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# Automated wonderland

Robotics gaining a stronger foothold at manufacturers across the region

STORY BY GINA MANGAN

SAY THE WORD "ROBOT" and many people still envision a space age contraption programmed by a genius to function like a souped-up human. Because of that image, some people think robots are too complicated and expensive to integrate into a manufacturing process.

But that's just not so, say the folks at KUKA Robotics Corp., a global manufacturer of industrial robots that operates a robotics training facility at Fox Valley Technical College in Appleton called KUKA College Fox Valley. Not only are industrial robots relatively simple to operate, they are reliable, flexible, able to work in conditions unsafe for humans, and can cost as little as one half the price of a conventional machine tool, said Ben Sagan, KUKA vice president of sales.

Robotics are everywhere these days – loading and unloading, bending, welding, assembling, sorting, cutting and grinding in a diverse range of industries. The Robotics Industry Association estimates about 162,000 robots are now installed in American factories, making the U.S. second only to Japan in robotics use.

## Where robots are used

KUKA's ROBOTICS ARE MILLING WOOD banisters and statues. They're stacking games, puzzles, juice cartons and ice cream cases onto pallets. They're cutting apart carcasses in slaughterhouses. They are maneuvering patients in medical settings. They are lifting clay roof tiles totaling up to 1.5 tons per day. They are handling red-hot 2,280-degree Fahrenheit metal forgings.

"I can't get robots in fast enough to meet the demand," Sagan said.

That's because companies outside the automotive industry are catching on fast to the benefits robotics can provide, despite some lingering misconceptions about their complexity. Robotic applications allow companies to reduce costs, increase productivity, develop new business opportunities, react quickly to customer needs, reduce worker injuries and stabilize their workforce by filling jobs for which employees can be hard to find, Sagan said.

KUKA's robotics sales grew 32 percent in 2006, even as the Robotics Industry Association reported a downturn in robot sales to the automotive industry led to a 38 percent overall decline in the total number of robots sold in North America during the first nine months of 2006. The bright spots were increases in robot sales to companies in general industry, food and consumer goods, and pharmaceutical/life sciences/biomedical. KUKA focused its efforts on growth areas.

Greenville-based QComp Technologies is also benefiting from the movement. The company devel-

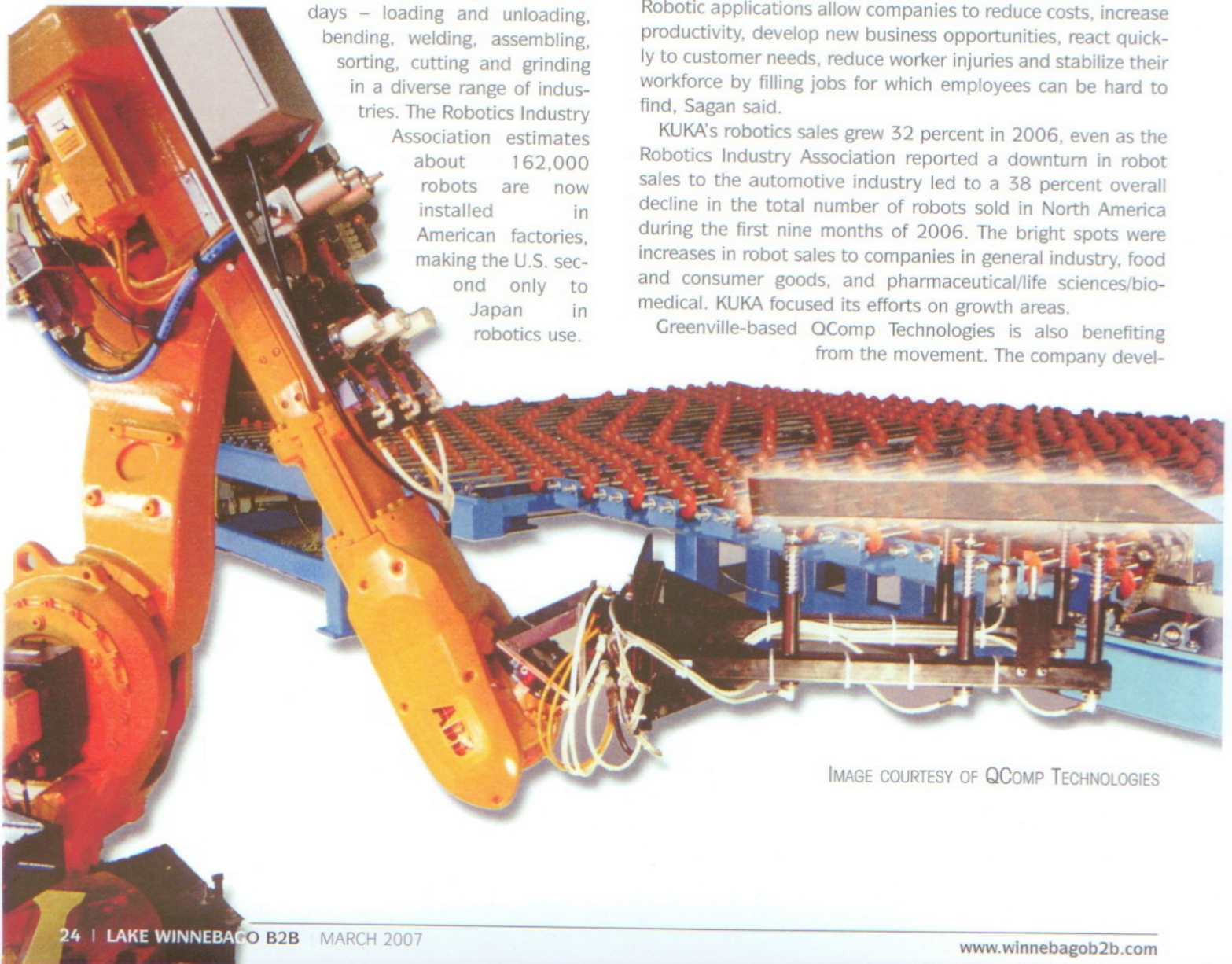


IMAGE COURTESY OF QCOMP TECHNOLOGIES

ops robotic-based systems for high-speed packing, palletizing, glass handling, case packing and other material handling applications within the food and consumer products industry. QComp President and CEO Tom Doyle said the company is predicting 20 to 25 percent growth in 2007 sales after experiencing a 10 percent increase in sales during 2006.

"We're seeing a record number of robots being applied in the companies we deal with," he said. "We have several customers within the Fox Valley with more than half a dozen robots on their floor."

Doyle said the flexibility robots provide has been a large benefit for companies. Robots can be programmed and reprogrammed to handle a wide variety of product sizes and variations. The robotic process is also repeatable and reliable, Doyle said.

"Our robots can be fine tuned so they don't scratch glass during handling. Likewise, they can be programmed to finesse a product into cases for the tightest possible fit, so our customers find significant quality improvements," he said.

Because robots don't take breaks, get sick or change shifts, manufacturers find they're able to run at a higher capacity.

When employees at Mid-States Aluminum Corp. in Fond du Lac had to evacuate their plant for about 30 minutes, its material handling robots continued to move pieces from point A to point B.

"Companies can end up unleashing as much as 5 to 10 percent of machine capacity that they didn't even realize they had, so there's a lot of hidden potential," Doyle said.

### Emerging presence in the Valley

BECAUSE OF THE FOX VALLEY'S RICH INDUSTRIAL BASE,

**“Companies can end up unleashing as much as 5 to 10 percent of machine capacity that they didn't even realize they had, so there's a lot of hidden potential.”**

*Tom Doyle, president and chief executive, QComp Technologies in Greenville*

Sagan said there's huge potential for robotics use within area manufacturers. The greatest challenge is overcoming the perception that robots are high tech and difficult to use, he said.

The length of training for employees to learn to effectively operate KUKA's robotics varies according to application. It can take anywhere from a day to three weeks. For example, an arc welding robot technician can be trained in about one week at KUKA's Fox Valley Technical College training center, plus some assisted hours.

Companies throughout the world send their employees to Appleton to train as KUKA robot technicians, administrators and programmers. KUKA instructors in Appleton last year trained 398 students and are on pace to train about 600 this year.

Danny Grzenkowitz, a programmer at U.S. Manufacturing Corp. in Detroit, recently spent four days learning programming of robotic welders, which his company uses to weld brackets onto tubes. At the same time, Cliff Walters of Negri

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Bossi Ltd., an Italian manufacturer of plastic injection molding machines, was training to service and maintain robots used to assemble and pack. The Virginia-based Brenco, which manufactures tapered roller bearings for railroad cars, sent four people to Appleton in mid-February to learn to operate, maintain and program a robot used for palletizing.

V.P. Kelkar, a manufacturing engineer with Brenco, said his company's goal is to reduce back and repetitive motion injuries. The robot will replace individuals who had to lift and move 50 pound pieces.

Decreasing employee injury and reducing the associated medical costs is a key motivator for many companies to implement robotic solutions. Bob Sippel, chief financial officer at Mid-States Aluminum, said the Fond du Lac company has received no repetitive injury complaints since implementing robotic material handling equipment 18 months ago. Three material handling robots are operating in high volume applications, which used to create



Photo courtesy of QComp Technologies  
THIS AUTOMATED PALLET STACKING ROBOT CAN EASILY MOVE MATERIAL AROUND A WAREHOUSE.

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