Photo: Llama Group.

Too many cooks
in the kitchen?

Do you work closely with multiple trades on projects? If the answer is yes, congratulations, you're probably reaping the benefits. If the answer is no, it might be time to start forming and embracing these relationships. **Amy Wallington** finds out why.

It is often said that practicality/functionality and beauty cannot be paired, it's usually a choice of one or the other. Many consumers believe that to have home automation installed means having it on show, making homes look small and unattractive. The modern day look of a high-end home is minimalistic and stylish in design. However, we know that technology can be integrated to enhance the home without affecting the aesthetic of the design, giving homeowners the best of both worlds.

When interviewing integrators about their projects for case studies, I find that one of the most common challenges they come across is trying to work alongside different trades such as interior designers and architects. Understandable really, as most specialities want to take control of their project to create the best possible development for their client. It can sometimes be a case of having 'too many cooks in the kitchen'. However, embracing the relationships and working as a team can not only make for a better overall project for the client, but it can also have huge advantages to your business.

Think about it, as a specialist trade, why try to do everything yourself? Why not bring other specialists in to do their parts and focus on excelling in your job and them in theirs. Ultimately, you want to create the best possible solution for your client, and if you're trying to do something that isn't your forté, it will probably have a negative impact on the end result.

Alex Josling is the co-founder and director of Seven Integration, and he recognises that although it doesn't give him complete control of the project, it's usually better not to sway past his area of expertise. "We are the experts when it comes to home technology, so we stick to advising on that. The interior designer may have a vision of how they want a room to look, and we search for ways to make that work with what we have available. We find that if you respect that everyone is an expert in their field, they will usually extend to us the same courtesy."

Although the designer usually has the final say in a project, working as a team from the beginning is the only way to create something that doesn't suffer compromises.

William Hopkins, managing director of Your Smart Home thinks that creating relationships from the start is key to success. He says: "I'm a believer in getting to know the teams we're working with early on as it gives us an insight into how we can help one another. Having the right people involved at the start just helps the project to run that much more smoothly which, as well as reducing stress levels, usually carries a financial advantage too.

"As a project develops, we're also not averse to bringing in additional specialities should it look as though they are needed. It's important to know what you're good at and what you're not so good at – it's tempting to try and take on everything, but you seldom pull this off, and certainly not to the highest standard."

Strategic partnerships

Andy Butler is one of the founders of The Llama Group, a company that incorporates architects, interior designers and construction into one business, designing, managing and implementing every element of a project. With a pool of selected companies from different trades, Butler says they work with none more closely than their AV partners.

"Any high end project needs to be viewed as a whole as far as we are concerned and as such why we have always been a full turn-key company, so although we directly employ most of the professionals we use, our integrators are fully set up in their own right and this relationship works well for us both," he explains. "It's crazy to think that either the end result and/or the journey getting there is the same with integrators being bolted-on or coming to the project part way through, not fully knowing or understanding the project/design/ objectives. As with any complex project involving humans, there always needs to be someone ultimately in charge and responsible which of course is us for every element of our projects."

From an integrator's point of view, Josling highlights that technology impacts on every part of the overall project and therefore, it is important to form strategic partnerships with every trade working on the project.

"Almost every project we work on will involve us working with some form of strategic partner, even if it is just the electrician on site. The majority of our work is on new-build properties and so there is usually an architect and a main construction contractor, but the list of trades we work with extends to include interior designer, mechanical and electrical contractor, cabinet maker/ joinery, landscaper, security, etc. In fact, almost every trade working on a property will have some form of impact on the technology we install or vice-versa."

One challenge AV integrators often come across is convincing interior designers and architects why their services are valuable and worthwhile to the client, and then why they should be involved from the beginning. The kit and requirements behind the technology is often not considered by designers, which causes problems if not discussed.

"It is undoubtedly a good thing to work with the rest of the design team on a project," says Josling. "There are so many factors we have to bring to their attention – ventilation for our product is almost always overlooked. And if you want a

Photo: IDS Lifestyle Technology.

"On the minus side, the amount a client can spend on technology is almost limitless, so sometimes it does rather eat into the design budget."

discreet system using lifts and motors to hide the technology we install, then these need to be integrated into the fabric of the building."

Tas Kyriacou, director of Intelligent Digital Solutions (IDS), agrees with Josling: "I believe it's an essential part in today's residential build that we work with interior designers and architects. Most projects require some form of technology and as great as an architect or designer is at their job, our elements of the project are sometimes overlooked. We should be brought in at RIBA stage two or even three so that we are involved in the design. This would prove to be very beneficial when the project is at its latter stages which is where we come in."

Educating all parties

Although not always the case, many professionals lack knowledge of home technology, making some integrators reluctant to work with them on projects. It is important the designer or architect know what is required in home automation as they often have final say on everything in the overall project.

Hopkins has had experience with an architect who gave his client the wrong advice because he was not educated enough in the area of smart homes. He recalls: "Most of the time, it's good having us all on board together, and it works best when each party excels in their own specialism, complementing one another.

But we did have one project where the architect was a 'self-proclaimed oracle of knowledge'. He had used one system and that was obviously the best. This muddied the waters with the client, as from our experience, this system he knew of would not have met the client's needs or brief. While it was a matter of bravado with this architect, 90 per cent of the time it's to do with comfort zones – they are understandably sticking to what they know or are used to."

Kyriacou has had similar experiences: "Sometimes translating what we know is right for the client and what the designer or architect believes is correct can take some time getting the message across. However, having an architect or designer involved in the process is hugely beneficial as the relationship and trust with their client tends to be strong, and they are able to deliver the message knowing that their client will feel comfortable in the decisions made."

These issues can be avoided by learning about each other's trades and knowing how you can complement each other's work. CEDIA has recently started reaching out to architects and interior designers to educate them on an integrator's role in a project.

On CEDIA's website, it states: "It is increasingly important for design professionals to recognise the impact that smart home technology can have on a project, so holding an open forum which allowed CEDIA representatives to discuss

this, was hugely beneficial. At the same time, it is essential that home technology professionals recognise what is needed from design and architecture professionals to enable technology to be considered at the early stages of a project."

Nicola Fulstow is the managing director of home automation integration company, SONA, which has recently been made a CEDIA Member of Excellence. She identifies a change in the market and similarities between the different trades. She adds: "I definitely think a greater understanding of each other would enhance any project as a whole and everyone wins.
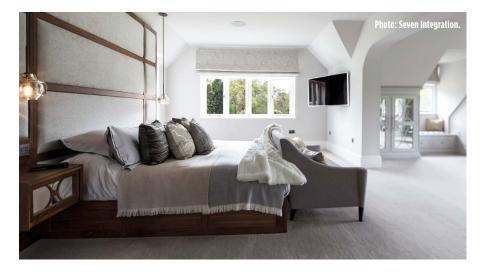
"Years ago, custom install was considered very 'techy', but now we don't even see ourselves as a technology company. We're designing lifestyles at home – they just happen to involve a lot of technology and can be very complex. But actually, at the core of what we do, we have very similar goals to an interior designer. I think that's why we love working alongside them so much. We appreciate their eye for detail, their creativity and the ability to bring a number of elements together to create a feeling and an ultimate 'wow' factor."

Kyriacou echoes this point: "I certainly think more needs be done from CEDIA, BIID and RIBA, whether it be through collaborative roadshows, seminars, and of course through direct CPDs from integrator to designer. With new upcoming CPDs by CEDIA, it gives integrators an opportunity to provide CPDs that are more specific to one element to home technology rather than just a broad overview. This way, integrators can return to a designer more frequently and have more educational content in a particular field. This momentum with new upcoming CPDs by CEDIA needs to continue into 2020/21."

Most design and architecture professionals want to be educated in home technology in order to grow their business and build a trusted community of professionals to work with. Butler maintains: "Education is vital, and we would never have achieved the level of acknowledgement without knowing the products/functionality and capabilities of what's possible. We have a fully integrated showroom and private home which are constantly being updated and used for testing new products and technology, and as such, we live in and use it daily."

Practical experience

Just through having worked on collaborative projects, trades build up some basic knowledge. Interior

Photo: Seven Integration.

"There are so many factors we have to bring to their attention – ventilation for our product is almost always overlooked."

designer, Dean Keyworth, the owner of Armstrong Keyworth, expresses: "Due to my experience on complex projects, I do have a pretty good understanding of the integrator's job. CEDIA and BIID have been working together for years to educate both parties on each other's roles and as tech advances apace, it is crucial to keep this mutual education up to date. I think both organisations are committed to this."

Fulstow also recognises how professionals are acknowledging technology growth and the need to get integrators on board, but there still needs to be more education. She says: "Some architects and interior designers really believe in our industry and see its value.

"However, there is still a way to go here with education. The more commonplace technology becomes, I actually think that there is a common misconception that an expert and experienced integrator is not a necessity. They often have the attitude that anyone can throw in a few TVs and some smart speakers, so why pay for an expert integrator?

"However, I think once someone has used and worked with an integrator or seen their work first hand, providing it's good, they quickly convert and want to work with them in all future projects. CEDIA's Member of Excellence programme is providing some much-needed accreditation for our industry which simply hasn't been in place before, and that unfortunately has meant some architects, interior designers and ultimately, end users have had poor, or in some cases, terrible

experiences with so-called experts. That situation is bad for the industry and all of us in general."
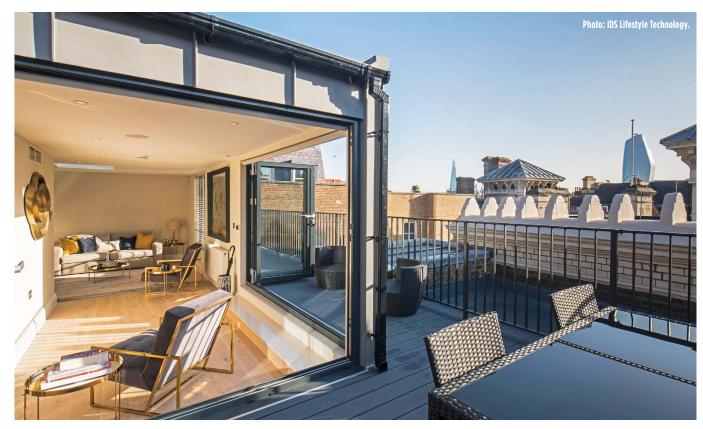
Benefits vs challenges

As this article has already outlined, there are many benefits to working with design and architecture professionals, but it doesn't come without its challenges.

Identifying the benefits to his business, Keyworth reiterates: "On the plus side, for high end residential projects, I think it adds a string to my bow as an interior designer to be familiar with how integration works and to have an idea of what is needed in terms of space for racks, plants, etc."

He does also see a negative to working with integrators though. "On the minus side, the amount a client can spend on technology is almost limitless, so sometimes it does rather eat into the design budget," he admits. "But that's why a good relationship is so important, as it means the various teams working on a project can be fair to each other as well as the client."

Creating a close working relationship with other professionals can lead to them recommending your company for more projects, generating more business. Kyriacou believes: "I don't think there are really any disadvantages to working with a designer or architect; I think there are several benefits. Firstly, it can provide a clear design from the outset, and clarity throughout each stage of the project, therefore making it an easier project delivery for the integrator.

Photo: IDS Lifestyle Technology.

"Secondly it gives an integrator an opportunity to develop trust and build a strong relationship with the designer or architect making the integrator their expert advisor in the long term. This will usually turn to further business for the integrator."

Josling also thinks that the advantages of working with other professions outweighs the negatives. He states: "The benefit of working with strategic partners such as architects, interior designers and the like, are huge. When we properly implemented a B2B model for our business, our turnover almost doubled year on year, managing to maintain similar gross profit margins.

"However, when a project is completed, apart from a possible service agreement and some upgrades along the way, you are unlikely to get another project from that client for years. An architect could be doing several projects a year. If only half of them fit the criteria to require our input, we could still be looking at a lot of business."

He also believes the architect plays a big role with the client. "Usually the architect in particular has the trust of the client. A client will spend a lot of time finding and selecting an architect so there is undoubtedly a trust there."

Get in early

Complications can often occur though, with the case of 'too many cooks in the kitchen' arising again. Josling points out: "There is another side to this coin. An architect for example might see us

as a complication. We make demands and offer promises that they are often sceptical about. If we are brought in late to the project then we will want to make changes to their designs to accommodate hardware, and for many, their experience of home technology is not particularly positive. The architect may wish to protect their client from other contractors like us, so everything becomes tainted with the architect's interpretation of the information. This can easily mean that the client does not in fact get what they want, but more the architect's version of what they want."

Josling recalls this happening: "We had exactly this happen on a project where the client wanted a home cinema. They communicated this to the architect but for some reason, when we specified a projector and screen, the architect said they just wanted a large flat panel TV. Because we were not allowed to have direct contact with the end client, that was what they got. It was only once the home had been built and we were handing over to the client that we happened to mention that the room would have been great with a projector in it and the client told us that that was actually what they had wanted."

This quite possibly demonstrates what Keyworth suggested earlier, where money for the technology eats away at the architecture budget, and therefore he took it into his own hands and in the end, his reputation with the client suffered because of it.

Similarly, Fulstow says: "There is nothing more frustrating than getting

to the end of a project and saying the words, 'if only we had known this' or 'if only someone had told us there was this feature, we could have integrated in, enhanced it and made it look better'. By working together throughout a project, details always come to light that help us to create something even better for the client. At the end of the day, the happier the client, the more passionate the referral and the better your reputation is."

Home automation and technology in general is becoming more realised by consumers. Professionals need to start accepting the fact that they will have to work alongside other professions in order to create the best solutions.

Concluding, Hopkins explains: "With technology becoming more mainstream, we are seeing lots of architects being led by their end clients. The issue architects then end up having to deal with is balancing a professional build, with essentially DIY electrics and gadgetry. Having an integrator involved means their client's aspirations can be guided, which may open up opportunities and possibilities that the client hadn't thought of. It means properly specified equipment that is fit for the application is supplied, at the right phase, which dramatically reduces the likelihood of headaches down the line.

"Similarly for interior designers, they have a vision which can be completely ruined by wrongly specified technology. Using an integrator helps their vision be maintained, as technology can be discreet or complementary to their overall picture."