

Personal mobility machine needs no help at Tokyo airport

June 8 2020, by Yuri Kageyama



This photo provided by WHILL, Inc., shows the trial of the company's Autonomous Drive System at Haneda Airport in Tokyo in November, 2019. The autonomous mobility system, which works like a wheelchair without anyone pushing it, is scuttling around a Tokyo airport to help with social distancing amid the coronavirus pandemic. (WHILL, Inc. via AP)

An autonomous mobility system that works like a wheelchair without anyone pushing it is scuttling around a Tokyo airport to help with social distancing amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The personal mobility machine seats one person and runs on its own without crashing, even when people jump out unexpectedly, for about 600 meters (660 yards) on a pre-programmed route at Haneda International Airport, WHILL, the company behind the technology, said Monday.

WHILL Chief Executive Satoshi Sugie said robotics and autonomous driving technology that reduce the need for human labor are a good match for these times of "living with" the coronavirus.

"We are rapidly developing our business in order to help restore a world where people can enjoy moving around with [peace of mind](#)," he told The Associated Press.

The ride lasts just several minutes, traveling from security clearance to the boarding gate at a maximum speed of 3.5 kilometers (2 miles) per hour. But hopes are high that the technology, which uses sensors and cameras, can help in other places, such as hospitals, parks and shopping centers. Labor shortages are a problem in Japan, as well as other nations.

Tests have been carried out at various airports since last year, including John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York, and the company hopes to introduce it at airports around the world.

The person on the machine can start or stop it through a tablet controller. It runs on lithium-ion batteries and returns automatically to where it started.

Anyone needing help walking long distances can use it at Terminal One

at Haneda, for what's referred to as that "last-mile mobility," according to WHILL, based in Yokohama, Japan.

Although vacuum cleaners, machines carrying things and talking robots are already moving about at airports and other places, personal mobility that runs autonomously is still relatively rare in public places.

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