



UKWA Technology Advisory Board – How to Get Robotics Working for You

It was another highly successful gathering for the UKWA Technology Advisory Board, this time tackling the advent of robotics and automation and its impact on the sector, which was well received by members and invited guests.

Hosted by John Lewis at its fully automated Magna Park Campus in Milton Keynes attendees were given a tour of the site for an insight into a prime example of a large scale, modern and highly automated warehousing & distribution operation.

Delegates included a range of UKWA's 3pl members from the largest represented by CEVA Logistics, to privately owned companies such as Import Services and Paul Ponsoyby, together with leading automation suppliers Neopost, ABB, Swisslog and Knapp.

UKWA associate members Logistics Partners and WCS were also represented, and the interactive discussions were complemented by valuable input from leading logistics users Homebase, Claire's Accessories and Argos amongst others.

Robotics for all

Introducing the discussions, UKWA Chief Executive outlined his view of the fast-moving world of logistics as it responds to the technology-driven expectations of today's consumer, citing the John Lewis operation as a best in class example of what would better be described as an order factory, rather than a warehouse.

Supporting this view, and as facilitator of UKWA's Technology Advisory Board, Mark Thornton, Marketing Director of UKWA associate Maginus Software Solutions, invited the meeting to consider how a greater level of automation could be adopted by the logistics sector, underlining that this should not be considered the exclusive preserve of the very large operators.

A revolution in logistics

Jo Bradley, Business Development Manager of automated packing solutions provider Neopost introduced Neopost's CVP500 packing machine, giving examples of continuous variety packing and case studies where automation had proved to be 15 times faster than manual labour, with up to seventy per cent reduction in materials and in one case a ROI within 24 months.

Introducing their latest robotic developments, Eleanor Baverstock Sales Manager, ABB, suggested that a revolution in logistics is potentially imminent, given space and labour limitations, with robotic applications increasingly likely to replace manual process, particularly where highly repetitive tasks exist.

Addressing the concerns raised by Chris Warn, Head of Supply at Homebase, about the cost of deploying robotics, ABB gave an example of a recent 3pl implementation in China where a traditional distribution function had been 80% automated, with end to end running costs reduced to around 4 Euros per hour.

Portable solutions

Joshila Makan, CEO of UKWA associate WCS, stressed the need for greater education across the logistics industry of these new technologies, which being portable have the potential to unlock many of the current challenges regarding the need for flexibility and agility in choice of location.

Shane Faulkner, Senior Sales Manager of Swisslog continued the theme of scaleable, flexible and portable solutions in his presentation of Swisslog's CarryPick robot, where an autonomous pick vehicle works collaboratively with manual labour.

Steve Knight of Knapp was keen to correct the perception of automation being prohibitively costly and inflexible, pointing out that most deployments should be viewed as islands of automation, and that operators should evaluate where automation might fit into a specific pocket of the distribution facility, rather than consider a complete overhaul.

Avoid silo thinking

This view was echoed by Paul Watkins, Senior Logistics Strategy Development Manager at Argos. Based on his current role and previous experience with M&S and Tesco, Paul outlined the necessity to take a more expansive view than is often the case. Sometimes the need to solve the immediate problem outweighs the need to think about the future, and Paul emphasised the need to consider the broader end to end process, and avoid silo thinking. He also pointed out the immense complexity of information technology in the process of automation, advising that these are largely massive IT projects supported by mechanisation and automation, not vice versa.

Mike Thomas, Director of Import Services and Michael O'Donohue, EVP CEVA Logistics UK, Ireland & Nordics, agreed that the logistics industry continues to learn from manufacturing industries, particularly automotive manufacturing from where much of the automation and robotic technology under discussion has been developed. The logistics industry has always responded by applying a high degree of manual labour; but as this most flexible of resources becomes increasingly scarce and more expensive, the industry at all levels has to find news to operate on a sustainable basis.

John Lewis prime example

Summarising the discussions, Mark Thornton of Maginus paid tribute to the John Lewis operation, and thanked John Munnely, Head of Operations, for hosting this highly informative meeting. He was impressed by the scale of the 2.2 m sq ft facility, handling 3,500 suppliers, 250,000 sku's including boxed and hanging, and the ability of John Lewis to serve its omni-channel model from a single stock. His parting comment was to imagine a future where a sufficiently-funded third party logistics provider might invest in an order factory comparable with John Lewis, and offer similar distribution services on a shared-user basis.

Don't get left behind

Thus the over-riding message for the logistics industry, which historically and traditionally has managed itself by increasing its labour force to handle each job, is wake up and smell the coffee – automation and robotics are coming to a town near you. Ignore at your peril.