1. Innovative Dining Ideas
2. Best Practices When Piloting Robots
3. Welcoming Immigrants, Solving a Staffing Crisis, Engaging Residents
While there have been mixed opinions about the use of robots, two SDA member organizations have found the integration of robots in their dining departments to be very successful.

Presbyterian Senior Living started a pilot in February 2022 at one of its Life Plan Communities, initially leasing a robot for a one-month trial. Quickly realizing the benefits, the organization purchased the robot at the end of the trial and is now purchasing three more robots for three of its other Life Plan Communities.

"The robot has been extremely helpful," said Bruce Groft, Regional Dining Services Support Manager at Presbyterian Senior Living.

"If you have an expeditor in the kitchen to load the soups, salads, beverages, and entrées, the server is able to stay in the dining room giving better service to our guests. It is important for the expeditor to anticipate the condiment needs for each meal so that the servers do not have to go behind the wall. Any foodservice person will tell you that when an employee goes behind the kitchen wall, they easily become distracted and that takes away from great customer service."
Following the December 2022 purchase of one robot after three successive 30-day trials starting last May with three different manufacturers, Thad Parton, Director of Restaurant Operations at Mather, said the integration of the robot has been very helpful to their culinary services team. "We see the robot as being a tool for our team members and not a replacement. It allows them more time in the restaurants with residents. With reduced trips to the kitchen, it has allowed us to increase section size and accommodates more residents throughout the meal service."

While Mather sees an opportunity to leverage the robot for running dirty dishes back to the kitchen, Thad said they haven't integrated that yet. However, for their signature Sunday brunch they believe it can be used to help replenish the buffet by running pans out to the buffet attendant and returning empty vessels back to the kitchen.

Besides Mather's independent living community in Wilmette, IL; two Life Plan Communities in Evanston, IL, and Tucson, AZ, and a third opening in Tysons, VA, in 2024, its Mather Institute shares innovations and next practices with the goal of improving aging services. By regularly collaborating with universities around the country, the Institute serves as an innovation incubator, transforming the senior living industry by bringing leading-edge research to real life.

Mather's interest in robots initially was twofold—to try to fill gaps in front of house staffing and also be an innovative lead in implementing the technology. With one robot embedded, Mather plans to add a second at Splendido in Tucson as restaurant volume increases this year. Its other communities are very eager to add a robot or two of their own based on the positive results of the testing.
What surprised them

When asked what surprised them the most at Presbyterian Senior Living, Bruce said, "There literally isn't anything you have to do to maintain it. Since we received the robot, we had to do two updates with the robot company. Other than that, we plug it in to charge it, and wipe it down after meal service."

Mather was surprised at how quickly their robot could be mapped between a restaurant and the kitchen spaces. "It takes about four hours to do this, some simple station settings, speed and music adjustments, and then it's ready for service," Thad explained. "Install and go live happened in the same day. I was surprised by the many residents that thanked us for providing a useful and important tool to better support our service team members. It was no secret that with a smaller than usual staff, the team was working much harder than they ever had. Residents were genuinely appreciative of our efforts."

What disappointed them

When asked about disappointments, Bruce said, "For me and my staff there is nothing disappointing about the robot. But as the technology grows, I'm sure the newer robots will have many new features and then we might say, 'Wow, I wish our robot did that.'"

Thad said with the robot they ended up purchasing, there has not been a disappointment at all. "It is critical though, when evaluating success, that expectations be realistic. These robots are very good at going from point A to point B to point C and then back to point A. Their capacity is what it is. Expecting anything more than this very narrow job function is just setting yourself up for disappointment. If you understand its abilities and limitations and how that affects your operation, it can be a great addition to your existing team."
Positive reactions from all involved

"From the very beginning, when I was approached by my Regional Support, there was nothing at Presbyterian Senior Living but excitement about the whole venture," Bruce said. "I was positive about it, my staff was positive about it, and when we presented this to our residents they were excited about the project. We had posted pictures and videos of what the robot could do. We had a naming contest that the residents were involved with. We picked the name 'Rhett Butler' from all the suggestions. Rhett even has his own name tag.

"Guests and family members are completely fascinated with the robot," Bruce added. "As you can imagine, the kids are left speechless. The robot sings Happy Birthday, and that has now become a staple for anyone approaching their birthday; they want Rhett to sing to them. We recently added a 48-unit apartment building to an existing building and in that building is a very large common area. The walk is almost as long as a football field.

Once a month on a Friday evening, the staff place a birthday cake on the robot and send it to the common area singing Happy Birthday the whole way down and the whole way back. When it arrives in the common area, the residents remove the cake and touch the screen to send the robot back to the kitchen."

Thad admitted Mather team members were skeptical, and it took some time for the robot to gain their trust. "The more they saw it perform well, the more they liked it. When the pilot period ended, the team gave the robot its best possible compliment—they asked when it would be back.

"THE ROBOT IS A BENEFIT, IT SAVES THOUSANDS OF STEPS A DAY."