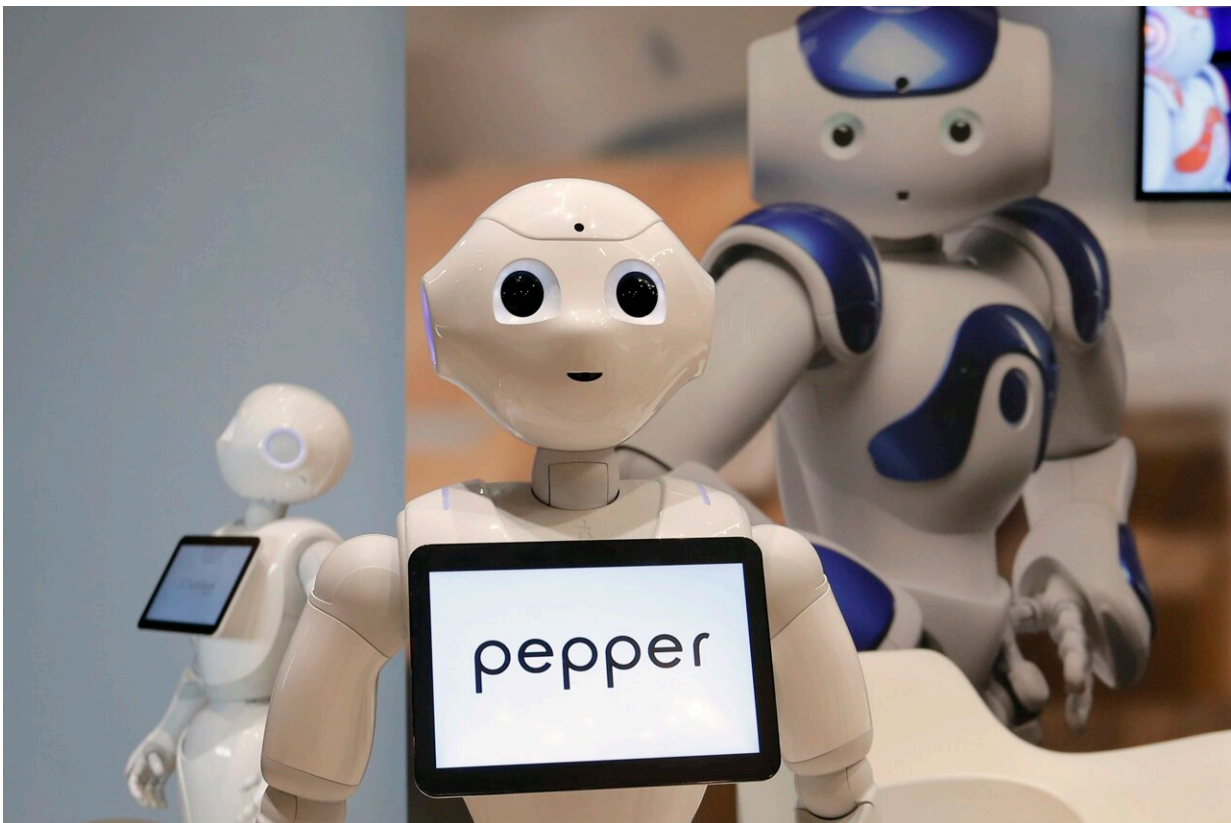


Japan's SoftBank says Pepper robot remains 'alive' and well

June 30 2021, by Yuri Kageyama



In this May 25, 2016, file photo, Pepper, the robot of Softbank Robotics Europe, performs during the Innorobo European summit, an event dedicated to the service robotics industry in Aubervilliers, outskirts of Paris. Japanese technology company SoftBank denies it's pulling the plug on its friendly talking bubble-headed Pepper robot. "There is absolutely no change to our Pepper business," SoftBank Robotics Corp. spokesperson said Wednesday, June 30, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Francois Mori, File

Japanese technology company SoftBank denies it's pulling the plug on its friendly, talking, bubble-headed Pepper robot.

"There is absolutely no change to our Pepper business," SoftBank Robotics Corp. spokesperson Ai Kitamura said Wednesday.

Pepper, introduced seven years ago, is centered around a rentals business, and production is regularly adjusted, the Tokyo-based company said.

While production was halted temporarily, Kitamura denied reports that set off speculation Pepper might be "killed."

The company acknowledged the contracts of 330 workers at the Paris division of SoftBank Robotics were being reviewed, but the move was routine and did not spell a death knell for Pepper.

If anything, the need for social distancing during the pandemic has boosted demand for robots like Pepper, which sometimes is used to take people's temperatures in stores.

Pepper robots, which have expressive hands but move around on wheels, have been cheering and dancing in the stands for the home games of the SoftBank Hawks Japanese professional baseball team in Fukuoka, southwestern Japan.

And Pepper's latest gig involves computer programming education in Japanese schools.

Robotics technology is widely used in manufacturing production lines and the transport of goods around the world.

But SoftBank Group Corp. founder and chief Masayoshi Son and other

experts say Japanese have a soft spot for robots like Pepper that look somewhat human and sometimes appear to show emotion.

Kitamura said the outpouring of reaction from Pepper fans was appreciated, and showed it has become a beloved icon.

"So many people said they would be sad if Pepper is gone," she said.

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