



Robot Versus Wo/Man

Egan robotics consultant and distributor John Henry Foster is helping to address labor challenges **BY JOHN P. PALEN**

The robots are here.

I'm not talking about the human-looking, talking variety — not yet, at least. The robots that are working in many Minnesota companies today have arms and grippers. Manufacturers are considering the advantages of robotics and other automation to increase productivity, reduce labor shortages and enhance workplace safety.

Interest and demand for robotics in Minnesota is unprecedented, according to Jan Hawkins, president and COO of Egan-based, John Henry Foster (JHF). "A lot of momentum happened just this past year, and the robotics

industry is gaining strong traction among large and small manufacturers, such as food, medical and industrial."

Optimism is higher in the state's manufacturing sector, according to Enterprise Minnesota, a manufacturing extension partnership (MEP) that consults with manufacturers to help them grow profitably. Its annual spring survey of 400 manufacturing executives throughout the state anticipated economic expansion for the first time in nine years. But those who experienced "difficulty attracting qualified workers" have more than doubled in the survey since 2011.

"Robots alleviate tasks such as heavy lifting and repetitive motion that may cause injury"

— *Jan Hawkins, President and COO,
John Henry Foster*

Owners are also concerned about maintaining health and safety standards, according to Hawkins. Robots alleviate tasks such as heavy lifting and repetitive motion that may cause injury, she says.

John Henry Foster is leveraging 80 years



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of established relationships to introduce the upper Midwest to robotics and other automation. In 1938, the company's namesake drove around the Midwest selling compressed air equipment from his Airstream trailer.

By the 1970s, JHF had approximately 20 employees, and by the '80s, it had a new location in Eagan and a new owner, Ed Mayhew. Mayhew passed the torch to Hawkins' husband, John, in 1999. Jan Hawkins joined the company about 15 years ago after a long career in telecommunications. She became president in 2014.

"Our tenured team and history have been helpful for us as this demand for robotics has come forth," Jan Hawkins says. "We already have the relationships through our large portfolio of compressed air products and solutions, and we began automating production and assembly processes for our clients more than a decade ago."

Another big component of the business is servicing compressed air systems and providing parts and maintenance. JHF's team of certified technicians bring more than 200 combined years of experience to support the vast product lines. Hawkins says ongoing training is one big reason employees stay.

Making a point to be involved in the community and the future of robotics in Minnesota, John Henry Foster considers opportunities to support kindergarten through 12th grade robotics clubs and to offer tours of its facility. The company recently hosted two industrial robotics expos in Bloomington and Winona

BIZ BRIEFING

JOHN HENRY FOSTER [JHF]

LOCATION: Eagan

INCEPTION: 1938

EMPLOYEES: 108

LEADERSHIP: Jan Hawkins, President and COO

DESCRIPTION: Leading provider of premium quality compressed air and automation solutions — customized and design-to-build — to clients in Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Dakota, South Dakota and northern Iowa

WEB: jhfooster.com

that attracted a lot of interest from businesses. Hawkins also wants to increase diverse interest in the robotics or automation career fields by demonstrating how they solve challenges in safety, energy consumption and employee burnout.

"There is a perception that robots will replace humans, but I see a future where they work alongside us," Hawkins says. 🇺🇸



JOHN P. PALEN is CEO of Allied Executives and works with CEOs, business owners and executive leaders on leadership and business performance through peer groups, coaching and educational workshops. alliedexecutives.com