Review: Wink hub can help bring your house under control

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It seems like everyone wants to control your house. Well, they want to help you control your house using their home automation ecosystem. What do I mean by home automation?

Tasks like controlling lights remotely, controlling your thermostat and deadbolts remotely, setting appliances to turn on to cook dinner or make coffee automatically or even monitoring your home security or alerting you if your water heater starts leaking.

All those tasks can be done now with home automation hardware from all kinds of manufacturers.

You may have heard the term "the Internet of things," which is just a fancy way of saying items in your home with an Internet connection.

People like the idea of being able to do all these things, but how to bring them together with a single controller is proving difficult.

There are plenty of products on store shelves with names like Insteon, Lowe Iris, SmartThings and Revolv that want to help you control your stuff.

They all work with a specific set of accessories.

But now there's the Wink Hub from Quirky, an inexpensive ($50) hub that works with a long list of connected products from a variety of

manufacturers.

You may have seen the Wink Hub or some of its related products at your Home Depot store. You can also get the starter kits or individual products from wink.com.

You can buy the hub bundled with other devices, which knocks the price down.

Wink.com has a starter kit of four light bulbs, two window/door sensors and a hub for $100.

The hub is a smallish white box that talks to your home Wi-Fi network. There is no option to connect it using Ethernet.

The hub works with the free Wink app for Android or iOS phones.

Once you connect the hub to your Wi-FI network using the app, you can add your connected devices.

I was given a hub with one GE Link connected LED bulb.

To add a device, you press the big "plus" sign and choose your device from the list. You can also scan the bar code on the box with your phone's camera.

You're shown a quick and thorough video of exactly what you need to do for each device's installation.

Adding the light bulb was easy. I had to put it in a lamp and turn on the lamp's power switch.

The app found the bulb, and it was ready for my control in about 30

seconds. The bulb can be named, and more than one bulb can be grouped together for greater control. Groups enable you to turn on or off the entire set, which is handy when leaving the house or at bedtime.

The bulb control is fairly simple: Touch the bulb icon to turn the light on or off. If the light is on, you can swipe a finger left or right to dim the light.

Your commands from the phone are traveling through the hub, so there is about a two-second lag between pressing the button and the light coming on.

One feature I especially like is if you manually turn the bulb off at the switch, it doesn't really mess up the system; the app will just tell you the bulb is unavailable.

If you turn the lamp back on, the app regains control automatically.

This is nice when you don't have your phone handy and just want to turn on the light.

I also tested the Quirky + GE Pivot Power Genius flexible power strip ($60), a four-outlet power strip with two smart outlets.

Power to whatever you plug into the two smart outlets is controllable from the app.

Installation was a breeze, and you can give names to each plug, so you can tell what is plugged into each one.

Also tested was the Leviton DZC Plug-In Appliance Module ($55), which makes any lamp or small appliance controllable.

Advanced features

There are some advanced features in the app, such as setting a schedule to turn things on or off; creating shortcuts, which turn on or off groups of things; and something called robots, which are pretty cool.

Robots are Quirky's word for macros - groups of commands that happen when you press a button.

Let's say you have a controllable thermostat, deadbolt and some bulbs. You can set up a robot called "arrive home" to unlock the door, turn on the lights and adjust the temperature to your liking with the press of one button.

Another robot might turn off all the lights and turn the thermostat down when you go to bed.

I'm excited by the thought of automating my house, but what's cool for me will probably make my wife crazy.

Getting all your stuff connected is very cool, but when your partner comes home and can't figure out how to turn on the lights, you're going to have a problem.

Quirky is trying to make life easier. I think the key is to start small, with something that will fit well in your life and then build up.

The Wink Hub is a great piece of hardware, and the app is beautifully designed and works well.

If you've wanted to dabble in home automation, this is a great place to start.

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-Pros: Inexpensive. Easy to set up. Compatible with many devices.

-Cons: Teaching others the benefits is a challenge.

-Bottom line: I can't help thinking this is really the future of all our stuff.

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