



PRESS RELEASE

Comment on 'Robotics in Retail' feature from Gavin Parnell, director at Go Supply Chain Consulting

Regarding robotics in retail, I think a lot of it depends on what you call a 'robot'. Clearly automated storage and retrieval systems have been around for years and generally involve handling of standardised units, such as pallets or totes, in a repetitive manner. When it comes to actually picking of goods, there are some automated technologies but these are not used widely, and are not really what you would term 'robots'.

However there are goods to man systems, which don't actually do the picking but do bring the goods to the warehouse operative to reduce walk time. The best known of these is Amazon Robotics, which is employed in various Amazon warehouses. There are alternative systems on the open market – Swisslog's CarryPick, for example. While I'm not actually seeing these in the warehouses in which we are working, Swisslog has a good video showing an application at a DB Schenker site in Sweden – a country where high wages and social costs make automation more common.

One does come across robot arms being used for palletisation from time to time, more often in manufacturing environments or again in high wage areas such as Scandinavia. In the UK there tends to be more of a presumption towards manual operations due to the desire for flexibility and the availability of flexible, low cost labour.

We are a long way yet from a robotic warehouse operative appearing in the average e-commerce warehouse – the diversity of products to handle, lack of credible case studies so far and long payback period are working against it. However, I noticed that Ocado is testing a robot arm / hand that can apparently handle fruit. Given that Ocado is an exceptionally automated environment already, with very high volumes, one can expect it to lead the way, but even this appears to be an early stage test.

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Editor Notes

Go Supply Chain Consulting Limited is a logistics consultancy firm offering supply chain and logistics consulting services to clients across industry sectors including retail, FMCG, fashion, automotive and technology. The company is independent from logistics service providers and vendors of equipment and systems.

Founded by an experienced and capable team of logistics consultants, Go Supply Chain

combines practicality with a highly analytical approach, reflecting its blend of operational and consulting experience.

Clients range from global corporations to fast-growing, entrepreneurial companies. Go Supply Chain works both in the UK and internationally – the team has completed projects in 16 countries.