

ROBOTS AND PEOPLE: CO-EVOLVING

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Robots and people are adjusting their symbiotic relationship in logistics. Our recent robotics coverage (Feb. 2021) generated a good amount of audience feedback, most related to the growing importance and essential need for humans in logistics.

It's true that the stresses created by the virus economy spawned an increase in investing in automation to take on more human-related tasks. Yet manufacturers of wearable technology make the case that wearables and new handheld devices remind us that humans have the edge over robots in terms of efficiency, flexibility, and costs for many supply chain-related jobs.

Robots and people in supply chain is a dynamic relationship. Walmart removed 300 robots and "hibernated" more than 1,000 others from its stores. One reason? Customers did not like them.

In 2020, Walmart also stopped using in-store inventory tracking

robots, citing studies that humans could do the tasks much faster. Did store shopper preferences and national sentiment to keep people employed play a role in that decision, too?

Both Walmart and Kroger, with its hyper-speed robotized "sheds," are riding the huge wave of increased online orders requiring heavy investment in e-commerce automation as Amazon has done since it acquired Kiva. Walmart plans to construct warehouses in or near stores where robots will travel, gather, and prepare orders for customer pickup or home delivery, completing the task in about one hour. The machines won't roam the aisles inside the store, but will be in the warehouse area, safely secured behind windows so shoppers can watch the automated activity like a robot zoo.

In this case at least, robots are relegated to activities that people want instead of what they are, and will be, capable of doing. Sector observers pegged the automation

market at \$15 billion last year; predictions are it will near \$50 billion in two years.

Will concern about the impact complete automation will have on the humans in the logistics workforce limit that growth? Maybe. "Robotics in and of themselves are not the answer," says Kevin Beasley, chief information officer of VAI, an ERP solutions developer. "Workers in warehouse and logistics operations are now knowledge workers. People can do tasks that robots cannot do and one is not necessarily better than the other. They are better together when they are working together."

Human insight and experience play a crucial role in meeting modern demands on supply chain operations despite what those outside our discipline think. In logistics, robots will dance with people and each will lead at different times as roles shift.

The evolution continues.

