

IN-STORE

## Will robots deplete the workforce of auto factories?

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By JOE MCCARTHY

As the role played by robots in automotive factories continues to grow, luxury consumers accustomed to hand-crafted items may begin to have mixed feelings.

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While the threat of disenfranchised humans may cause unease in consumers who appreciate learned expertise, the proliferation of robotic technology in automotive factories does not signal an end to human involvement. On the contrary, robots are still subservient to the design aesthetics and programming of humans and auto brands still employ vast amounts of people.

"I have been to the Audi factory in Ingolstadt to pick up a car," said Lauren Fix, automotive expert and author of "[Lauren Fix's Guide to Loving Your Car](#)," Lancaster, NY. "There were still quite a few people to fit and finish details.

"They told me that the human eye is critical for final inspection because certain items still require a human to complete the assembly," she said.

"As for customers appreciating it, yes, a well-built car lasts longer, looks better and creates an overall better quality car. This is part of the reason Audi's sales have skyrocketed and customers are flocking to the full Audi lineup across the world."

## Natural progression

The heavy and unyielding nature of vehicles have always called for machinery to pick up, bend, shape and manipulate exteriors and interiors. Extending this relationship between man and machine to a higher level as technology progresses seems to be a logical step.

Robots are generally used to do the brunt of repetitive tasks that require exact execution, which frees up space for humans to work on other projects. Freeing up humans for other tasks does not necessarily reduce the amount of jobs available.

"Today's average car lasts much, much longer," said Bob Prosser, CEO of [Auto World Marketing Corp.](#), San Diego. "This is because everything is designed on a computer so the tolerances, manufacturing, paint and assembly are far more precise and consistent.

But let's never confuse the term hand assembly and craftsmanship," he said. "I would use the term 'craftsman' to mean things still done by hand, by highly trained, experienced and passionate people dedicated to the quality of their craft.

"Although computer-aided designers and software engineers work with their hands technically, I am not considering them in context of this topic."



*BMW plant in Leipzig, Germany*

Similarly, many luxury brands have training programs that bring in hundreds of young applicants a year, which does not indicate a diminishing industry.

Audi employs 2,400 apprentices, who range between 15 and 18 years old. Each year, 715 apprentices complete their education and start a career at Audi, and they're replaced by 715 more; their retention rate is 100 percent, according to [Core77](#). The article explains that the Audi factory in Ingolstadt, Germany employs 35,000 employees.

Technicians are still widely sought after by luxury automotive brands. Mercedes-Benz offers Elite Start and Elite Advanced programs for aspiring technicians to hone their skills and learn valuable industry knowledge.

Aston Martin is accepting applications for its graduate engineering and business programs until Nov. 29.



*Aston Martin facility in Gaydon, Britain*

Meanwhile, Rolls-Royce Motor Cars' expansion is barreling forward with the popularity of its Wraith model and rising sales that spurred the creation of 100 new jobs.

The British automaker's newly-minted jobs run the gamut of the company's labor, indicating that the brand is churning on all cylinders, while half-year sales figures predict another record year in 2013 ([see story](#)).



*Rolls-Royce Wraith*

"There still is a good level of hands-on craftsmanship with today's high-end marques," Mr. Prossman said. "They still advertise pride of workmanship in their product when it comes to engine assembly and interior finish.

"Older, collectible sports cars used to be built by craftsmen to a large extent, and that sounds romantic and old-world, but it often also meant each car had its own soul and personality, sometimes good, and sometimes bad," he said. "That's rarely the case any longer."

Furthermore, the greater role played by robots in factories creates a futuristic atmosphere that likely brings more consumers in for tours, which can boost brand reputation.

While automakers continue to increase robot intelligence in factories, actual models are

also gaining intelligence.

For instance, German automaker Mercedes-Benz is working to ensure the reliability of its autonomous vehicles, having already exhibited the technology needed to navigate streets without human intervention.

The automotive brand will have to overcome numerous hurdles before an autonomous vehicle becomes available to the public, but keeping consumers updated will generate interest in the project. Similarly, Mercedes-Benz' full-throttle approach to autonomy will likely spur other brands to increase their research into similar designs ([see story](#)).

Factory wonder

Factory tours with or without robots are still an excellent way to build brand loyalty and attract new consumers.

During McLaren's efforts to build an image outside of racing, the brand leveraged factory tours to sway consumers ([see story](#)).



*McLaren production center in Woking, Britain*

Factory tours enable brands to curate their own image. Unlike with dealerships, factories provide brands with complete control over how they are depicted.

Brands can leverage history by exploring the path taken by founders, showcasing rare vehicles or bringing guests through an average employee's routine.

"Factory tours are great for kids, buyers and anyone who wants to learn," Ms. Fix said.

"I have visited plants around the world and always walk away impressed and inspired to create something better in my life too," she said.

Final take

*Joe McCarthy, editorial assistant on Luxury Daily, New York*

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