



*July 2023*

## Automating Home

*By Mark Costlow*

In a recent issue we talked about the home automation technology landscape. That gives you an idea of what the environment looks like, should you choose to play with it. But, we didn't really give you many reasons to want to bother with it! So backwards as it may seem, this month we are going to list some interesting home automations that we have used or read about. This may motivate you to add some smarts to your own home, or at least explain why that one friend seems so excited about it.

First up is one of my favorites, and also simplest. The idea came from a post by a father whose son on the autism spectrum has trouble with transitions. Abruptly shifting from screen time to the leave-for-school routine could result in a tantrum or shutdown. So he programmed his living room lights to change color gradually as time-to-leave approached. He also set the TV to lower its volume over the same time period. This gave the kid subtle cues that the time to leave is coming up.

We did something similar in our house, to ease the transition from the morning coffee to leaving for work. We don't have a cognitive problem with the transition, but we might be late if we're engrossed in our phones. 20 minutes before time to leave the lights turn blue. 10 minutes before, they turn red. And at T minus 5 minutes they simply turn off. It's daylight so the room isn't dark, but it's clear the house is kicking us out and we should get to work.

Another variation on this is the "sunrise alarm". Have smart lights in your bedroom gradually increase to full brightness over 15-30 minutes before the alarm goes off. Especially useful if you have to wake up while it's dark outside.

Here are a few more ideas and some real life examples of the many things that can be done:

- Set thermostats based on presence. There are sophisticated "presence sensors" which can tell if anyone is in a room. They can ignore pets, but know if you are there even if you fall asleep. Some people also use phone beacons to tell if someone is in the house. (When you leave the house, your smart phone goes with you).
- Turn off lights when a room is empty.
- Calculate and set the appropriate brightness of lights when motion is detected. This will help you avoid being blinded when you need to turn on a light in the middle of the night.
- Close all the blinds in a room when the TV is playing a movie.
- Nag a particular household member to walk the dog, from 9 am until the dog is seen by one of the outdoor cameras. A similar strategy works for taking out the trash, or taking medications.
- Detect when the front door is left open and broadcast alerts every 5 minutes until it's closed.
- Automatically start the bathroom fan once the humidity goes over 65%. Raise the speaker volume when the bathroom fan goes on.
- Turn the bathroom lights red if the shower has been on too long.
- Issue an alert when there is a water leak behind the washer or near the water heater. Or, use smart water shutoff valves to detect a leak and turn off the water supply.
- Broadcast an alert when the kitchen timer is finished until someone enters the kitchen.
- Adjust TV volume when the A/C turns on and off.
- Automatically start an exhaust fan when the air quality monitor detects a buildup of CO<sub>2</sub>, radon or particulates like forest fire smoke.
- When you go on vacation, have the lights in your home cycle on at various times to make it look occupied. One system monitors your daily use for a couple of weeks and mimics it while you are away.
- Only run the pool pump and pond fountain when there is excess solar energy available.
- When the NWS issues a tornado warning nearby, flash the house lights while the smart speaker reminds everybody where the safe place is.

- One person had a large multi-area basement with poorly placed lights and switches. It was awkward or dangerous to navigate to them before they were on, or away from them if turned off when leaving. He replaced the bulbs with smart ones, and set it up so that when the light switch at the top of the basement stairs is turned on or off, it does the same for all the other lights in the basement.
- Speaking of sophisticated presence sensors, there are new ones that can not only detect when someone is in an area, they can tell if someone has fallen and run an automation in response. The automation could flash lights in another room, make an audible alert, or call 911. You may know that new wearable devices like the Apple smart watch have fall detection as well. The problem with those is you have to be wearing the watch at the time of the fall. A smart fall sensor can tell if someone has fallen in a bathroom for example, even if the watch was left by the bedside.
- One smart home enthusiast described his "morning routine". When the bed sensor detects he has gotten up in the morning, it disables the house alarm, turns up the heating, and opens the blinds in any rooms he enters. After a few minutes, the house speakers read out a set of announcements including calendar items for the day and the weather forecast.
- When everybody has left the house, trigger the robot vacuum to make a pass. A more advanced version of this automation sends a message to the homeowner asking if it is OK to start the vacuum. If they reply "Yes", it disables the home alarm motion sensors while the vacuum runs, and turns them back on when finished.

Most of these automations are small things. Many seem silly or trivial (although some are literally life-saving). The reason many are so excited about this is it changes our fundamental relationship to our homes. Before, your house or apartment was a static structure and you molded yourself to fit. If the only switch for a light is in an awkward place because of where you want the sofa, too bad you just deal with that. But with a smart home, the space becomes malleable. It bends to your will, reacts to your desires, removes small irritants to make daily life just a little more pleasant.

## New Member's Portal

*By Jamii Corley*

We have created a replacement for our Member's Portal and it's in beta now. If you'd like to see what we're up to you can log in at <https://mp.swcp.com>. Use your SWCP account name and email password to get started.

The new dashboard has all the useful tools from the old one and a few new things that we've been asked about, like the saving one or more credit cards without being on auto-billing. This allows you to easily pay your bill when you want. You can see which payments we're received in case you're not sure. The credit card payments in the new dashboard are processed immediately. it's easy to get an email receipt.

You can now do password recovery.

The primary account holder can easily set email passwords for secondary accounts and to modify your account contacts list, the set of people allowed to help manage your account. These can be both secondary accounts and outside consultants. It's good to review this occasionally to make sure only the correct people are authorized.

We're using a database of known compromised passwords to help you choose safer alternatives, with a tool you can use to check a password to see if it's appeared in a breach. For that check, your data stays entirely local here at SWCP.

Your dashboard password is now separate from your email password so once you're logged in you can now choose a new password just for the dashboard. This allows you to give dashboard access to an employee or consultant without giving them access to your email account.

**Note:** We refer to our new member's area either as the **member's dashboard** or as the **member's panel** or new **member's portal**. When you see "Panel Password" it's the password for the new dashboard. If you run into problems or have suggestions, please let us know at [help@swcp.com](mailto:help@swcp.com). We'll be adding new features over the next few months. We hope you enjoy using our new tool.

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