November 2021

Using virtual reality in a care setting

Adult Social Care Digital technology and skills review

Ipsos MORI, Institute of Public Care and Skills for Care

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This case study supports a review of technology and digital skills in adult social care, undertaken by Ipsos MORI, the Institute of Public Care (IPC) at Oxford Brookes University and Skills for Care on behalf of NHSX. Further information is available on the study webpage.

Problem to be solved

Optimal Living has a total of 70 staff supporting 30 people aged between 18 and 55 years old. It specialises in delivering residential and supported living care to people with learning disabilities, autism, mental health conditions and challenging behaviour.

Due to restrictions linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, Optimal Living had to change the way they operated to ensure they could keep people safe and maintain wellbeing, when many activities could no longer be done face-to-face.

Optimal Living wanted to provide positive and stimulating experiences for people during the pandemic. They trialled using virtual reality headsets to enhance people's quality of life and replace some activities that they could no longer undertake.

The project

Optimal Living had already started to embrace and use digital solutions. They had implemented a digital social care record, were using RESTORE2[1] to monitor changes in people's health, and because of the pandemic had started to use video calling software to communicate with external partners, such as GPs and multi-disciplinary teams, and within the organisation for management meetings across locations.

Through an NHSX project and their own monies, Optimal Living began using more digital devices in their service, such as tablets and smart televisions. This environment was supportive of a care worker's initiative to trial their personal virtual reality headset. The care worker had experience of using virtual reality in the entertainment industry and recognised the positive opportunity it might bring to the people they supported.

"Be open to new ideas" Care worker, Optimal Living

The virtual reality headset allowed people to experience the sensation of activities they could not do during COVID-19 restrictions - or would not usually have the opportunity to experience - for example, a taxi ride in New York. The impact of the initial trial with non-verbal people encouraged Optimal Living to buy virtual reality equipment and offer its use to people supported by their services.

Implementation

The initial virtual reality headset trial was undertaken by the care worker who had inspired the project, who then provided peer training and support to colleagues. With this support, staff found the technology straightforward to use.

[1] Recognise Early Soft Signs, Take Observations, Respond, Escalate (RESTORE2™) is an NHS physical deterioration and escalation tool for care homes

The main consideration was how people with complex needs were introduced to and familiarised with the headset, with some people not wanting to engage with the device at all and some requiring a gradual introduction over several sessions, until they were comfortable wearing the headset fully.

"The bottom line is such technologies need to be slowly introduced for those with learning disabilities" Owner, Optimal Living

A further consideration was identifying and sourcing content that would be relevant and of interest to individuals, particularly for non-verbal people. Through care workers' knowledge of the people they support, and liaison with families, content was identified and trialled from a popular online streaming service. Once relevant content was identified, the headset sessions' duration gradually increased and the intensity of the experience built up, for example, progressing from a car journey to a rollercoaster ride.

Once there was greater use and confidence in the technology, an online immersive learning environment provider was identified to provide interactive content for the devices. Based on positive results of the trial, Optimal Living will be implementing this platform, in conjunction with the roll-out of the headsets, to other locations to provide individualised experiences and to support activities programmes more broadly.

Outcome and impact

The introduction of virtual reality headsets has enabled people to engage with the outside world, virtually, enhancing their experiences and quality of life. For example, people experienced activities from trekking in Nepal to a hot air balloon ride. For those people who engaged with the technology, tailored experiences were undertaken. For example, a non-verbal person with cerebral palsy and an interest in both trains and the military was able to experience a steam train ride and participate in the 'Trooping of the Colour'.

"Interactive and immersive technology creates deep engagement and an emotional connection with the content." Director, immersive learning environment platform provider

The technology has enabled people to engage more, which has reduced behaviours that may challenge, and this has continued even after the lifting of lock down restrictions.

People communicated their enjoyment of the virtual reality experience in different ways. Staff noticed more smiling and increased engagement by non-verbal people, which staff felt was enhancing and developing their communication and relationship with the individuals.

"**It's a great feeling when you see the smiles from the residents."** Owner, Optimal Living

Lessons learned

The previous introduction of digital technology meant that Optimal Living staff were more confident to try digital devices and other systems. A care provider environment that shows a degree of digital maturity can give care staff the confidence and encouragement to explore the broader use of digital solutions.

This trial started because an interested member of staff suggested it, which shows the importance of being aware of and open to new innovations and technology solutions.

Optimal Living looks after people with varying needs and sensory abilities. This technology is versatile, cost effective and easy to use thereby appealing to the broad range of people supported. But the

interest, engagement and enjoyment of the virtual reality experience is very individual, and so will benefit some individuals but will not be taken up by all.

"Care workers can share the resident's VR experience via tablets or smartphones. This helps build the relationship and communication with the individual." Care worker, Optimal Living

In conjunction with an immersive learning platform, a virtual reality headset can provide a viable means of building life skills in a safe and confidence-building environment before being experienced physically, for example, traveling by public transport.

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