

Fears of employee displacement as Amazon brings robots into warehouses

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Author: Callum Jones

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Amazon is experimenting with a humanoid robot as the technology company increasingly seeks to automate its warehouses. It has started testing Digit, a two-legged robot that can grasp and lift items, at facilities this week. The device is first being used to shift empty tote boxes. The company's ambitious drive to integrate robotics across its sprawling operation has sparked fears about the effect on its workforce of almost 1.5 million humans. Tye Brady, the chief technologist at Amazon Robotics, claimed that – although it will render some jobs redundant – the deployment of robots would create new ones. In a briefing at a media event at an Amazon facility on the outskirts of Seattle, Brady told reporters that he wants to “eliminate all the menial, the mundane and the repetitive” tasks inside Amazon's business. He denied this would lead to job cuts, however, claiming that it “does not” mean Amazon will require fewer staff. Insisting that people are “irreplaceable” in the company's operation, Brady pushed back at the suggestion it could one day have a fully automated warehouse. “There's not any part of me that thinks that would ever be a reality,” he said. “People are so central to the fulfillment process; the ability to think at a higher level, the ability to diagnose problems. “We will always need people ... I've never been around an automated system that works 100% of the time. I don't think you have as well.” Digit was developed by Agility Robotics, a startup based in Corvallis, Oregon, and backed by Amazon. The robot, which can walk forwards, backwards and sideways, and can crouch – is 5ft 9in (175cm) tall and weighs 143lb (65kg). It can carry up to 35lb (16kg). Amazon plans to put Digit to work “in spaces and corners of warehouses in novel ways”, it said in a blogpost. “We believe that there is a big opportunity to scale a mobile manipulator solution, such as Digit, which can work collaboratively with employees. “Our initial use for this technology will be to help employees with tote recycling, a highly repetitive process of picking up and moving empty totes once inventory has been completely picked out of them.” Ford, the carmaker, was the first buyer of Digit robots. Agility Robotics got investment from Amazon's Industrial Innovation Fund last year. Separately at Wednesday's event, Amazon announced it was deploying a robotic system called Sequoia at one of its Houston warehouses in an effort to speed up deliveries. The system is designed to help identify and store inventory 75% more quickly, it said, and reduce the processing time of orders by as much as 25%. Onstage, Brady said: “Collaborative robotics involves people. How can we have people be the stars, the spotlight, the center of the show, when it comes to the jobs that we have to do? “When we do our job really, really well, our robotic systems just kind of blend into the background to become ubiquitous. You don't talk about your dishwasher too much in your kitchen. It's an amazing robot. It's such a great robot that I don't even call it a robot.”