is that they can be used to make telephone calls. So this is fantastic because they’re hands-free, there’s no buttons to press, there’s no numbers to remember, once the contact is programmed in to the Alexa, she can make the call for you. So Alexa, call Bethan.

Alexa: Calling Bethan’s home.

Phone rings.

Bethan: Hello there, good morning, RNIB, Bethan speaking.

Hannah: Hi Bethan, it’s Hannah! (all laugh). OK, bye! Bye, Bethan, bye! These smart speakers can be really handy to keep older people safe in their homes. So, quite often we hear stories about how older people have fallen or maybe they’ve just got themselves into a bit of trouble and they can’t ring anybody, they’re not near a phone, you know, usually they’re forgotten to put their – if they’ve got TeleCare- they’ve forgotten to wear the device, so, to raise some help. So there’s a lot of stories of people who’ve been in that situation but who have a smart speaker in their home and so they’ve been able to shout to the speaker and connect to somebody else in order to raise the help which is absolutely fantastic. Smart speakers can also be linked to other items around the home, so you can use Alexa to do things like turn your lights on, to control your heating, you can also connect them to a doorbell, for example, so if somebody is at your door, you can then connect via Alexa to speak to them – so there are loads of things like that that can be used for older people to keep them independent in their own homes.

Marion: Yeah, that’s an amazing range of uses and things I wouldn’t have thought of, things that maybe just don’t cross people’s minds but would really help with independence and just people being able to do things themselves more then they might otherwise have been.

Hannah: Absolutely.

Marion: Hannah, can I ask, do you have any tips or ideas for people wanting to support people to use technology for their independent living or people who maybe work in a care setting and want to use technology for their customers?

Hannah: Absolutely, so first of all, everybody’s sight loss is different so just because a solution supports somebody else, it does not mean that it will support you or the person you’re working with so the first thing is to explore – explore with the individual what their sight loss is like for them and also what their skills are and what they’re looking to do with the technology. It’s not one size fits all, it’s about finding out about the person and what it is that they want to do. The other tip would be, wherever possible, to try and get the individual to be hands-on with the device. They can be quite abstract; tablets, smartphones, smart speakers, if you’ve never seen or heard of one before, so it’s a really good idea to get your hands on them, maybe then friends, family, someone you’re supporting who has one, give them a try, get your hands on them and see what you think. Another good tip is that when you’re supporting people, the world of technology is full of jargon. It’s full of all these terms that can be really complicated and that can be a barrier for people looking to join the digital world. So, try and start really simply and explain what all the terms mean, ty not to talk about the device itself, try to speak about what you can do with it – so what these devices enable is communication, is the ability to enjoy reading books again, or your leisure. Talking about technology in those terms is much more appealing than actually, the device.

One of the stories that I see quite often is I went to visit a lady once and we were talking about the technology and there was another person in the room who was banging on about smartphones and this woman was like: “I don’t know, don’t use a smartphone, don’t go on the Internet, hate it! Don’t want to do it! Don’t want to do it at all” so I was just having a chat with her and she just said: “Ooh, I’ll just get my mobile out” and I was like “Ooh, what mobile have you got?” and she got it out and I was like “Oh, what do you do?” – it was a smartphone! – and I said “Ooh, what do you do on your smartphone?” and she says: “Ooh, well, I go on Facebook and I do my emails and I do my banking” and I just thought: “Well, that’s it isn’t it? That’s somebody who is put off by the terminology and actually is using a smartphone and is using the Internet, she just doesn’t understand how, you know, the terms.

Marion: Oh, it’s so well integrated that she’s just using it without even realising.

Hannah: Yeah, absolutely, and it doesn’t matter really, at the end of the day. As long as you get the most out of what you want to do with it, then what it’s called doesn’t matter. And finally, seek advice and ask for help – there are loads of organisations out there that can provide information and advice about technology. First of all, there’s our team the RNIB’s Technology for Life team that you can contact, we’re always here to help. You can contact us by calling 0303 123 9999 or visiting our Technology Hub, which is on our website. It has lots of useful information about the kinds of technology that can be enjoyed by people with sight loss. Also, up and down the UK, there are loads of wonderful societies for people with sight loss. They are a wealth of information and can provide local support – so somewhere near you will be organisations that support you to support people with sight loss, and the people themselves.

Marion: Hannah, thanks very much, you’ve given a lot of advice about how technology can be used to support independence. Maybe for older people with sight loss and it’s also useful for people who maybe work in a care setting. Thank you for all the valuable information you’ve shared, I’m sure people listening will find it very helpful – I know I’ve found it really interesting and I’ve learned a lot from just listening to what you’ve had to say. I’m certainly thinking about introducing my Mum to Alexa! Thanks for your time.

Hannah: Thank you.

Marion: We also have an open badge on the Scottish Social Services Council website which you can apply for if you’ve listened to one of our podcasts.

Voiceover: If you found this helpful, listen to our other podcasts. We also have other information and support online from our Sight Loss Advice Service at rnib.org.uk/advice. You can also call the RNIB Helpline on 03031239999. We are the Older People and Complex Needs team at RNIB. For more information about what we do, search for us on the RNIB website.

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