The Rise of the Robots

by Ricia Sturgeon-Hendrick

“Be nice to the robots, for they will rule the world one day.” — Thhive.com

There seems to be a real concern by some that, by the end of this century, 75% of all Americans will be out of a job and servile to robots. That may be too far away for your editor to worry about, but a new report by PricewaterhouseCoopers says 38% of U.S. jobs, most of them service based, are at high risk of being replaced by automation in the next 15 years.

Centuries ago, the Western world successfully replaced agricultural jobs with industry jobs, and the economy kept on ticking — still, the rise of the robots is a disruption that deserves our consideration. According to The Week, of the 270 occupations listed in the 1950 census, only one has been completely eliminated by automation: the elevator operator. In honor of that event, our cover features . . . elevator operators (the human kind). Our own Kaija Wilkinson writes of them in the article Always in Style. The cover was shot in Stockmann’s flagship store in downtown Helsinki, which has 94 KONE elevators and escalators — some brand new and some from the 1930s, including a still-operating paternoster. The store that sells almost anything was celebrating 150 years in business.

TIME notes that the global industrial robotics market is expected to reach US$79 billion by 2022. The construction industry, and attendant trades, have been slow to automate, and they are unlikely to be as affected by robotics as many other industries. However, a recent report by the McKinsey Global Institute says that to improve productivity, the construction industry must take steps to “infuse digital technology, new materials and advanced automation.” So, our focus this month, for the first time, is on Robots and Automation, which will undoubtedly be an ongoing topic.

Emre Köröşlu, in Smart Machines Are Ushering In a New Generation of Production, says that robotic production reduces human inefficiencies but also requires skilled employees to know when to intervene. This has been dubbed the Industry 4.0 revolution, where information technology and production technology completely intersect. In our own industry, component supplier Elevator Cable Supply Corp. (ECS), a 50-year-old company, installed its first computer-controlled equipment in the 1980s. Now, according to Cathy Hayat in Riding the Cutting Edge, ECS has many in its plant, plus robotic welders, which have increased productivity and reduced errors. Yaskawa Turkey sent us Robotics Leader Yaskawa Plans Slovenia Factory about the Japanese tech giant’s plans for supplying Europe. The company has a base of 350,000 industrial robots. “REDI” for the Future by Kaija Wilkinson is about an unusual group of towers (mixed use — commercial and residential) being built in Helsinki. KONE used focus groups to record positive and negative issues with vertical transportation to develop the 61 elevators and 48 escalators going into the buildings. Because of this, the equipment is unusually responsive to the passengers’ needs, coming to a call from a cell phone and using light, sound and smell to enhance the experience. This subject was so much fun that your editor felt inspired to do some “blue sky”ing in Will the Elevator Industry Meet the Future? imagining how automation and robotics might affect the future of the elevator industry. Surely, many ideas were missed, and we urge you to send in yours.

This is a time of the year when many events in our industry take place, and we tried to cover them all. Asansör İstanbul 2017, with more than 300 booths and 28,000 visitors, was within days of Eurasia Lift Fair in the same city. This newer tradeshow had 250 exhibitors and 33,000 visitors. Istanbul once again proved it is an important bridge between East and West. More events included: IAEC Forum 2017, where consultants met in New Orleans; Russian Elevator Week in Moscow with nearly 180 booths and more than 5,000 visitors; the Seventh International Seminar on Elevators and Escalators in Tehran, Iran, that brought together scholars and industry; and, finally, GAL and Hollister-Whitney’s entertaining of consultants at their Consultant’s Day in Quincy, Illinois.

Don’t miss the Interview with the Elevator Program Chief of the Navy, Kevin Morse, by our own Angela C. Baldwin, or EW Correspondent M.J. Mohamed Iqbal’s article on how Toshiba makes A Shift in Focus from faster elevators to higher-capacity units. This is but one idea of what the future holds. Tell us about yours!  🌐