

Manufacturers hope for AI boost in factories

April 23 2023, by Léa PERNELLE



Manufacturers see potential for artificial intelligence in the sector.

Manufacturers are hoping for the artificial intelligence revolution to reach their factories, envisaging robots being used to repair complex machinery.

There has been an explosion of interest in uses of AI across many sectors

since the launch last year of chatbot ChatGPT from US startup OpenAI.

And at last week's Hanover Fair on [industrial technology](#) in Germany, the potential for [artificial intelligence](#) in the manufacturing sector was firmly in focus.

Via the tablet in his hands, a young employee of American IT services provider HPE chatted with an AI-equipped virtual assistant, asking it to operate the arm of a robot.

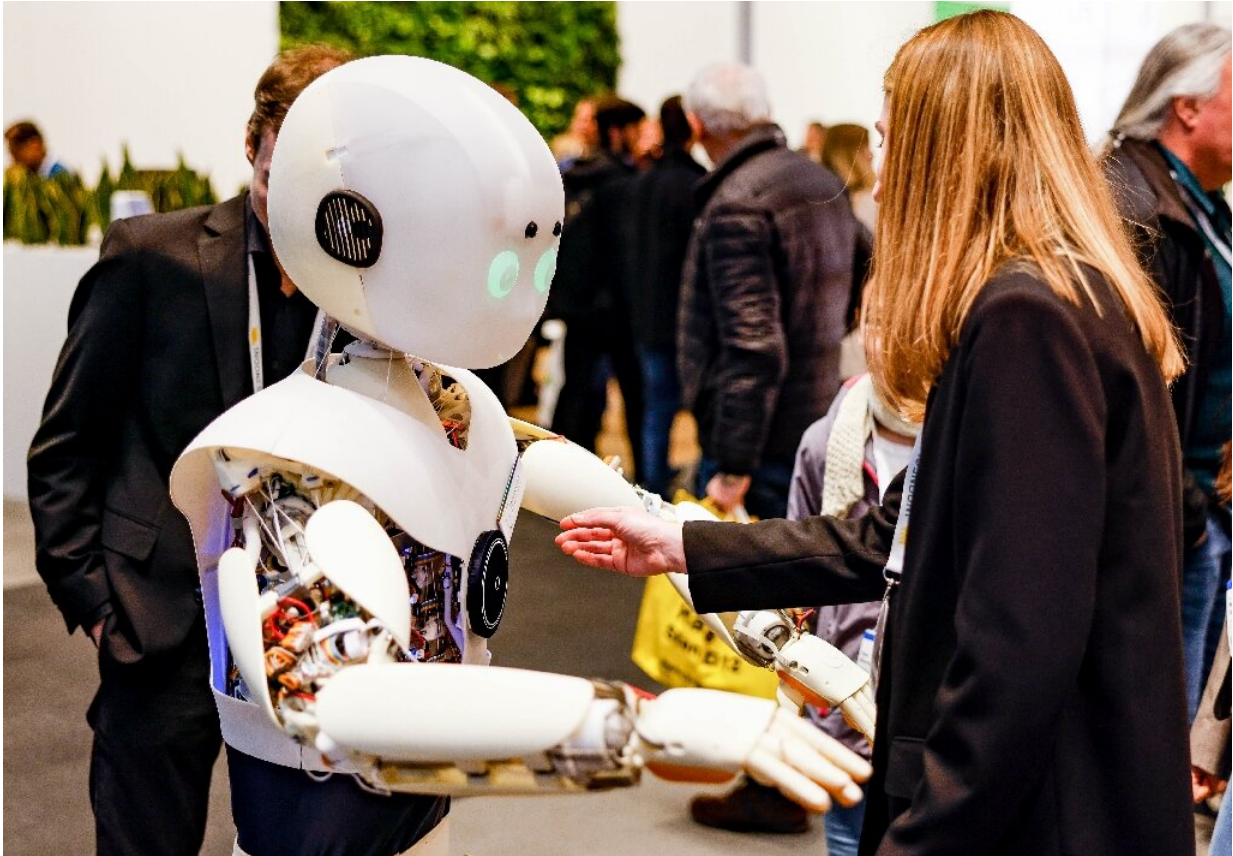
In order to solve a technical problem, "factory workers no longer need to get a qualified expert on site: the artificial intelligence takes charge" of guiding the repairs, said Thomas Meier, a data analyst from HPE who was presenting the prototype.

The US firm, which has some 60,000 employees, has been working for the past year with Aleph Alpha, a German startup with some 50 staff, seen as one of OpenAI's leading European rivals.

The innovation communicates with factory workers who can, for example, send a photo of a machine for the programme to detect any problems or check that it is correctly installed.

Aleph Alpha's resources are modest compared to those available to OpenAI, which has received major financing from Microsoft.

But the German startup believes it has at least one major advantage—it will keep customer data in Europe.



A woman interacts with a robot at a major trade fair in Hanover.

'Increasing efficiency'

But Aleph Alpha CEO Jonas Andrulis told AFP that Europe's contribution to the AI revolution must go "beyond regulation".

At another stand at the Hanover fair, Siemens was also exhibiting an application aimed at improving factory performance.

In partnership with Microsoft, the German industrial conglomerate is this year planning to bring out a new version of the Teams messaging platform.

It will feature ChatGPT and be specifically designed to help workers and spot defaults in products.

Microsoft and Siemens, who say they are working with a number of clients in the automotive and aerospace industries, rejected accusation that AI will lead to job losses.

Anthony Hemmelgarn, CEO of Siemens Digital Industries Software, said that 70 percent of issues were not being recorded and that AI was "not replacing anybody", as certain tasks were not getting done.

"It's all about increasing efficiency", he added.

Another advantage that AI could bring is "alleviating the shortage of skilled workers", particularly in Germany, said Jochen Koeckler, head of the Hanover fair organisers.

In Europe's biggest economy, almost 58 percent of manufacturers complain of workforce shortages, according to a study by the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training published in December.

For Andrulis, AI will undoubtedly lead to huge upheavals in the world of work.

But he also sought to offer assurances. "It's not like AI will take your job. But the company who will use AI will take the market share of the company who doesn't."

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