

Pilot project shows robots streamlining warehouse operations

Technology group Wärtsilä and DHL have completed a successful pilot, where the companies tested mobile robots of Fetch Robotics in the daily operations of the warehouse. (video)



The companies also wanted to gain a greater understanding of the added value of robotics in a warehouse environment and to learn about the human–technology interface between robots and employees.

“There are exciting times ahead as we gear up to work side-by-side with robots in our operations. This technology allows us to seamlessly improve our customers’ supply chains, whilst relieving our employees from much of the physical effort and keeping them safer,” says Paul Stone, CEO Africa and MD South Africa, DHL Supply Chain.

“Our colleagues took centre stage during the trial. The robots are designed to work alongside employees and to relieve them from physically strenuous tasks. The robots alone took over a walking distance of more than 30 kilometres per day, thereby increasing productivity and safety within the warehouse working environment,” says Denis Niezgoda, robotics accelerator lead, DHL Customer Solutions and Innovation.

Interactive work environments with robotic ‘colleagues’

The mobile robot system simplifies point-to-point material handling. Workflows at Wärtsilä’s warehouse can be set up and modified very quickly to accommodate today’s dynamic environments, without the need for complex programming. Workers can interact with the robots via touchscreen, and send them on their journeys with a push of a button.

The autonomous mobile robots have a loading capacity of 78 kilogrammes and can cover a distance of two metres per second. When the nine-hour battery life comes to an end, the freight robot independently makes its way to the charging unit. The intelligent robots recognise their location and surroundings and can differentiate between dynamic and static obstacles, thus enabling them to take evasive action to work safely with and around people.

Successful pilot inspires future partnership

The pilot was carried out in Wärtsilä's central distribution centre in Kampen, the Netherlands, where the entire logistics chain of Wärtsilä's spare parts, from order intake to customer delivery, is managed. DHL runs the warehouse operations.

“The pilot was a success and, as a result, we have decided to continue exploring and developing new applications of smart mobile robot technology. Over the coming months, we will continue to trial different robot types and technologies together with our partners to further improve productivity, quality and safety in our operations,” says Anne Träskbäck, general manager, parts delivery at Wärtsilä Services.

This new generation of smart mobile robots can impact the logistics industry through enhancing people's capabilities. They enable people to perform tasks faster and save energy, thus improving efficiency.

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