

TECHNOLOGY

SoftBank-powered robots to help Grab with meal deliveries

Singapore and Japan to use the droids jointly developed by China's Keenon



SoftBank Robotics and Keenon Robotics are keen to roll out their service bots to the U.S., Europe and the Middle East. (Photo by Mayuko Tani)

DYLAN LOH, Nikkei staff writer

September 21, 2021 19:47 JST

SINGAPORE -- Autonomous robots powered by artificial intelligence sound like plot devices straight out of a Hollywood science-fiction movie, but soon these service droids could be the norm in the food industries in Japan and Singapore, thanks to SoftBank Robotics and China's Keenon Robotics.

The two countries will be the first to use such robots in a partnership announced by SoftBank and Shanghai-headquartered Keenon on Tuesday. The two companies hope to expand the use of intelligent machines in sectors such as food and beverage to ease labor shortages.

Keenon developed these droids equipped with its own AI capabilities and powered with SoftBank's cloud computing infrastructure that give them the ability to detect and avoid obstacles while making deliveries. "Superapp" provider Grab's cloud kitchen at Hillview in Singapore will be the first to use these robots whose main duty would be to bring the orders from the kitchen to the delivery drivers.

The Singapore-based company, one of Southeast Asia's most valued startups, said the service robots will help automate some functions at its cloud kitchen, which is essentially a food court with a centralized kitchen with orders taken via its Grab app.

"We look forward to improving the agility of our operations and reduce repetitive and manual processes with the help of the robots," said Yee Wee Tang, managing director at Grab Singapore, adding that the robots will reduce physical contact as well, particularly useful during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cloud kitchens and food deliveries have also risen in popularity during the health crisis.



Robots developed by Keenon Robotics and SoftBank serve meals at a launch event to demonstrate their capabilities. (Photo by Mayuko Tani)

Tung Lok Group, which owns and manages over 35 restaurants in Singapore, Indonesia, China, Japan and Vietnam, has also signed up for the robots.

"The service industry, particularly the F&B sector, has been facing a constant challenge of manpower shortage for a very long time now," said Andrew Tjioe, president and CEO at Tung Lok.

"We do not expect these robots to replace the human element in our service, but rather, we hope for these robots to further complement and enhance our service efficiency," he said.

Keenon's robots for Grab and Tung Lok are the latest in a line of machines the company has developed for restaurants, hotels, hospitals, government offices, elder care facilities, banks and airports. The company said its innovations have been used in more than 30 countries, serving over 10,000 customers worldwide.

"As the cost of labor increases, technology becomes an affordable solution creating an increased appetite for automation alongside human tasks," said Tony Li, Keenon CEO.

SoftBank said appetite in the region for such technological innovations is vast. An Astute Analytica study also showed that the Asia-Pacific region will control 27.1% of the global delivery robot industry by 2027.

While Singapore and Japan are early adopters of SoftBank and Keenon's robots, the partnership has its sights set on rolling out similar products in Europe, the Middle East and the U.S. as well.

Kenichi Yoshida, chief business officer at SoftBank Robotics, told Nikkei Asia that South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, Australia and New Zealand are also markets that his company is targeting.

"'Robotization' can bring not only the deep productivity improvement but also service enhancement, because people can focus more on high value-added tasks, including customer care, while your robot can handle low value-added tasks," he said.

Yoshida said that automation will help fill labor gaps in countries like Singapore and Japan grappling with aging populations. Although some human jobs may become obsolete, he said that he hoped other jobs will be created.

"Robot engineers (are needed) and we need to deploy the robot to all over the restaurants, and we need to provide the support in terms of technology," he said. "Definitely yes, some jobs have to be changed, have to be replaced, but new tasks, new jobs will be created."