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Robots Can Create Jobs, Too

[Industrial robots can help companies compete by boosting quality and productivity.](#)
That's ultimately a benefit for American labor

By Jeff Burnstein



If you work in an American manufacturing company today, you should be worried about your job. I live in Michigan and have witnessed the destruction caused by shuttered factories and jobs shipped overseas. When plants close, whole communities suffer.

With unemployment at about 14 percent or higher in Michigan, it's not surprising some workers are afraid of robots capable of working seven days a week, 24 hours a day with great accuracy and reliability, capable of performing many tasks better than people.

That fear, so prevalent in the early days of robotics, today is misplaced. What should really give workers pause is when their companies won't use robots and other automated technologies to become stronger global competitors.

U.S. technology and business innovators recognize that robots in factories have the potential to save and create more jobs than they eliminate. Robots help companies turn out higher-quality and lower-cost goods to compete with those made in China, Mexico, India, or other low-wage nations. They remove people from dangerous and boring jobs they shouldn't have been doing in the first place, and put them in higher-skilled, higher-paying positions.

New Industries

There's also a large ecosystem of robotics-related companies in America that employ thousands of people who design, build, program, and service robots and the equipment they work with.

Look at some of the new industries America wants to develop. To get the desired quality and productivity from plants that produce wind turbines, solar panels, and advanced batteries and the cars they go in, we need robots. They're just as essential to the successful development of these industries as they are to aerospace, consumer packaged goods, electronics, food, and lab automation.

Look at the new General Motors, whose Buick LaCrosse is built in its Fairfax (Kan.) plant, which contains more than 1,100 robots. GM is now hiring back some laid-off workers to keep up with growing demand for stylish, high-quality new cars.

Or talk to [Drew Greenblatt, president of Marlin Steel Wire Products](#) in Baltimore, who pays his workers \$30 an hour plus benefits and beats overseas companies that pay much less, thanks in part to investments in robotics technology. In the 12 years he's owned the [wire basket](#) and [hook maker](#), Greenblatt has doubled head count while increasing revenue sixfold. [Marlin exports products all over the world, including to Belgium, Poland, Switzerland, Australia, and Taiwan](#), as a result of the high-quality products his company produces.

U.S. Growth Potential

The first industrial robot worldwide was installed in 1961 at a General Motors plant in New Jersey. Of the more than 1 million robots that work in manufacturing facilities worldwide, only a fifth are in U.S. factories. The relatively low adoption rate of robots in the U.S. is a hopeful sign, since we still have a chance to take advantage of robotics on a broader scale.

Industrial robotics also creates jobs at the companies that build and service the machines. Even though most of today's industrial robots are built in Japan and Europe, major robotics companies including ABB (ABB), Fanuc, Kuka Robotics, and Yaskawa Electric have U.S. divisions. Adept Technology (ADEP) is based in Pleasanton, Calif.

If you count robots working outside factories in fields including medicine, defense, and home maintenance, there are more than 8 million of the machines worldwide. Many leaders in those areas, including Intuitive Surgical Systems (ISRG) and iRobot (IRBT), are based in the U.S.

Robot-building competitions like First Robotics, founded by inventor Dean Kamen, excite today's students who will become tomorrow's engineers and entrepreneurs.

There was a saying popular at General Electric (GE) in the '80s that American industry needed to "automate, emigrate, or evaporate". In the ensuing decades, we've lost too many jobs to emigration and evaporation. I hope more companies will choose to automate before it's too late.

Jeff Burnstein is president of the Robotic Industries Assn., a trade group that promotes the industrial use of robotics, in Ann Arbor, Mich.

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