

Top 7 Best Smart Home Hubs and Buyers guide

What is a smart home hub?

These days there is a huge number of smart devices available on the market, from simple light bulbs to smart thermostats. Collectively they have become known as the Internet of Things (IoT). Having a house full of these devices can become a hassle if they are supplied by different manufacturers and are controlled through a host of different apps and controllers.

That's where the smart hub steps in.

A smart home hub is a device that lets you control all your smart gadgets by creating a network of all your devices, often using low-power wireless protocols like Zigbee or Z-wave. Others may only use standard Wi-Fi protocols or Bluetooth.

With the addition of this hub and in most cases an accompanying app, the idea is you can control all your devices from one central point.

Do you need a smart home hub?

Benefits of Smart Home Hubs

Imagine the scenario, you have an ecobee SmartThermostat, a houseful of Philips Smart lightbulbs and a Nest security system. Things can get confusing pretty fast. In cases like this then a Smart Home Hub can certainly help simplify things.

A Smart Home Hub can let you control all your devices from one central location or hub. And if you're using a set-up with voice control integration then it is even easier still.

There is also the financial aspect to be looked at, when used in conjunction with devices like a smart thermostat and lightbulbs a Smart Home Hub can lower your household bills.

Smart Entertainment

Of course, hubs can do much more than just control your heating and lighting. Many of the systems also link to smart speakers and screens or even have them built in, so if you want Alexa to play music in whichever room you are occupying then a Smart Home Hub has this functionality too!

How to Choose a Smart Home Hub

Hardware considerations

Choosing a Smart Home Hub can seem daunting, but there are a few simple questions to ask yourself before you make that choice. For instance, if you already have a Nest Smart Thermostat, then the Google Smart Hub would be worth considering, as Nest is a Google product. Whereas if you already own Apple smart products then an Apple HomePod would be a better consideration.

Basically, it is better to check the compatibility of your current hardware before you decide which brand/model suits your needs best.

Connectivity

As we already touched on briefly, Smart Hubs have a variety of wireless protocols and other connectivity options. It is therefore important to check what protocols any existing hardware you may have uses, and make sure that whatever hub you choose supports the same protocols. The most common protocols are 2.4ghz and 5ghz Wi-Fi, Zigbee, Bluetooth and Z-wave.

Features and Skills

Some people may just want something that controls their heating or lighting systems, whilst others may be looking for something with more functionality, like voice control or integrated multi-media capability. Once again, it is good to be clear about your own expectations and demands before making that purchase.

Ease of Operation

The whole point of setting up a smart home is to make life a bit simpler, if you are tech savvy, then this might not be such a big point. But, if like most people, you just want things to work out of the box, then you should take this into consideration. For instance, if you want to easily integrate voice control into your smart heating system, then systems like ecobee4 and ecobee SmartThermostat come with Alexa built in.

Types of Smart Home Hubs

Hardware Smart Home Hubs

This is a Smart Home Hub in the traditional sense of the word. These act as a central communication hub that control your integrated smart hardware from a central location. They are also mostly internet capable to allow you to remotely monitor and control your smart devices.

A hardware hub will generally offer a range of connectivity options with the most common, as already mentioned, being Wi-Fi, Zigbee, Z-Wave and Bluetooth.

Software Smart Home Hubs

A software hub is a single piece of software that will either link to your smart device directly or through the smart device's own app. If you already have half a dozen apps installed to control your devices, then a software hub can pull all the associated controls into a single app and let you control them all from one interface.

For someone new to the world of smart homes, this may well be a suitable starting point, particularly if existing hardware is compatible with the software hubs. A point that is obviously worth checking beforehand.

Hybrid Hubs

These don't sit well in either of the above categories, but as the name suggests are a mix of both. The easiest way to give you a feel of what a hybrid hub is would be to mention a couple of examples. For instance, earlier generations of both Amazon's Echo and Echo Dot and Google Home would fall into this category.

These devices could be set up to control smart devices like lightbulbs and smart thermostats through voice control. The physical aspect of these obviously constitutes the hardware side of the description. However, as the connection between the hub and the devices is not direct, rather it's through your Wi-Fi system, they cannot be considered true hardware hubs.

Best Smart Home Hubs

Best Smart Home Hub

Samsung SmartThings Hub 3rd Generation

One of the great advantages of this hub is its compatibility list, this hub can control a huge range of smart devices including – Smart Thermostats, lights and switches, motion and status sensors, speakers and much more.

It also works quite happily when paired with Amazon Alexa or Google Home as well as being the best Zigbee Smart Home Hub and the Best Z-Wave Smart Home Hub, due to being compatible with protocols. Throw in Wi-Fi and Bluetooth and you have as much versatility as you could hope for from a Smart Home Hub.

Whilst it will work quite happily with 3rd party sensors and devices and respond to voice control when paired with Amazon Alexa or Google home devices, Samsung have designed their own range of devices and sensors including: -

- **SmartThings Multipurpose Sensor** – Lets you know when doors are opened or closed.
- **SmartThings Motion Sensor** – Senses movement.
- **SmartThings Outlet** – Control any small electrics connected to an outlet.
- **SmartThings Button** – Control connected devices with a single button push.
- **SmartThings Water Leak Sensor** – Detects leaks.

It can also be used as an alarm when paired with cameras and smart doorbells and control your heating when it's connected to a Smart Thermostat.

Best Alexa Smart Home Hub

Amazon Echo Show 10

The newly released Amazon Echo Show 10(3rd Gen) is undoubtedly the best and smartest yet to come from the ever-expanding range of Amazon Alexa products.

Compatible with a host of smart devices through Wi-Fi, Zigbee and Bluetooth. It can be set up for use as the central hub to control all compatible devices. And because it is voice control capable it can be set up by asking Alexa to search for devices and it will discover and set-up all your devices for you!

The Amazon Alexa 10 can be paired with devices including: -

- Smart Thermostats
- Security Cameras
- Lights
- Ring Smart Lighting (Coming Soon)

It is also a communication and entertainment center, boasting a 10.1-inch screen and a premium speaker. It also features a 13-megapixel camera which uses auto-framing to keep you center of the picture. The HD screen can be used to watch shows from the likes of Amazon and Netflix, or as an image gallery for your photos, or for making video calls, when used in conjunction with the camera and microphone.

For peace of mind you can also remotely access your Amazon Echo Show 10 and access the built-in camera if you need to check what's happening at home.

Best Google Smart Home Hub

Google Nest Hub Max

This is Google's top of the range smart hub, in functionality and even in some ways aesthetically it is a similar offering to Amazon's Alexa 10. Connectivity options are identical as well, with the Google Nest offering Wi-fi, Bluetooth 5.0 and Zigbee options. It features a 10-inch touchscreen that has a maximum resolution of 1280 * 800 dpi. The onboard 6.5-megapixel camera also has the auto-frame feature and has a wide-view angle of 127-degrees.

The Google Nest Hub Max also has voice control built-in and can be paired with many smart home devices, including: -

- Smart Lighting
- Thermostats
- Security systems and doorbells
- Smart plugs

The Google Nest Hub Max comes with Google Chromecast built-in and this allows you to use the hub as a home entertainment center, with all the major subscription services including the likes of Netflix and Spotify as well as podcasts and news and weather reports.

Best HomeKit Smart Home Hub

Apple TV 4K

The Apple TV 4K differs from the Google and Amazon Smart home hubs as it has no built in screen or speakers, instead it attaches to any compatible TV or speaker system. As the name suggests it has a full 4K resolution and the audio output is Dolby Digital Plus 7.1 Surround sound. It has voice control through the remote-control using Apple's Siri system.

For connectivity the Apple TV 4K features Gigabit ethernet, Wi-Fi and Bluetooth 5.0, currently there is no support for either Zigbee or Z-wave, although there are hubs which will act as intermediaries to allow some form of compatibility, but its better checking before setting out on this route.

With Apple gear to ensure full compatibility it is better to stick with Apples own range of HomeKit equipment, or with those who have been licensed to produce HomeKit compatible devices. There are the usual range of devices available including.

- HomeKit Smart Cameras
- HomeKit Smart Locks
- HomeKit Smart plugs and outdoor plugs
- Ecobee Thermostats

As with anything Apple, the list of compatible devices is more limited than its competitors, but there is still everything available for the Apple TV 4K to be classified as a true smart home hub.

Best Budget Friendly Smart Home Hub

Amazon Echo 4th Generation

This is a good budget entry level hub, it offers support for Zigbee compatible smart devices and like its big brother the Amazon Alexa 10, setting up these devices is as simple as turning them on and asking "Alexa, discover my devices." It also supports connectivity through Wi-Fi and Bluetooth.

Designed with simplicity in mind, this is really a smart speaker that is super smart. Controllable through either voice control or through the Alexa app (available on Android and iOS) It has the capacity to control a host of smart devices and can send alerts based on such criteria as the sound of a smoke alarm or breaking glass.

Don't be fooled by its budget price though, the Amazon Echo 4th Generation is more than capable of controlling and monitoring the same range of smart devices as the more advanced Amazon Alex 10.

If you are looking to start off setting up a smart home this entry level hub, may be just the one for you.

Best Professional Smart Home Hub

Hubitat Elevation Home Automation Hub

Don't be fooled by this hub's diminutive size, it still packs a mighty punch. Compatible with Z-wave and Zigbee devices this is one of the most versatile hubs on the market. Although not Wi-Fi enabled by itself, it can be accessed through an ethernet connection and if it's integrated into an existing Wi-Fi network, its interface can still be accessed wirelessly.

Whilst the omission of Wi-Fi may seem like an oversight, it fits perfectly with the Hubitat ethos of operating all your smart objects without locally, without any requirement for cloud access. It also stores all your data locally and puts a high emphasis on your privacy and the security of your data.

The Hubitat Elevation hub comes complete with its own built-in suite of apps that let you build your own automations and automation rules for all your connected smart devices. It also works with smart speakers/hubs including Amazon Alexa and Google Home to enable voice control.

There is also a free accompanying app available for Android and iOS devices enabling you to access, control and set-up your devices from your smart phone or tablet.

Best Smart Home Hub and Wi-Fi Router Combo

Samsung SmartThings Wi-Fi Mesh Router Hub

This two-in-one device does something that seems so sensible I don't know why more manufacturers haven't yet followed suit. Not only is it a Smart Home Hub with all the capability of the Samsung SmartThings hub, but it also acts as the main Internet router too!

And it does both tasks extremely well, the router side of the operation offers a host of features like smart traffic learning, parental controls and built in security to block malware and spyware attacks.

Whilst the Smart Hub side of the operation offers support for both Zigbee and Z-wave devices and boasts seamless set-up of all your smart devices through the companion app.

Worst Smart Home Hub

Wink 2 Smart Home Hub

It is both surprising and a shame that such a fully featured hub as the Wink 2 Smart Home Hub rates so lowly. On paper it sounds promising, compatible with Zigbee and Z-wave and boasting compatibility with all major smart home categories it should have been a winner for Wink.

But somehow, it seems to have all gone wrong for Wink, earlier Wink products were full of promise but somehow over the years they seem to have fallen behind the competition and the list of compatible devices is dwindling. The only thing growing seems to be the list of poor reviews and complaints. With many complaints that the

customer support is shocking and despite having to pay a subscription fee many users are claiming their devices have suddenly stopped working.

With the very future of the company in doubt, this product is one to avoid.

Frequently Asked Questions

Do I need a Smart Home Hub?

If you want full and effortless control of your home environment, added security and reduced bills from the lower heating and energy costs, then the answer is yes.

Someday soon most homes will be smart homes in one form or the other, and not because it's a gimmick, its because smart homes are convenient, ecologically they are greener and more secure.

What is the best Smart Home Hub?

Everyone's needs are different, the above list is comprehensive as far as the range of types and prices of hubs currently available is concerned. Except for the Wink 2 anyone of these hubs would grace any Smart Home. Before you decide it is a case of deciding which is best for your personal needs.

Does a Smart Home Hub Work Without the Internet?

The Internet is essential for such features such as remote access and control of your devices, and some systems are Internet dependent to work at all. But there are options that can offer a fully functional Smart Home System without the requirement for an internet connection, from the above list the Hubitat Elevation Home Hub is the only one to claim this functionality.

