Buy A Robot And Save America

http://www.forbes.com/business/2005/12/30/robots-logistics-warehouse-china-cx_rm_0103robots.html

– Copied from Forbes for USA molders -

Ignorance of the costs of logistics, the supply chain and manufacturing can sink a company--and even a nation. There is endless talk of how low Chinese wages can save your company, and that could be true. But there has been almost no talk of how industrial robotic technology, which is getting better every day, can save your company--especially with prices dropping as they are.

Close to 15,000 industrial robots, worth more than $900 million, have been purchased in North America. These figures are on track to double--then double again--at which point the U.S. might catch up with Japan. This would decrease the need to outsource many manufacturing and distribution jobs to China.

Industrial robots can't speak English or Chinese, but they can communicate very well with their controllers--something they do 24/7, with no vacations and no health care. They don't receive a pension after they're retired, either. Instead, they get recycled or remanufactured and go to work again.

The average wage for a U.S. warehouse or distribution worker is around $15 per hour (plus benefits). The average wage for this same work in China is about $3 per hour. The average wage for a skilled UAW U.S. automobile worker is $25 to $30 per hour, plus the staggering costs of health care coverage and retirement. The average cost per hour to operate an industrial robot is, “30 cents per hour,”.

Even if this figure is doubled to 60 cents and includes a vision system, a software package and yearly maintenance, it is still only one-fifth the cost per hour of a Chinese laborer. It is more like one-fiftieth as costly as a **General Motors** (nyse: GM - news - people) assembler. Is it possible that GM, **Ford Motor** (nyse: F - news - people) and a host of other U.S. manufacturers, distribution-center operators and warehouse managers should look more closely at industrial robots?

There is, of course, an initial purchase and installation cost (approximately $60,000), but this can be amortized in a few years. After that, the cash flow is impressive. Moreover, many of the tools a robot needs, such as end effectors (grippers for instance), have to be matched in their costs against tools used by manual labor. Some 45% of the robots that have been purchased in North America in 2005 have been materials-handling robots. In the logistics domain for instance, industrial robots can deliver consistent quality in demanding applications, such as mixed-load palletizing. In a distribution or manufacturing center, this may involve individual pallets that must each be stacked with a variety of products in a specific way. Robots do this well, consistently and economically. The advantages are not merely in higher productivity but in significantly reduced labor costs and increased quality control.

In 2000, an individual robot cost one-fifth what it would have cost in 1990. The prices continue to drop, and some manufacturers and distributors have gotten the message. According to Donald Vincent, the director of the Robot Industry Association, North American manufacturers have "increased their purchases by 30% as of the third-quarter 2005 over 2004."

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