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THE TECH ISSUE

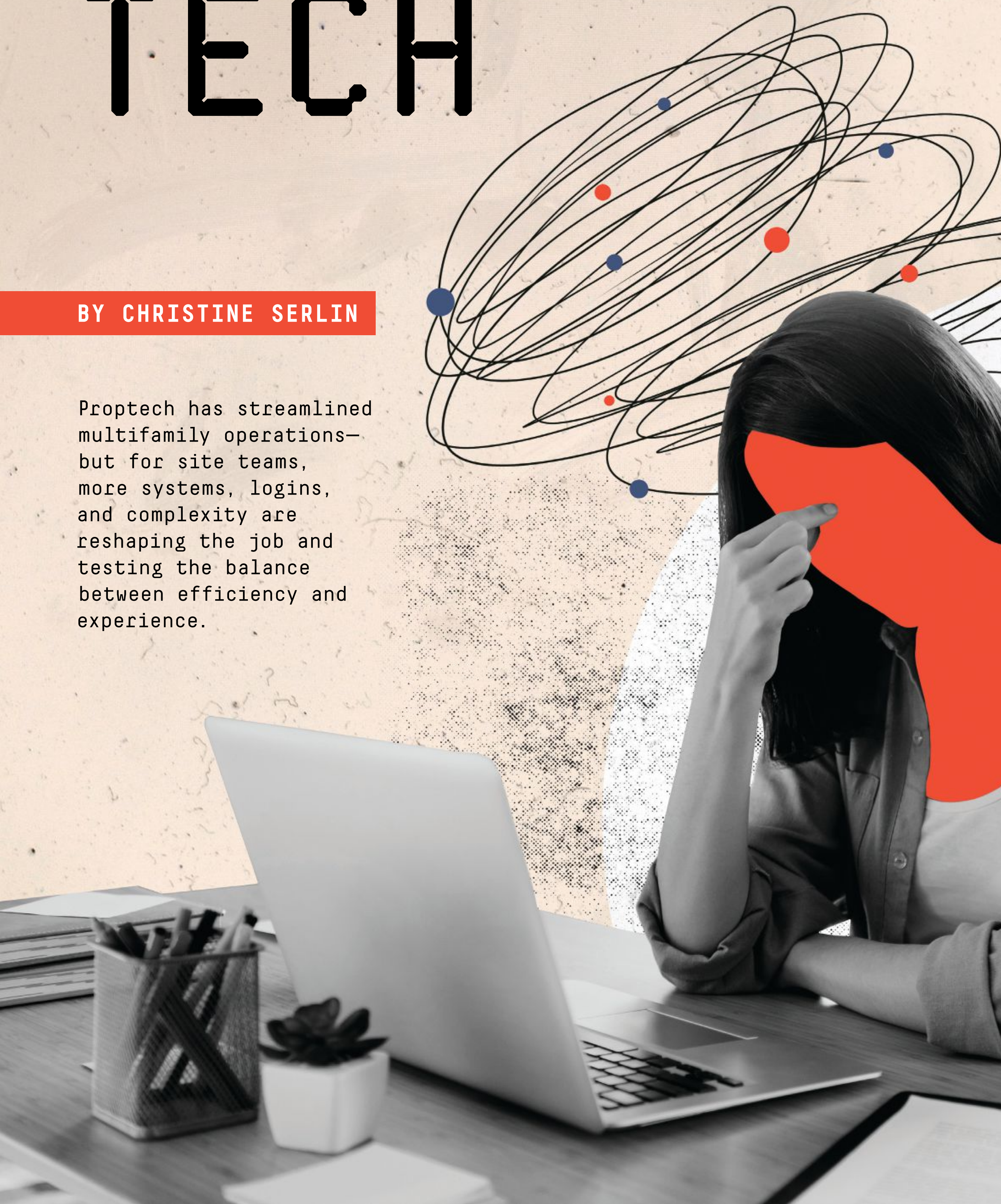
Where AI is delivering real gains across multifamily workflows

APRIL/MAY 2026 • VOLUME 31, ISSUE 2 • MULTIFAMILYEXECUTIVE.CO

TECH

BY CHRISTINE SERLIN

Proptech has streamlined multifamily operations—but for site teams, more systems, logins, and complexity are reshaping the job and testing the balance between efficiency and experience.



OVERLOAD

GETTY IMAGES

TECHNOLOGY SINCE THE start of the pandemic has transformed multifamily operations at an accelerated pace—but for on-site teams, the gains haven't come without growing pains.

Since 2020, an explosion of proptech solutions has helped streamline leasing, automate routine tasks, and unlock data-driven decision-making. But that also has layered on dozens of systems, logins, and workflows—leaving site teams to navigate a more complex, tech-heavy role than ever before.

The result, according to industry experts, is a balancing act: leveraging technology to drive efficiency and elevate the resident experience, while avoiding overload that pulls site teams away from their core mission—serving current and prospective renters.

"When technology works well, it removes administrative friction from the process," says Rick Holcomb, a senior capital and facilities management leader at Willow Bridge Property Co. "When it doesn't, it can add complexity. Success really depends on thoughtful implementation and systems that are designed for field users, not just administrators."

According to Mariana Estrada, chief strategy officer at RPM Living, the site team profile looks completely different than it once did with new challenges.

"I don't think anyone would like to admit it, but I think the gains that we've made have all cost something, and it's made it really difficult to do what in the past has been a primarily customer service-oriented job," she says. "Expectations are higher, and so it is a challenge for folks just starting in this industry. We have to recognize how the advancements we've made have had real impacts on the people who are powering the properties and supporting our customers every single day."

Cindy Clare, chief operating officer at Bell Partners, agrees that technology can be a double-edged sword.

"There's a lot of technology that helps, but we also have to be careful of technology overload—how many systems can we have on a property, how many different logins?" she notes. "Right now, there is a huge effort across the industry, and at Bell, where we're looking at how we can streamline applications."

With technology constantly changing, even sometimes on a daily basis, Clare says it's important to find the tools that move the needle. "How do we help our teams, give them the best tools, but not exhaust them with all the technology?" she shares.

However, while technology might not be reducing the workload, it's redistributing it.

Taryn Silva, vice president of learning and development at Mill Creek Residential, says 20 years ago, everything was manual.

"We're shifting back to what matters most—people—while artificial intelligence (AI) handles the basic, introductory questions. That creates space for our teams to focus on more complex, meaningful interactions," she says. "The technology is helping, but there are always areas for refinement."

Estrada adds the roles today are more digitally enabled but also more complicated.

"A lot of the manual, simple, repetitive tasks have been transformed by automation and customer self-service tools, centralized support models, and definitely AI and AI-enabled systems. That's created a lot of room for our teams to focus on higher value work like relationship building and enhancing the resident experience, developing their own leadership skills, problem solving, and driving property performance," she says. "But at the same time, navigating that much more technology, the work is faster and it's smarter, but it's not necessarily simpler."

Jeremy Brown, vice president of marketing for ZRS, and Shannon Teixeira, vice president of human resources at Wendover, both agree that technology has helped eliminate a lot of the low-value, tedious, and repetitive work that used to consume site teams' time.

"If there's a routine or an optimization that can be employed through technology, we're wanting to do that so that we can shift our team's focus into what we call high-value work, which is community engagement, resident engagement, and more proactive ways in which we can continue to serve our residents' needs," says Teixeira.

Brown adds technology is freeing teams up for higher-value work like being visible on property grounds, doing proactive walks, and investing in the resident experience. However, he shares the workload has shifted into troubleshooting, compliance documentation, and reporting. "You trade paper processes for more systems oversight," he notes.

BALANCING THE LOAD

Multifamily leaders are cognizant of the site teams' technology loads and are being thoughtful and intentional to help prevent overload.

"We try to look at technology rationally, understanding the burden on our on-site staff. Whatever we implement, we aim to make it net neutral. And if we can find solutions that truly give them time back in their day, we push very hard to do that," says Savas Karas, chief technology and transformation officer at CAPREIT.

According to Estrada, RPM Living is reformatting how its operations look so that technology is enabling the work and not making it more complicated.

In similar fashion, Wendover is leaning into its technology architecture this year with a goal of making the lives of its property management teams easier and better every day.

"Although we want to say learning adoption is fast, it still takes time to integrate into the flow of work. What we're really looking at is to what degree the technology is impacting the current state of work, how complex it is, and how much training is required. We want to make very deliberate decisions on behalf of our teams to ensure that we are not over-indexing their capacity again," Teixeira says. "By going back to the guiding principle of how we are improving their work experience internally, we can always look at that threshold before we move something forward."

She says Wendover also engages in listening sessions, doing site visits, and understanding the pain points of new technology to see what the firm could be doing differently. Last year, the firm went through a hybrid organizational restructure, including moving from being decentralized across its communities to a business solutions hub, which is an extension of the communities around areas such as maintenance, operations, marketing, compliance, and human resources.

"Whether it is a technology shift or a process enhancement, the property teams have full support and learning opportunity within all of those changes, along with the hub as a support mechanism," Teixeira says. "The feedback has been incredibly positive. We're continuing to enhance that. We had just over a 30% reduction in turnover last year over 2024, which was a pretty substantial decrease."

With so many new technology offerings on the market addressing different pain points, Clare says she has to be careful about what she selects so that she doesn't overload the site teams with too much change.

"That's not easy because there are lots of great tools out there. But if you're already doing one major software upgrade or a software change, adding two or three more becomes really difficult. We try to be thoughtful about what we're rolling out and when," she notes. "I'm sure we could be better at it. I'm sure if you asked our sites, they'd tell you they still would like us to do it differently. But we try to be very careful about when we're making those changes."

Mill Creek also keeps an eye on its core mission of providing homes when evaluating new technology.

"We've always said that our industry, rental housing, is about people. Providing housing meets a fundamental need for people," says Samantha Chalmers, innovation and integrations director at Mill Creek. "Yes, we can add tech, but we can't lose sight of this core function. And we're reaching a point in the technological evolution that it's helping us strengthen this core focus."

However, there are still improvements with technology that industry leaders would like to see.

"There are so many tools. I feel like pre-COVID, our industry really was behind in terms of technology. During that period, we progressed by leaps and bounds. We adopted a lot. We layered it in, tacked it on, and that allowed us to not only get through the pandemic, but also to make some really significant strides in evolving our operating model," Estrada says.

But she says interoperability is still one of the greatest challenges as well as overlap and duplication of functionality with a lot of the platforms.

"Some of the systems integrate well, and some absolutely do not. So too often the site team is left bridging the gap manually, and I think that's one of the clearest opportunities for multifamily today. It's figuring out how to not just add more technology but really create a more connected ecosystem that will reduce that friction for our associates and for our residents."

Brown and Karas agree.

"[The systems] don't talk to each other as much as we would like," Brown says. "There's room for improvement, and the industry needs stronger integrations so on-site teams aren't stuck bridging gaps between systems."

Karas adds integration wins the day.

"I will take a solution that's fully integrated and does 80% of what I need versus a product that gives me 100% of what I need but is not integrated," he adds.

Clare says she looks for areas where Bell Partners can consolidate, for example, finding one tool instead of three.

"We've done some things that help us minimize what the teams have to use but also still move the needle. You have to look at what's going to make a difference from both sides. That means looking at what's going to be helpful for the sites but also how easy is it for your prospects and residents to use as well," she says. "Because it also can be technology exhaustion for your residents. You don't want them logging into five different places. You try to minimize, but you want to provide the services and the conveniences that they want so there's a balancing act between the two."

THOUGHTFUL ROLLOUTS

A lot goes into the deployment of new technology solutions, including pilot programs, training, and valuable feedback loops, to make the transition as smooth as possible for site teams.

> **"The industry needs stronger integrations so on-site teams aren't stuck bridging gaps between systems."**
>
> **—JEREMY BROWN**

According to Karas, CAPREIT employs a full change management program before introducing a new solution.

"We literally start with the end in mind, and we say, 'how are we going to train and support our staff to use this new technology? What are the outcomes that we are expecting? What are the KPIs that we're expecting to know it's working, and what would cause us to pull the plug on it?' And we do that before we sign the contract to understand all of those items."

For Bell Partners and Mill Creek, piloting is critical to make sure the thesis is accurate.

"One of the things that we do pretty well is pilot before we roll out. We spend time thinking about what is going to work and then we test it. We're not necessarily first adopters. We don't want to be the guinea pig, but if something seems to be working for others, then we're willing to test it and see if it works for us," says Clare.

Silva notes that associate buy-in is critical to successful innovation.

"When our on-site teams clearly see what's in it for them, they're more open to change, especially when it makes their jobs easier. If something adds work without meaningful impact, we'll pause and revisit it at a better time. We're also intentional about piloting during slower seasons to set teams up for success."

To support implementation, Mill Creek pairs pilots with structured training and feedback.

Silva says, "We provide rollout training, implementation meetings, FAQs, e-learning, job aids, and continuous feedback loops so we can adjust quickly."

Chalmers adds she wants to know the good, the bad, and the ugly about the technology solutions.

"When I get the bad and ugly, that's my favorite thing," she says. "We learn the most from that kind of feedback. It helps us make the product stronger, have a smoother implementation, and improve training materials, which increase our success rates."

Chalmers and Silva also say the real-time feedback loops provide valuable information for their vendor partners.

"We're helping refine this technology to make it better, not just for our customers, but for our residents and our organization. These things the associates are flagging are helping all clients of this vendor partner. I think that also helps our teams stay motivated because they're seeing the impact of their work in the pilots," says Silva.

Estrada adds, in addition to the feedback loop, ongoing training is critical.

"One of the things that we are really focused on and invest in is training. Training has to be ongoing, and with all of the initiatives, advancements, enhancements, and optimization that we're doing, we've really found that one-time exposure and rollout is not enough, particularly in a business with high turnover and a lot of competing priorities," she says. "Implementation and that initial launch is just a starting point. We know that it takes reinforcement. It takes a ton of accessible resources. It takes a lot of layers of leadership and support, creating a real feedback loop that helps us figure out where those pain points continue to be so that we can continue to chip away at them and make sure that regardless of the complexity of the system our associates feel like there's a continuous improvement cycle."

ZRS employs both in-house and vendor training as well as a mentorship initiative.

"We approach this through vendor training plus internal enablement and ongoing refreshers. We also use power users or champions at the site and regional level so teams have real support, not just a one-time training session," says Brown. "We also pair new team members with peer mentors so there's a consistent person they can lean on during onboarding and rollouts."

Chalmers adds when implemented correctly, developed appropriately, and trained effectively, that's where you see the technologies give teams back time to invest in the human experience.

NEXT-GEN SIMPLICITY

Overall, technology is moving the multifamily industry forward, and leaders are optimistic about what additional streamlining will mean for the site teams.

"I would like to continue finding ways to streamline with tools that are more intuitive and easy for our teams to use, both our site teams and our prospects," says Clare. "Sitting in an office, doing all the paperwork is not where they add value. Being out on the properties, meeting with residents, making sure the properties look good—that's where they add a lot of value."

According to Estrada, as platforms evolve and the industry continues to unlock even more value from AI and machine learning, she also hopes the systems will become more streamlined and easier to navigate.

"I see that having a lot of positive impacts on their ability to execute on property goals and to meet our customers' and our clients' needs, but also to just streamline their way of working," she says. "It's not 10 systems that you have to know how to navigate and which button to push in each one. You don't have to take a three-hour training course to do that, but maybe you have one platform that sits on top and you use conversational AI to execute what hasn't already been automated in the background. Then your real job is asset preservation and management and creating these really amazing bespoke customer engagement experiences for the people who live at your community."

Estrada adds: "I think there's a lot to unlock there—taking the focus off of having so much digital and system-specific proficiency and figuring out how to really use the tools to gain back even more time to focus on our customers." **MFE**