

Technology Will Change Multifamily Leasing

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BY DONALD DAVIDOFF

The apartment industry's onsite technology is at a tipping point, the likes of which we have not seen since the late 1990s. That was a major conclusion of "20 for '20" — a recent study based on interviews with 20 senior property management and technology leaders about where the industry will be in 2020.

That period, starting 20 years ago, saw the advent of instantaneous credit screening, web-based PMS, resident/prospect portals and pricing and revenue management, for example. Those new technologies delivered transformative change to the industry; since then, technological innovation has moved at a much more incremental pace.

Today's confluence of smart home and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, along with other new entrants such as self-guided tours and short-term rental platforms, look set to change the prospect and resident experience and the way in which communities are staffed.

Preparing for the Tech Tsunami

"We are bracing ourselves for a technology tsunami," says Mike Brewer, Executive Vice President of Operations with RADCO Residential. "Our residents and prospects' tastes and expectations are changing, and some exciting new technologies are coming to market that can differentiate companies both in the experiences they offer and the efficiency of their operations."

AI technologies already exist that have the potential to revolutionize critical areas of service delivery. Leasing is an obvious example, with companies already testing AI-driven agents that can handle an ever-increasing proportion of leasing activity.

The benefits of having technology handling inquiries, answering questions and booking tours are obvious in a world where prospects increasingly demand instant responses and don't always want to speak to an operator. When coupled with the possibility of a self-guided tour of the property, leasing starts to look more like the self-serve experiences that we have come to expect and enjoy elsewhere.

Think about the process of buying an airline ticket. Not so long ago, you would have needed to talk to an agent to book the ticket and line up to check-in and receive your paper boarding pass. In a few years, booking and check-in have become self-serve, putting the traveler in control while relying less on people to deliver the highly repetitive elements of the process. It's been a win-win for airlines and their customers.

Defining the Property Associate of the Future

Forward-thinking apartment operators are already considering the impact that these technologies will have on operations.

"There are two fundamental questions we have to ask ourselves," Brewer says. "What's the optimum staffing for more technology-enabled properties, and what are the skills that we're going to need in an era when most people will only reach out to property staff when the technology can't solve their problem? The need for improved soft skills will go up as the need for administrative skills falls."

This changing technology landscape is one driver that is causing operators to rethink their approaches to developing their onsite teams. Another is the challenging climate for recruitment and retention, another issue highlighted in the 20 for '20 study.

Competition for high-caliber apartment talent has become especially competitive in hot markets such as Washington, D.C., South Florida and Atlanta, where new development continues to rise. Executives at The Bainbridge Companies quickly recognized that to recruit and, more importantly, grow their top-tier talent, they needed to take a radically different approach to training and development.

Re-focusing Training on Technology

“Technology is obviously a key component of onsite job functions along with the daily customer service aspect of leasing and resident relations,” Bainbridge Senior Vice President Dana Caudell says. “And while our training focused heavily on customer service -- bringing the new leasing agent or maintenance team member onto the site a day or two after hiring -- we saw a tremendous opportunity to optimize our training around technology.”

Today a five-day offsite orientation program for new hires allows Bainbridge to address every facet of the job and increases emphasis on the company’s technology stack.

“It is imperative to make sure that new team members are familiar with all of the technologies we use,” Caudell says. “It instills confidence in our teams when they step into their new roles and positions us for operational efficiencies and improved analytics.”

The goals of the revamped program are not only to ensure success from day one but to nurture talented agents for long-term futures with the company.

“Our teams are the lifeline to our business,” Caudell says. “As technology changes the way we operate, we needed to change our approach cultivating our teams. We believe we are creating operations and business savvy that was not there before. We are now better positioning every team member to grow within the company because they have a more well-rounded skill set and vested interest in how the business runs.”

As technology penetrates deeper into functions and service elements that we traditionally associate with service professionals, apartment operators will have to think more creatively about how to staff their properties and how to continually develop that staff. That is both a challenge and an opportunity as new technology promises to redefine operations for years to come.

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