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Delivery robots to hit Japan streets

AFP, FUJISAWA, Japan



“Excuse me, coming through,” a four-wheeled robot chirps as it dodges pedestrians on a street outside Tokyo, part of an experiment businesses hope will tackle labor shortages and rural isolation.

From April, revised traffic laws are to allow self-driving delivery robots to navigate streets across Japan.

Proponents hope the machines could eventually help elderly people in depopulated rural areas gain access to goods, while also addressing a shortage of delivery workers in a country with chronic labor shortages.



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for delivery in Tokyo on Jan. 18.

Photo: AFP

However, there are challenges to overcome, including safety concerns, said Hisashi Taniguchi, president of Tokyo-based robotics firm ZMP Inc.

“They are still newcomers in human society, so it is natural they’re seen with a bit of discomfort,” he said. “The robots would not be operating entirely alone, with humans monitoring remotely and able to intervene.”

It is important the robots “are humble and lovable” to inspire confidence, Taniguchi said.



Panasonic Corp’s delivery robot Hakobo sells hot drinks and snacks in Tokyo’s Marunouchi shopping and business area on Jan. 13.

Photo: AFP

ZMP has partnered with behemoths such as Japan Post Holdings Co in its trials of delivery robots in Tokyo.

Its “DeliRo” robot aims to look charming, and features big, expressive eyes that can be made teary if pedestrians block its way.

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There is a serious purpose behind the cuteness.

Japan has one of the world's oldest populations, with nearly 30 percent of its citizens over the age of 65. Many live in depopulated rural areas that lack easy access to daily necessities.

Labor shortages in its cities and new rules limiting overtime for truck drivers also make it difficult for businesses to keep up with COVID-19 related e-commerce and delivery demands.

"The shortage of workers in transport will be a challenge in the future," said Dai Fujikawa, an engineer at electronics giant Panasonic Corp, which is trialing delivery robots in Tokyo and nearby Fujisawa.

"I hope our robots will be used to take over where needed and help ease the labor crunch," he said.

Regulations set a maximum speed of 6kph, meaning the "chances of severe injury in the event of a collision are relatively small," said Yutaka Uchimura, a professor of robotic engineering at Shibaura Institute of Technology.

If a robot "moves off the sidewalk and collides with a car due to some discrepancy between the preinstalled location data and the actual environment, that would be extremely worrying," he said.

Panasonic said its "Hakobo" robot can judge autonomously when to turn, as well as detect obstacles, such as construction and approaching bikes, and stop.

One person at the Fujisawa control center simultaneously monitors four robots via cameras and is automatically alerted whenever their robotic charges are stuck or stopped by obstacles, Fujikawa said.

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Hakobo is programmed to capture and send real-time images of traffic lights to operators and await instructions.

Test runs have so far ranged from delivering medicine and food to Fujisawa residents to peddling snacks in Tokyo with disarming patter such as: "Another cold day, isn't it? How about some hot drinks?"

Authorities do not believe Japanese streets are soon to be teeming with robots, given the pressure to protect human employment.

"We don't expect drastic change right away, because there are jobs at stake," said Hiroki Kanda, an official from the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, which is promoting the technology.

"The spread of robots will be more of a gradual process, I think," Kanda said.

Uchimura is aware of the technology's limitations, and believes rolling the robots out in sparsely populated rural areas first would be safest.

However, firms say that demand in cities is likely to make urban deployment more commercially viable.

Taniguchi hopes to eventually see the machines operating everywhere.

"I think it would make people happy if, with better communication technology, these delivery robots can patrol a neighborhood or check on the safety of elderly people," he said. "Japan loves robots."

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