

ASK THE EXPERT

Home automation specialist Nic Black answers some common questions.

What are the benefits of integrating my home?

Firstly, smart-home technology should (although it doesn't always) benefit the lifestyle of the user. It should augment and supplement your lifestyle, so that you can get on with enjoying it, rather than being bogged down trying to work out how the technology works.

It should also provide flexibility. For example, automated blinds will close automatically at different times in the day to stop overheating. A smart home will almost certainly reduce energy bills and increase security. Lighting and heating can be controlled according to need, and lights can be turned on and off to mimic your presence if you are away for long periods such as on holiday.

Will it add value to my property?

More people are wanting a certain level of smart-home technology within properties, either through refurbishment of an existing house or a new build. In my experience I've seen clients' homes sell at a demonstrable premium because of the technology that has been installed.

I'm not very technical – is it for me?

Systems use simple icons to operate. For example, a speaker icon will indicate audio while a light bulb allows access to your lighting. Once users understand the options, home technologies can be as straightforward or as complex as the user wants. I try to simplify it to the lowest common denominator whenever I design a system.

What budget do I need?

Whether it's lighting control, multi-zone audio, automating your blinds, or interfacing with your heating, each of these facilities comes at a cost, so it really depends on how many of these elements you want to incorporate.

In my experience a relatively well-fitted-out smart home with integrated lighting, a few zones of audio and all the links with CCTV and access via some form of app that centralises all the devices, typically costs around £40,000 to £50,000, but that really is going the whole hog. Systems start from a few thousand pounds, but obviously they are going to be limited.

When is the best time to start planning?

Now! The most successful projects are

planned before the ground is broken.

In an ideal world the smart home consultant would be sat alongside the architect, M&E consultants and interior designers at the early planning stages, once the actual building envelope has been designed.

Things have to be coordinated, whether that's just future-proofing the cabling within a building or actually thinking about how to integrate technology into the fabric of the building and what that means then to the other trades. It all starts with a design and a budget outline so that the owners can consider all the elements such as the heating systems, windows, roofing and wall construction.

What is the best option – wired or wireless?

Really robust systems are available with multiple wireless access points throughout the property that can give you a very smooth experience, but you should always have some form of resilience and redundancy.

The bottom line is that I would always encourage hard wire connections wherever possible for reliability, resilience and very importantly for the maximum band width, which means large amounts of data can be streamed without distortion or buffering. This is more likely to happen with a wireless connection.

What are the latest tech trends?

I think that artificial intelligence is probably the most exciting thing because it affects everything – it interfaces with all things relating to a smart home. That's exciting because everyone can benefit from these technologies, from young families to older people. I think the whole world of artificial intelligence is going to expand dramatically.

It may be smart but is it secure?

If you are clumsy with the way you introduce technology into your home then you're making yourself vulnerable.

However, there shouldn't be any concern if you use an integrator who has experience of bringing different devices together, securing them in a central, intelligent network that is designed and fit for purpose with proper firewalls and all the usual protections in place. Home technology relies on internet access and as integrators we have devices to



lock down home technology devices so it would need a very sophisticated organisation to penetrate it.

What about monitoring and maintenance?

The systems we use are well developed and have flexible architecture that allows us to provide secure remote access so that we don't have to charge to come out to an owner's site. This means we can respond to most calls within an hour and make some kind of fix.

One manufacturer, Control4, is leading the industry by recognising that people don't want to have to keep going back to the integrator, so they have developed a system where owners can add devices and make changes when they want.

How do I start?

With our user matrix we talk about high-level principles. In other words, do I want audio in this zone? Would I like it now or in the future? Do I want TV, CCTV, video door entry access? Would I like it now or in the future? With these questions starting everything, we think about what cabling you will need so that you have a design that you may wish to install in stages, based around affordability or some kind of flexible changes of use of the property.

Nic Black established the Pyramid Group in 1996 and has over 20 years' experience in the audio/visual industry.