

Mercedes eyes humans, not robots, for S-Class customization

27 February 2016, by Nancy Owano



Here is a headline which, if you read it fast, might trick you into thinking you see the words in this order: "Mercedes replaces humans with robots on the production line."

After yawning once or twice, you need to go back and re-read Friday's *The Christian Science Monitor* headline as it really appeared: "Mercedes replaces robots with humans on the production [line](#)."

Man bites dog? In this case, yes. There are jobs at which robots are not yet a match for humans. Case in point: the assembly of customized Mercedes S-Class sedans.

The news is that Mercedes has hired skilled human workers to assemble highly-customized S-Class sedans in one of its plants with the view that doing so results in a show of better efficiency than if they were to deploy robots to do certain assembly tasks.

Robots will handle repetitive tasks on the production line, while humans will do jobs requiring decision-making and tolerance for ambiguity. Jeff Ward-Bailey reported that the car company

believes making decisions on the assembly line regarding customized parts had best be reserved for humans

They decided to hire more skilled human workers to staff the plant in Sindelfingen, Germany. Some interesting stats on the plant: the 101-year-old Sindelfingen plant produces 400,000 vehicles a [year](#) from 1,500 tons of steel a day, said *The Guardian*.

Markus Schaefer, Mercedes-Benz' head of production, was quoted by Bloomberg's Elisabeth Behrmann and Christoph Rauwald. Today the degree of individualization and many variants are too much for robots to handle well. "The variety is too much to take on for the machines... They can't work with all the different options and keep pace with [changes](#)."

The S-Class sedan from Mercedes carries a growing array of options. Carbon-fiber trim, heated and cooled cupholders and four types of caps for tire valves are some examples, and the carmaker's robots can't keep up.

"Mercedes found that it was taking too long to reprogram its robotic workers to distinguish between different parts and adapt to new tasks," said *The Christian Science Monitor's* Ward-Bailey.

Schaefer told Bloomberg: "We're saving money and safeguarding our future by employing more people."

The Christian Science Monitor offered this take-away. "As Mercedes's hiring move shows, the [automation](#) trend doesn't necessarily mean human workers will be phased out, but it does suggest that the employment landscape will probably look very different 20 years from now."

In Schaefer's view, that means that a car maker had better make judicious use of both humans and

robots. If the manufacturing process is focused around a skilled crew of workers, he said in Bloomberg, Mercedes can shift a production line in a weekend instead of weeks needed in the past to reprogram robots and shift assembly [patterns](#). Schaefer is pushing to reduce the hours needed to produce a car to 30 from 61 in 2005, said Bloomberg.

With manufacturing focused around a skilled crew of workers, Mercedes can shift a production line in a weekend instead of the weeks needed in the past to reprogram robots and shift assembly patterns, Schaefer said.

The automotive industry is the largest user of [industrial robots](#), said *The Guardian*.

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