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NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2026

CONNECTION

Tech the Halls

Wi-Fi Wishbook of connected devices

ROCKIN' THE JUKEBOTS



Original photo by Mark Gilliland

5-4-3-2-1

Launch your smart home

Smart home devices can sometimes sound like science fiction. The truth is much more down-to-earth. Simply think of a smart home as a collection of devices that connect to your internet and are controlled by your phone, your voice or on a schedule you decide.

The possibilities seem as endless as a clear night sky, and that can feel intimidating. Fortunately, a little planning and knowledge go a long way. So, keep it simple at first.

START WITH THE BASICS

You don't need to outfit your entire home overnight. Begin with one or two devices that solve real needs. Smart speakers, which may include voice assistants, smart plugs and smart bulbs, are great entry points. They're affordable and easy to install. They can also show how everything works together.

PICK A HOME BASE

Most smart devices work through an app, and many people find it helpful to center their setup around a single ecosystem such as Amazon Alexa, Google Home or Apple Home. Adopting one system can make setup smoother and reduce compatibility headaches.

STRENGTHEN YOUR WI-FI

Your smart home runs on your internet connection, so a reliable Wi-Fi network is essential. If you notice slow speeds or dead zones, contact your broadband provider to learn about upgrading your router or other available options. A strong connection ensures your devices respond quickly and consistently.

NAME THINGS CLEARLY

It might sound mundane, but naming your devices thoughtfully makes a big difference. "Living Room Lamp" is much easier to remember and say out loud than "Plug 3." As your setup grows, clear names keep everything organized.

KEEP SECURITY IN MIND

Because these devices connect to the internet, it's important to protect them. Use strong, unique passwords and keep your apps and devices updated.

Before long, you'll find your home responding in quiet, helpful ways. And while there may not be an astronaut at your door, it might just feel like you've taken a small step into the future.

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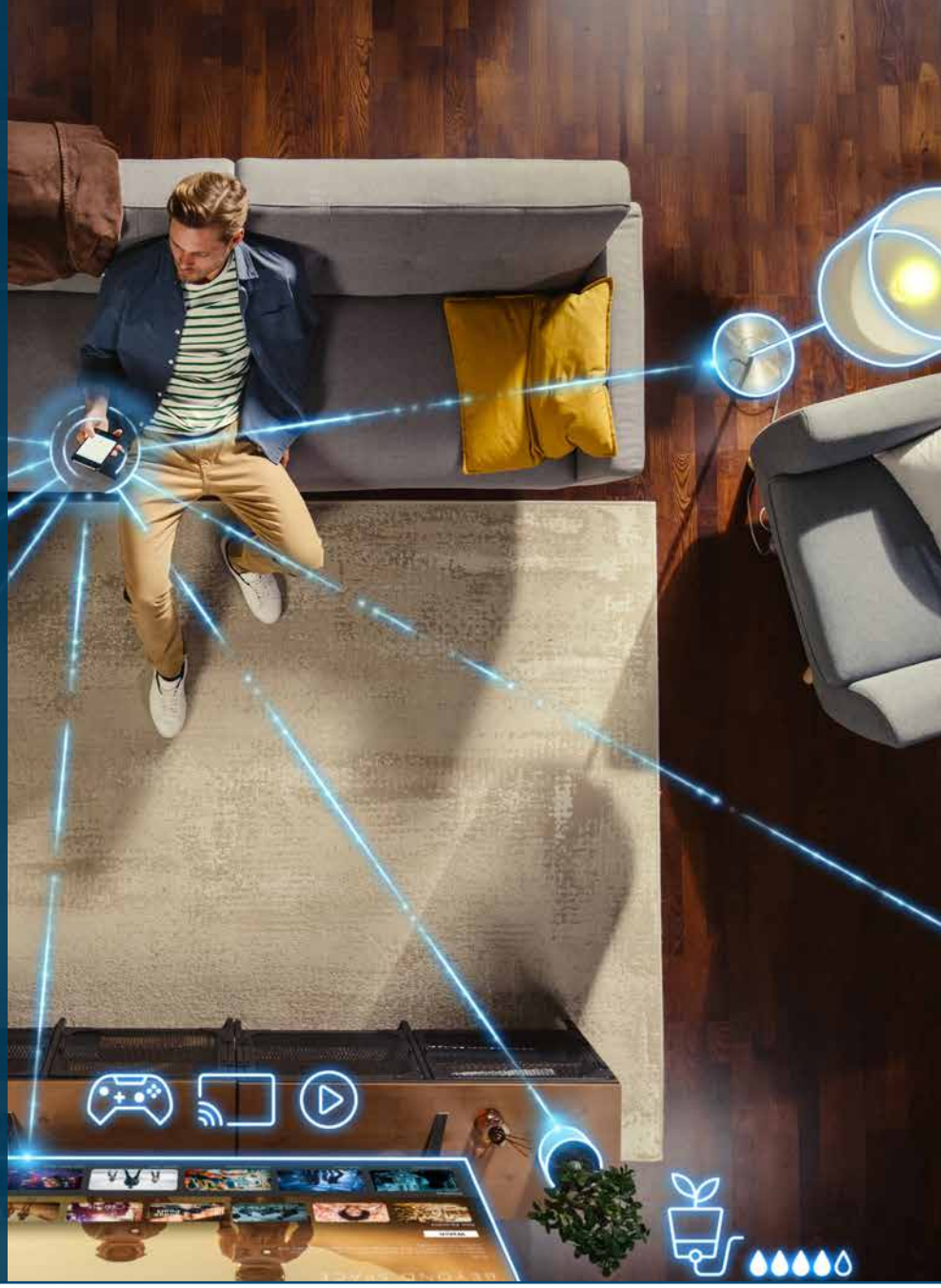
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Adobe Stock image by Gorodenkoff



YOUR LAUNCHPAD TO CONNECTED LIVING



KEVIN BEYER
Chief Executive Officer

Not too long ago, the phrase smart home sounded like something out of a futuristic novel. Today, it's part of everyday life, and it all begins with a reliable broadband connection.

Our new Wi-Fi Wishbook is your guide to exploring the connected home, with ideas for nearly every room and even the yard. You'll discover smart lighting, security cameras, thermostats, kitchen gadgets and entertainment devices, along with technology that can help children stay safer online and allow older family members to live more independently. We also include practical tips for setting up your Wi-Fi, keeping your network secure and choosing devices that fit your lifestyle.

Think of this magazine as your launchpad. You don't have to upgrade everything at once. Even one or two well-chosen smart devices can make everyday routines a little easier, a little safer and a lot more convenient.

Of course, every connected home needs a strong signal behind the scenes. That's where Farmers Mutual and Federated Telephone comes in. We're proud to provide the fast, dependable broadband that powers everything from video calls and streaming to the latest smart home technology. While the gadgets may feel a little out of this world, the people delivering your connection are your neighbors, committed to helping our community stay connected today and ready for whatever comes next.

CONNECTED KITCHENS

Smarten up the heart of your home

LEAK DETECTORS

These small sensors monitor sinks, dishwashers and refrigerators and send an alert to your phone if they detect moisture. When shopping for the perfect detector, look for loud alarms. Some even pair with systems that shut off water automatically.

SMART COFFEE MAKERS, GRINDERS

Start brewing your next cup from your phone, with a voice command or by setting a schedule. Some models can grind beans just moments before brewing. Choose one that fits your coffee preferences. Simpler machines are often easier for everyday use.

DIGITAL FAMILY CALENDAR

This wall-mounted digital calendar displays schedules, chores and reminders for the whole household. Sync it with your Google or Apple calendar, and put it somewhere everyone will see it, like the entrance to the kitchen.

SMART OVENS

Smart ovens connect to your phone to preheat, adjust settings and send alerts when dinner is done. Look for easy-to-use controls and features you'll actually use when selecting one.

SMART REFRIGERATORS

A smart fridge monitors temperature, sends maintenance alerts and sometimes shows what groceries are inside. These are a larger investment than other smart kitchen appliances, so prioritize practical features.

SMOKE, HEAT AND GAS DETECTORS

These detectors send alerts to your phone and identify different risks. Look for long battery life and clear notifications. Some can even trigger other devices, like turning on the lights.





Original photo by Mark Gilliland



Sponsorships, like this one from the Gene Haas Foundation, help the JukeBots robotics team meet its expenses.

JukeBots Heroes

Lac qui Parle Valley robotics team makes its mark

Story by JOHN CLAYTON

Back in 1969, kids loved to "Do the Funky Chicken," thanks to the R&B hit on Memphis' Stax label playing from jukeboxes everywhere.

That was a long time ago, but the Funky Chicken clucked again this year at Lac qui Parle Valley High School, where the JukeBots robotics team named its creation after the Rufus Thomas hit.

The Funky Chicken competed in March at the Great Northern Regionals in Grand Forks, North Dakota, where the JukeBots made a name for themselves, finishing eighth out of 51 teams after the qualifying rounds. The team then led an alliance with the Dawson Blackjacks and the Babbitt Iron Mosquitoes into competition. The alliance finished fifth overall in the finals.

JukeBots head coach Aaron Koosman says the whole adventure is a team effort, from the first turn of a screw to the competitions.

"It's a good hands-on experience," Aaron says. "This is a world competition, not just local, so the kids are competing against teams from the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Turkey, Israel, Australia, China—the world."

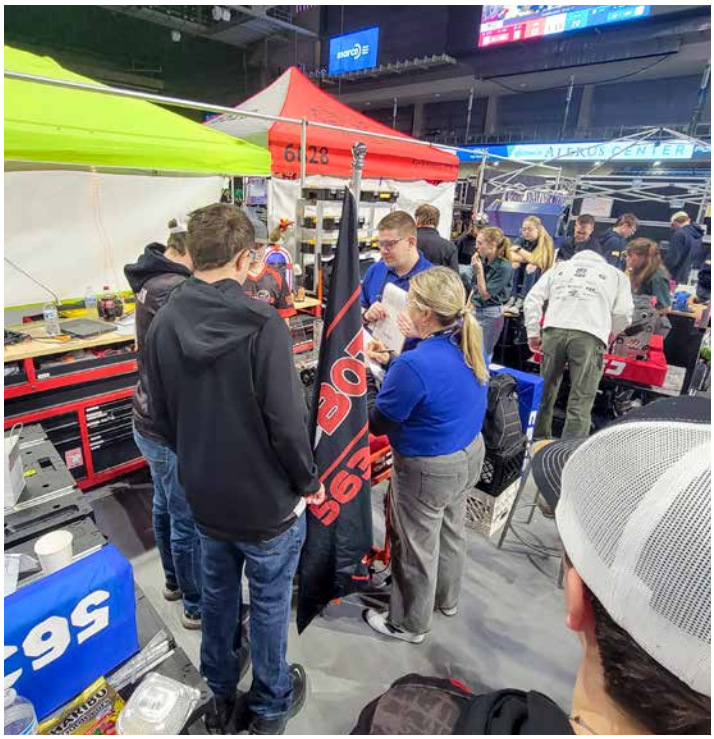
The process begins each January, when FIRST Robotics—or For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology—sends out instructions for its competition formats and specifications for the competitive robots. From there, it's an eight-week sprint as teams create their made-from-scratch robots.

"We all find out on the first Saturday of January what your robot has to accomplish, and every year it's a little bit different," Aaron says. "They tell everybody in the world what they have to do, then you

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The team enjoys a meal after a competition.



Two event judges interview JukeBots about their approach.

Photos courtesy of Kayla Golden

have eight weeks or so to design, plan, build, program, practice and strategize. It's good for kids to learn how to do different things, how to design and create a template and a prototype and then get it to actually work."

PART OF THE PROGRAM

The JukeBots roster usually consists of 10 to 15 Lac qui Parle Valley High students who get a crash course in basic and competitive robotics. For some, it's an introduction to STEM. For others, it's the first step along a career path.

"Three years ago, two of the kids went into robotics straight out of high school, and last year one went to college for programming," Aaron says. "This year, one of our seniors is considering diesel technology, and one is considering teaching."

Current JukeBots senior Caden Moe was the programmer for the Funky Chicken during his junior year. He's considering a career in software engineering after college and says the robotics team has played a role in that decision.

"It kind of pushed me toward where I want to go for college," Caden says. "It taught me how to do stuff like programming, electrical work and all of that. It's a lot of teamwork skills that you learn, too, and you meet a lot of new people as well."

Caden and Riley Gades will both be back on the bus for the long trips to Grand Forks this year. "You learn stuff about engineering and a lot about teamwork," says Riley, who plans on entering the workforce after high school.

But the learning goes far beyond the workbench, something Caden has come to appreciate.

"I'm not always the most sociable interaction type of person, but I do like going to competitions, and I like talking to all the people there," he says. "They're definitely all a bunch of smart people—some of them a lot smarter than me."

Tyler Bradseth, in his second stint as a coach with the JukeBots, says the robotics program gives kids who may not be interested in athletics or other activities an opportunity to join a team.

"I think it's just a fantastic program. It allows the kids to be creative and tackle unique problems," Tyler says. "It really flexes on some of the strengths of what I think is kind of the future of manufacturing and of agriculture, where we're seeing more and more of the robotics being put in place. It's allowing some of these kids who aren't necessarily as interested in things like sports or that kind of thing an outlet to still be competitive and flex some of their own skills, which has been really cool to watch."

GETTING TO GRAND FORKS

Building a better robot is just part of the JukeBots' job description. They also handle marketing and plan fundraisers that keep the team going. Companies, including Farmers Mutual and Federated Telephone, sponsor the team and help keep the JukeBots in business.

Aaron says all of it is necessary because the team's $20,000 budget usually doesn't cover all the expenses. Entry into the Great Northern Regionals alone is $6,300. A second contest is $4,000 and a third is discounted more. "The rest is for travel, hotel, food and replacing tools when we need to and other things that get broken and stuff like that," Aaron says. "It can get expensive, so we need the community support."





Adobe Stock photo by ppa5

RELAXATION STATIONS

Bring the spa experience to your bed and bath

FRAGRANCE SYSTEM

Release your favorite scent on a schedule or whenever the device detects motion, keeping your space fresh without constant spraying. Look for adjustable intensity and simple app controls. Avoid placing it directly near vents.

SMART SHOWER EXHAUST

These fans clear steam and odors, and some feature voice control and automation. Models with built-in humidity sensors are especially helpful. They activate when steam rises. Check compatibility with your favorite voice assistant.

SMART BEDS

A smart bed can help shape how you feel when you start and end your day. Popular features include sleep data tracking and temperature control for optimal comfort. These systems often rely on a companion app for full functionality.

SMART CURTAINS

Automated curtains can gently let in natural light as you wake up. Look for quiet motors and check that the curtains fit your existing curtain rods. Battery-powered models are easier to install, but wired versions offer longer-term convenience.

SMART TOOTHBRUSHES

These high-tech dental devices build better daily habits by tracking how long and how well you brush. Look for an app that's easy to understand. Most connect via Bluetooth rather than Wi-Fi, and battery life varies by model.

AIR PURIFIERS

Compact air purifiers reduce moisture-related odors and airborne particles, keeping the bathroom feeling clean. Choose one suited for small spaces and look for an automatic mode that adjusts as air quality changes. Place it near, but not too close, to moisture sources.

NOW-THIS-IS-LIVING ROOMS

Level up your favorite gathering space

SMART SPEAKERS

These voice-controlled devices play music, answer questions and control other smart products. Place them where you love to lounge, near a couch or on a side table. Look for devices with clear voice recognition, which matters more than extra features. Google and Amazon offer solid options.

SMART DISPLAYS

Enhance the smart home experience with a screen. These convenient displays show video calls, recipes or camera feeds. They work best in spots where you glance often, like a media console. Check privacy settings and camera controls to stay confident about your security.

SMART TVs

Smart TVs connect directly to streaming apps and your home network, eliminating that clunky cable box. Look for an easy-to-navigate menu and reliable app support. A world of endless entertainment awaits.

SMART THERMOSTATS

A smart thermostat learns your schedule and preferences, adjusting temperatures automatically. It's an effortless way to control energy costs. Before buying, be sure to check the device's compatibility with your heating and cooling system.

GAMING CONSOLES

Modern consoles aren't just about online gaming. They also double as entertainment hubs that stream movies and shows, play music and connect to other devices like smart speakers.

PET FEEDERS AND CAMERAS

Automatic feeders and pet cameras keep you connected with your best buddies when you're away from home. Look for simple controls and reliable notifications.

ROBOT VACUUMS AND MOPS

Put your cleaning on a schedule. Robot vacuums and mops only need clear floor space to get to work. Mapping features help them learn the layout of your home, so efficiency improves over time.



Adobe Stock image by James S. Cowan


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KEEPING TABS ON YOUNG EXPLORERS

Tools designed with child safety in mind

Designed for children of all ages, from infants to teens, smart home devices can help ensure a safe environment even when the kids are not in.

IN-ROOM MONITORS

Smart monitors stream live video to smartphones. Some models can notify parents when their little one is moving around more than normal. Others double as sleep trackers and even play lullabies and white noise to soothe the baby back to sleep.

SMART LOCKS TO THE RESCUE

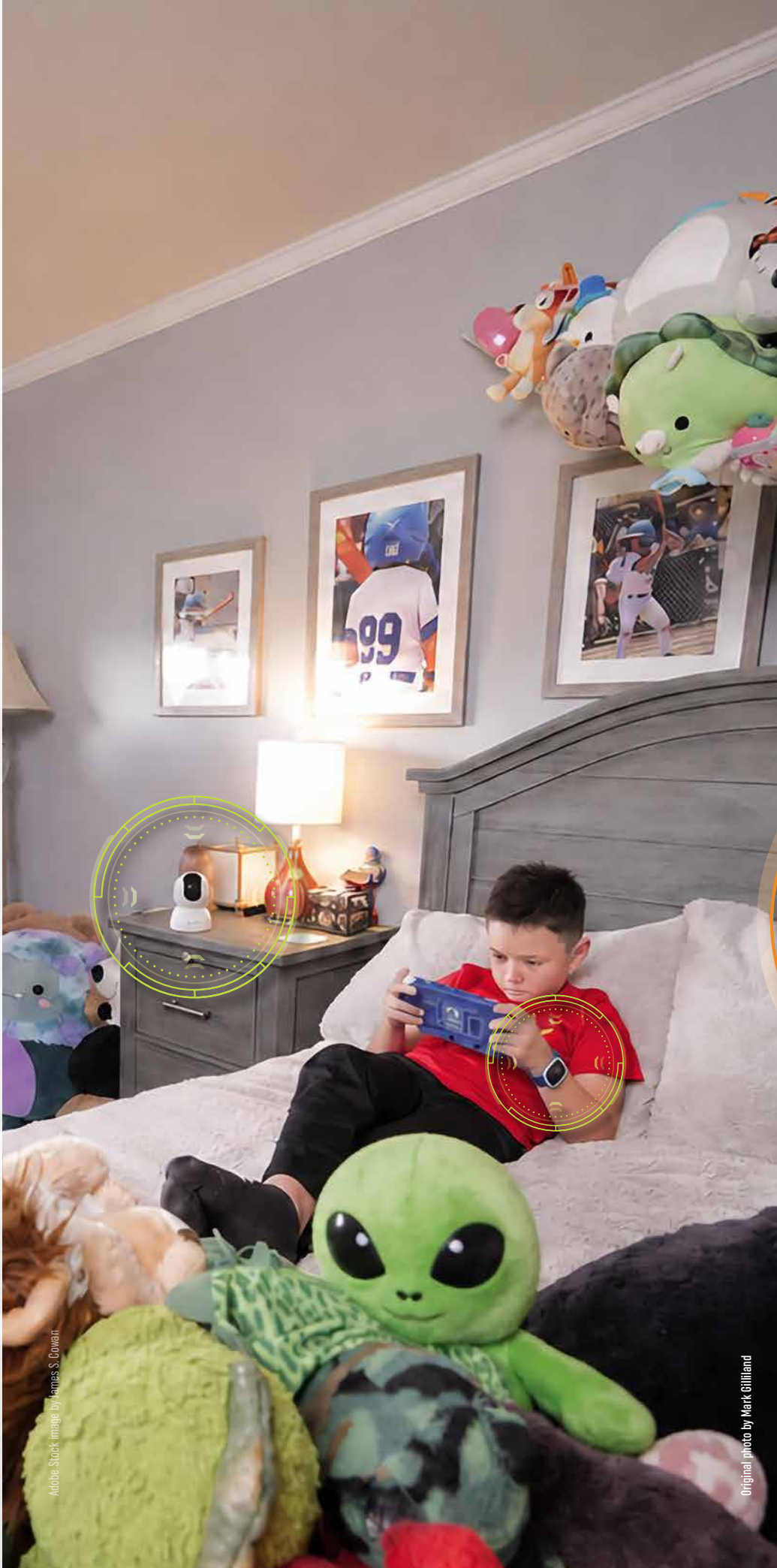
Avoid that moment of panic when a busy child locks himself in his room. Modern smart locks are considered “invisible” due to their slimline looks. App compatibility, remote access and door status detection complete the package.

WATCH THIS!

Sure, they tell time, but today’s smartwatches also include two-way calling, limited texting to preapproved contacts, GPS tracking and school-mode settings to reduce distractions. Some even provide video calling and voice memos.

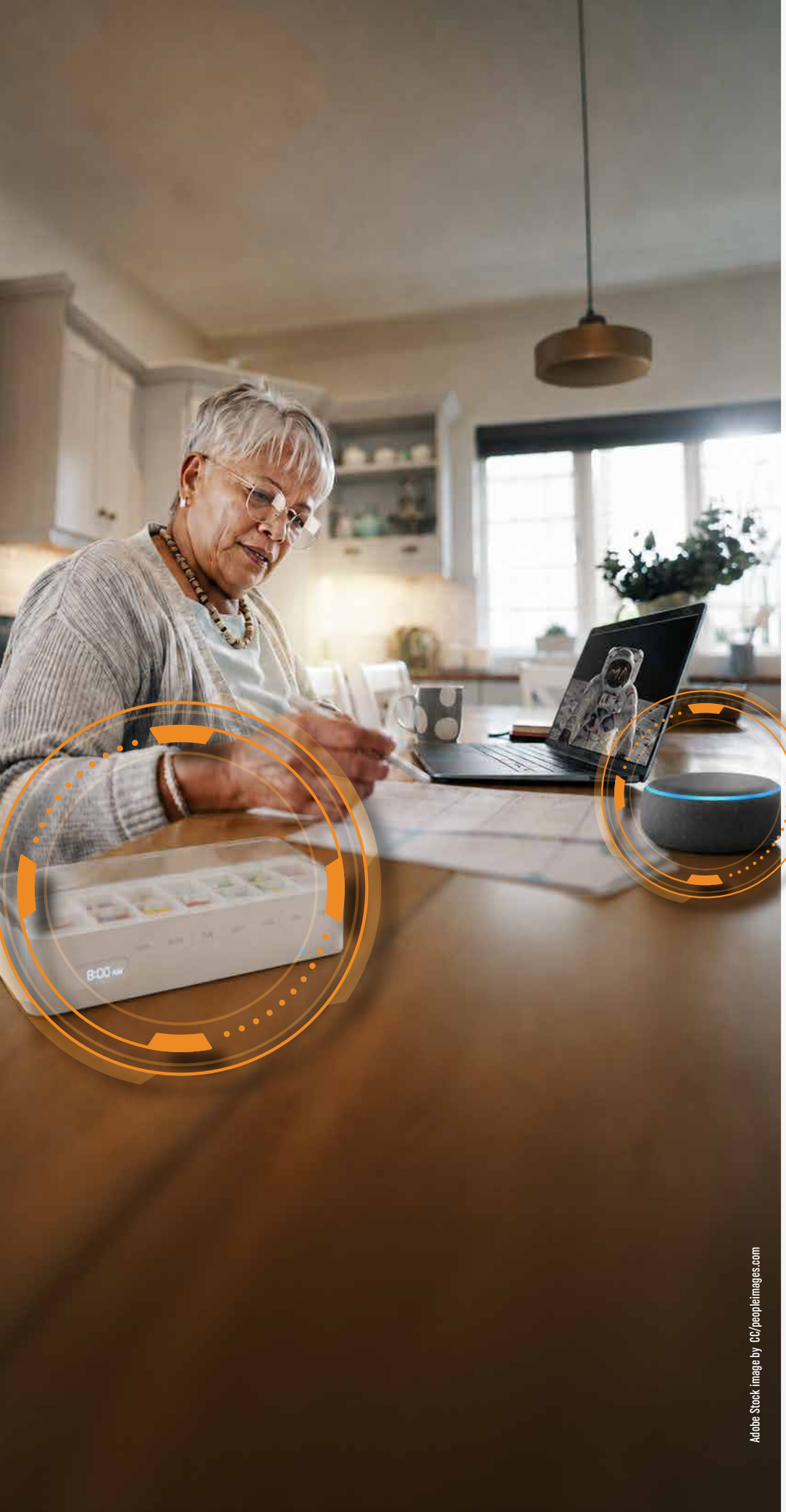
ALWAYS IN TOUCH

Infants and toddlers are not ready for advanced wearables, but a GPS tracker offers real-time location data and can even alert parents when their child leaves a preset safe zone. Small and lightweight, they can be attached to a backpack, belt loop or shoe. Many come with an SOS button to send a location alert.



Adobe Stock image by James S. Cowan

Original photo by Mark Gilliland



Adobe Stock image by CC/peopleimages.com

SAFE SIGNALS FOR OLDER ADULTS

Smart tools help enable independent living

Wi-Fi-enabled tech tools can provide safety and peace of mind for loved ones of older adults who want to stay in their own homes.

SMART SPEAKERS

Smart speakers can remind someone to exercise, take medications and ease feelings of isolation. They can also be an important lifeline in the event of a fall or injury, with voice prompts to call emergency contacts.

PILL ORGANIZERS

Multiple medications with different dosing schedules can be hard to keep track of. A smart pill container organizes them by time and day of the week. You can also set reminders and controls to release only the needed pills at the required time to avoid accidental overdosing.

APPLIANCES

At some point just about everyone forgets to turn off the lights or oven. Smart appliances can automatically turn off after a period of inactivity. Smart plugs and outlets can control other devices from a phone or tablet and even connect with a smart speaker to allow voice commands.

STAY ALERT

Even with safety features in place, accidents and health emergencies happen. Stand-alone medical alert systems can be placed in a central location, or a wearable device can call for help with the push of a button. Some can detect falls, even if the person is unable to press the button, or monitor medical conditions like diabetes.

BRING YOUR SMART HOME TO LIFE

Once your smart home is up and running, dial it in to operate as smoothly as possible.

MATCH THE DEVICE TO THE JOB

Not every smart option is interchangeable. For example, smart bulbs are great for lamps and fixtures. Smart switches make more sense for built-in ceiling lights. Trying to use both on the same circuit may mean you can't control the lights at all. So, pick the right type of device for the job to create predictability.

PAY ATTENTION TO POWER

Device behavior may change based on how it's powered.

Battery-powered devices are easier to install but may respond slower to preserve battery life. Plug-in devices tend to be faster and more reliable, but they need a nearby outlet. So, choose plug-in options for devices like security cameras or doorbells.

KNOW YOUR WI-FI BANDS

Many newer routers offer two Wi-Fi bands, 2.4 GHz and 5 GHz. The distinction matters.

Many devices are built to work on the 2.4 GHz band because it travels farther and handles walls better. When setting up devices, check the instructions to verify the correct Wi-Fi band.

SENSOR STRATEGY

Motion sensors can feel magical or mildly annoying, depending on how they're placed.

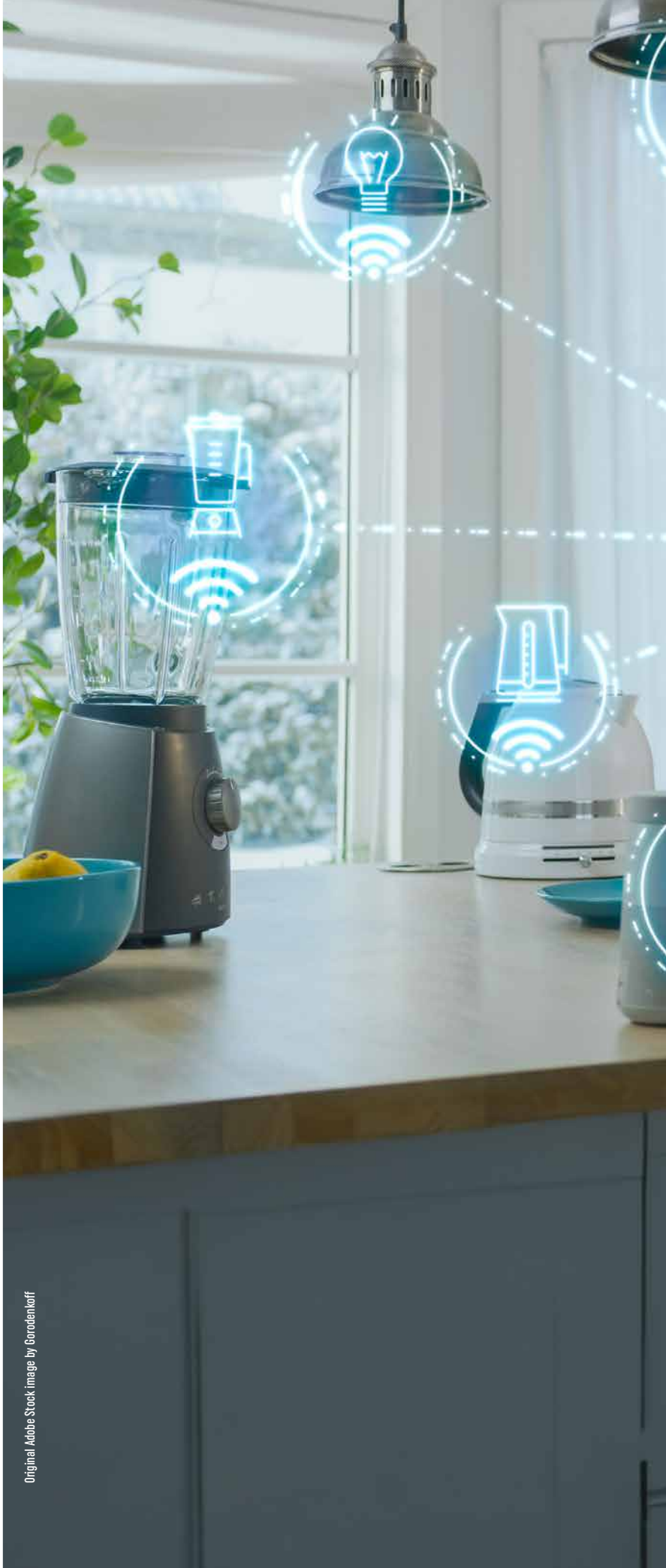
Shifting sunlight or passing cars can trigger a window-facing sensor. Also, if a sensor is aimed too high or too low, it may miss movement altogether.

For best results, place sensors where people naturally cross their path, and avoid direct exposure to windows or heat sources.

UNDERSTAND DELAY AND 'LAG'

If a smart device doesn't respond instantly, it's usually doing extra work behind the scenes. A voice command travels to your speaker, to remote servers and finally back to your device. If your internet connection is busy, each step is more noticeable.

When timing matters, like turning on lights when you enter a room, consider using local controls, such as motion sensors or switches, instead of voice commands.



Original Adobe Stock image by Gorodenkoff



BACKYARD BLISS

Let gadgets take the chores out of the outdoors

SMART WATERING SYSTEMS

No need to remember to water the lawn or garden ever again. These systems automatically handle it based on schedules, weather or soil conditions. Look for options that adjust to rainfall and connect easily to your existing sprinkler setup. Placement matters—zones should match the needs of different plants.

SMART GRILLS

Use connected thermometers and apps to cook with precision. You can even check temperatures from your smartphone without lifting the lid. Look for clear readouts and reliable alerts.

SMART BIRDHOUSES AND FEEDERS

These devices include small cameras, letting you watch birds visit and even identify species in real time. Choose a model with weather resistance and a simple app. Placement should balance visibility with a bit of privacy for your feathered friends.

SMART CHICKEN COOPS

A smart coop door opens and closes automatically, usually based on light or a schedule, protecting your chickens at night. Battery life and durability are important, especially in changing weather.

ROBOT MOWERS

Robot mowers quietly trim your lawn on a schedule. They are best in yards with clear boundaries and minimal obstacles. Setup can take a little time, but once mapped, they keep yards tidy with little effort.

WEATHER STATIONS

A home weather station tracks conditions like temperature, rainfall, wind and humidity right where you live, giving you more precise insight than a general forecast. Look for easy-to-read displays and app integration. Sensors should be in open areas, away from buildings or trees that could skew readings.



AI-generated image by Brandon Pomienke



How the Internet R

1

GLOBAL INTERNET BACKBONE

High-capacity networks and undersea cables carry data across the world.

2

DATA CENTERS AND CLOUD SERVICES

Websites, apps and content are hosted in secure data centers around the world.

3

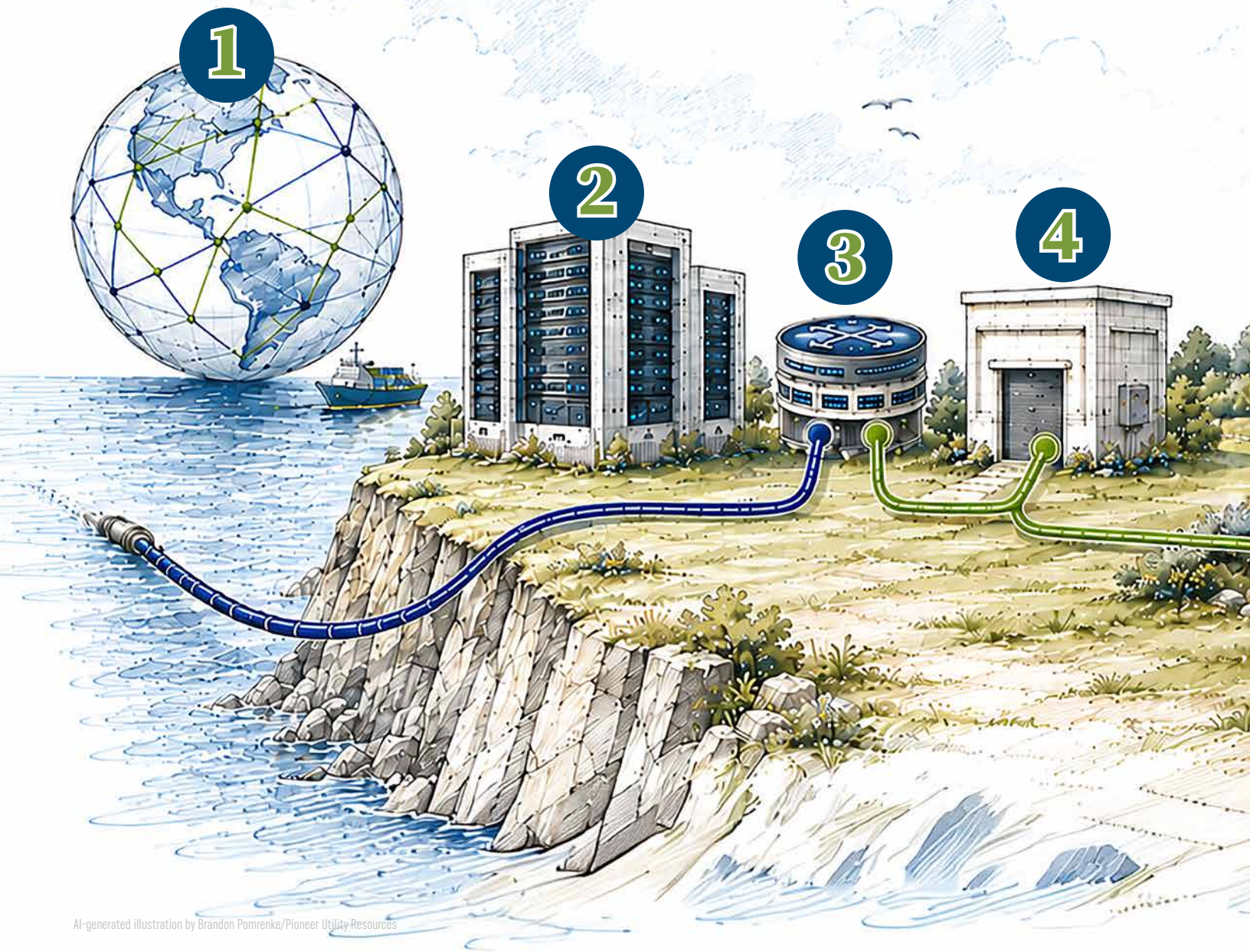
REGIONAL NETWORK HUBS

Internet exchange points and major carriers move traffic across regions.

4

UTILITY NETWORK OPERATIONS/HEADEND

Bandwidth enters Farmers Mutual and Federated Telephone's lines here and is managed and routed locally.



AI-generated illustration by Brandon Pomrenke/Pioneer Utility Resources

eaches Your Home

5

FIBER BACKBONE NETWORK
High-capacity fiber lines carry data across our service area.

6

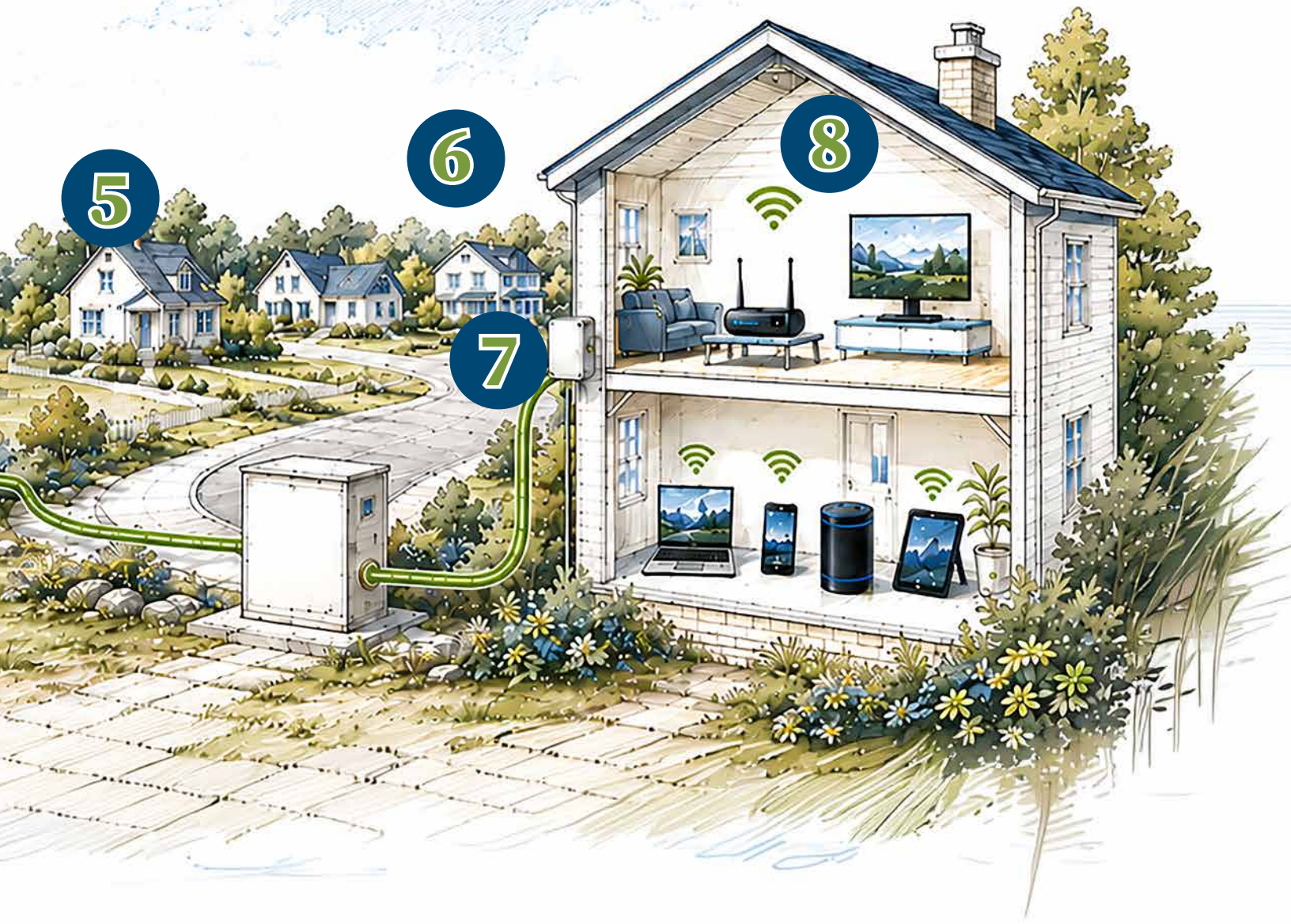
NEIGHBORHOOD DISTRIBUTION
Fiber is distributed across our community to bring service closer to homes.

7

HOME CONNECTION
Fiber is connected to your home and to an optical network terminal, also called an ONT.

8

WI-FI AND CONNECTED DEVICES
Your router provides Wi-Fi throughout your home to all your devices.



GARAGE GLOW-UP

Storage solutions get smarter

SMART GARAGE DOOR OPENER

Open and close the garage door from your phone, no matter where you are. These devices also can send alerts if you leave the door open. Look for models that work with your existing opener, or consider a full replacement if yours is older.

SMART TOOL CONTROLLERS

A smart tool controller connects to outlets or power strips, letting you turn tools on or off remotely or on a schedule. This can add a layer of safety—especially for devices you don't want left running.

MOTION SENSORS

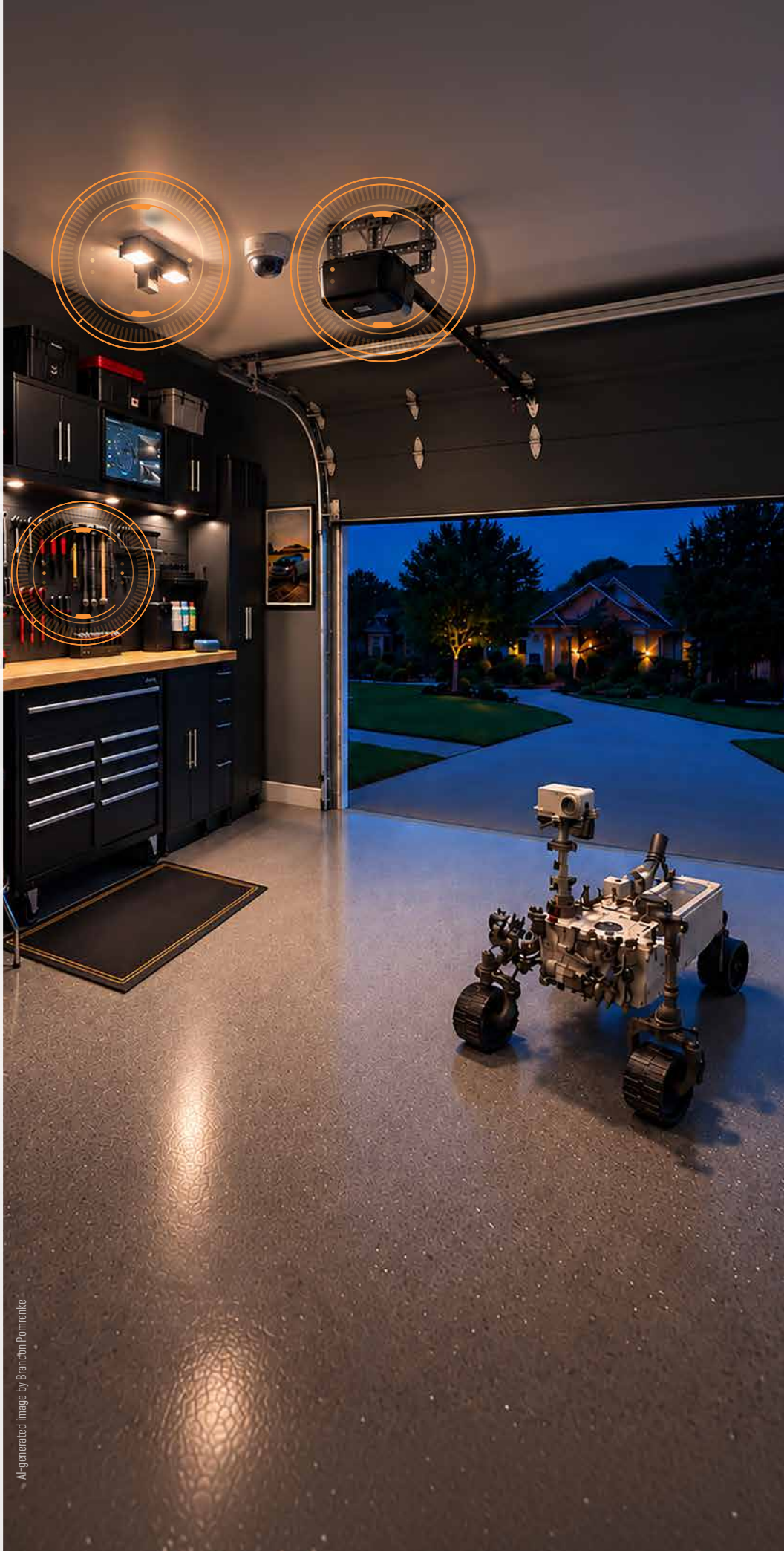
Triggering lights by detecting movement, these devices mean no more fumbling for switches when your hands are full. Place them in your home where you naturally enter or move through, and adjust sensitivity to avoid false alerts.

TOOL TRACKING SYSTEMS

Keep tabs on valuable equipment. These systems often use small tags paired with an app to show where tools are—especially useful for those that move between the garage, yard and other workspaces. Look for long battery life and simple setup.

TEMPERATURE AND HUMIDITY SENSORS

These sensors monitor conditions inside your garage, which can affect tools, stored items and even your car. They send updates to your phone so you can catch issues earlier, like excess moisture. Place them away from doors or direct drafts for more accurate readings.



AI-generated image by Brandon Pomrenke



Original Adobe Stock image by Ranju

SHARE YOUR SOUNDTRACK

Take your tunes to every room

MULTIROOM LINKED SPEAKERS

Play the same music throughout your home or different songs in different rooms. Simply put, these speakers keep everything in sync. Look for systems with easy grouping controls and reliable connections. Placement matters: Spread them evenly so sound feels balanced, not crowded.

WI-FI TURNTABLE

A Wi-Fi turntable blends classic vinyl with modern streaming. It spins tunes while also sending the audio to wireless speakers, a great option for record fans who don't want to be tied to one room. Check compatibility with your speaker system, and keep the turntable on a stable, vibration-free surface.

A SMART DISPLAY FOR MUSIC CONTROL

A smart display, like a Nest Hub, acts as a visual control center. It can show lyrics, album art and playlists while letting you control playback with your voice or a quick tap. Place it someplace convenient, like a kitchen counter or side table, and review privacy settings so it fits your comfort level.

SMART GUITAR AMP

Devices like smart guitar amps and connected apps let musicians adjust tones, save presets and even record, making it easier to experiment without extra gear. Look for intuitive controls and headphone options if you want to keep your compositions to yourself.

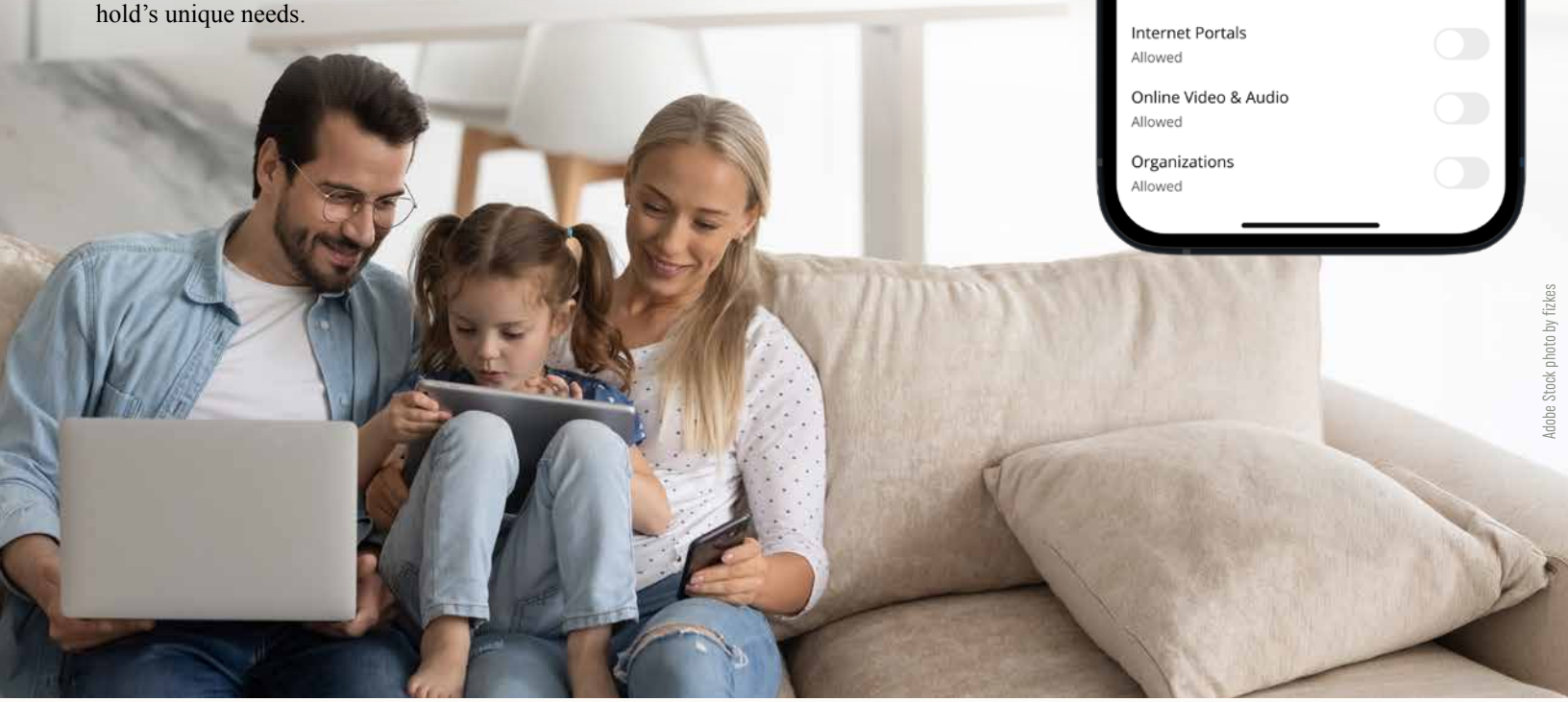
Wi-Fi Simplified

Manage your network with the ACIRA WiFi app

As the number of connected devices in the average home grows every year, laptops, tablets and smartphones compete for bandwidth with smart TVs, gaming systems and other devices.

Keep everything running smoothly with the ACIRA WiFi app—available for free on Google Play and the Apple App Store.

Begin by creating a profile for each person in the household, personalizing it with their name, photo and a list of their devices. Then, customize your network to meet your household's unique needs.



Adobe Stock photo by fizkes

PARENTAL CONTROLS

"Five more minutes" can end up being a lot longer than that when kids are watching videos, gaming or scrolling at bedtime.

Set a daily schedule to help kids avoid digital disruptions to their sleep cycles and connect when it matters.

Pause internet access, filter inappropriate content and set daily limits for certain apps or websites, creating predictable routines that avoid nightly screen-time negotiations.

ENHANCE WITH EXPERIENCEIQ

Don't let buffering during your favorite Christmas movie kill the vibe.

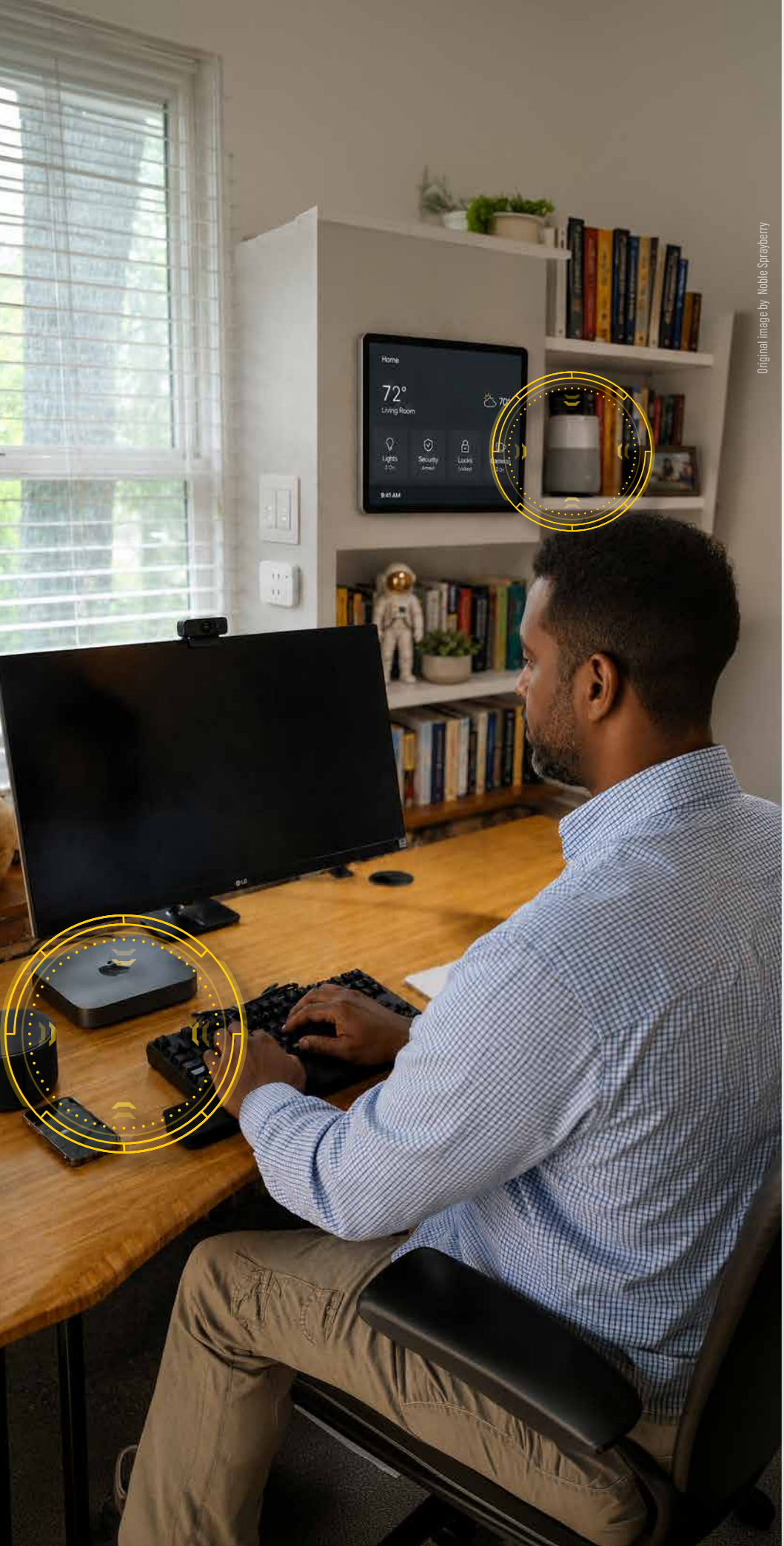
Use the ACIRA WiFi app to check approximate usage by profile. If you spot devices hogging bandwidth, prioritize streaming devices or temporarily pause others.

Use the ACIRA WiFi app to create a guest network in seconds and generate a QR code for quick access or text the password directly. Guests stay connected while remaining securely separate from your primary home network.

SAFEGUARD WITH PROTECTIQ

Any connected home can be a target of cyberthreats. The ACIRA WiFi app's ProtectIQ feature guards your network by monitoring traffic and blocking malware, intrusions and viruses.

The app also sends real-time alerts to give you greater peace of mind. ProtectIQ automatically updates weekly.



Original image by Noble Sprayberry

PRIORITIZE PRODUCTIVITY

Customize your work-from-home setup

Working from home is now a way of life for many people. And while a kitchen table and laptop may get the job done, having the right setup can make a big difference in comfort, focus and productivity.

A smart workspace takes advantage of connected technology to simplify tasks, reduce distractions and help you stay on course throughout the day. Consider thoughtful additions that make a difference in creating a more efficient and comfortable work environment.

IMPROVE YOUR CONNECTION

A reliable internet connection is crucial for any part of your smart home setup, but you really don't want to worry about interruptions during important video calls or in the middle of uploading a large file. If your connection feels slow or inconsistent, consider the location of your router or whether your work may require more bandwidth.

CREATE A FOCUSED SPACE

Begin with devices that support your daily routine. With a smart speaker or display, you can help manage your schedule, set reminders and answer quick questions without interrupting your workflow.

Add smart plugs and lighting to turn on lights at the start of your day or adjust brightness and temperature with a simple voice command when you're in the zone.

Noise-canceling headphones or even app-controlled white noise machines create a more focused atmosphere. You can also use smart assistants to set timers for focused work sessions or breaks, helping you stay productive throughout the day.

KEEP SECURITY IN MIND

Because your work may involve sensitive information, it's important to protect your devices and network. Use strong passwords, enable two-factor authentication when available and keep your software up to date. Be sure to review the privacy settings on your devices, too.

acira
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