

Robotics: opening doors for SMEs



Andrew Crackett, managing director of Yaskawa Southern Africa, highlights the value for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) of adopting robotic automation solutions and how Yaskawa is addressing barriers to adoption.

smaller businesses optimise productivity and growth in their highly competitive markets.

SA's SME Landscape

The adoption of robotics and automation in South Africa, particularly among SMEs, has been slower than in other parts of the world. Although this is for a number of reasons, such as financial constraints, integration complexities, lack of technical expertise and accessible training, and the perception that automation is better suited for large-scale industries, Andrew Crackett, Managing Director of Yaskawa Southern Africa, believes that these challenges can be overcome with the right approach.

"When working with SMEs, we take the time to understand their unique needs and objectives. This allows us to provide tailored robotic systems and end-of-arm tooling that are both adaptable and scalable, helping businesses grow sustainably," Crackett explains.

Yaskawa's robotics solutions can adapt to various applications and industries, and this versatility is critical for SMEs that often operate with limited budgets and need systems that can grow along with their businesses.

Tailoring robotics for SA's SMEs

For many SMEs, integrating robotics into existing operations can be daunting. However, Yaskawa is able to simplify the process by offering interfaces that enable easy communication between robots and other equipment and, more importantly, with operators. In addition, flexible system configurations allow businesses to expand their robotic capabilities as their needs evolve. "Our solutions are designed to make it easier for SMEs to integrate robotics into their operations. We also offer extensive support and training, ensuring a smooth transition as businesses adopt these new technologies," says Crackett.

Overcoming financial constraints

Of all the perceived barriers to robotics adoption, the initial investment costs of robotics are often a significant concern for SMEs. To help overcome this barrier, Crackett says Yaskawa has partnered with system integrators that offer leasing plans, helping SMEs to afford robotics and automation by spreading out the costs over time. These financial solutions open the doors for smaller businesses that may not have had the capital for a large upfront investment for these advanced systems. "This approach ultimately optimises the return on investment, making automation a feasible option for more businesses," he adds.

Cultivating a robotics ecosystem

Aside from providing robotics solutions, Yaskawa is committed to creating a strong robotics and automation market in the country. "We are helping to cultivate a strong robotics ecosystem in South Africa by working closely with local integrators across specialised industries. In addition, we provide a comprehensive set of training programmes, from basic programming and maintenance to more advanced troubleshooting and operator-specific skills," Crackett says.

The focus on training is crucial, as one of the biggest challenges facing SMEs in the country is the lack of workers with any background in operating and maintaining robotic and automation systems. As such,

Yaskawa is helping to build a workforce that is not only capable of managing the technologies but also contributing to the broader industrialisation goals of South Africa.

Driving economic growth and job creation

While there are concerns that the adoption and integration of automation will lead to job losses, Yaskawa has a different view. The company sees robotics as a key driver of economic growth and job creation in South Africa.

By automating repetitive, labour-intensive tasks, businesses can increase productivity and reduce labour costs in this area, making production more competitive while offering their current workforce opportunities to upskill, which, in turn, could see them furthering their own careers. Robotics optimises productivity, efficiency, and, subsequently, competitiveness. It also allows for the upskilling of employees, as well as reducing operator fatigue and improving the safety of manufacturing operations.

Moreover, Yaskawa's business model is in line with South Africa's National Development Plan 2030, which aims to improve industrialisation, optimise the country's

ever-present need for job creation, and stimulate economic growth. By investing in local manufacturing and helping businesses adopt advanced technologies, Yaskawa is playing a key role in supporting the country's industrialisation goals.

Innovating the future

Yaskawa is committed to the continued innovation in robotics solutions for the South African market. "Automation can boost both productivity and efficiency, while also helping businesses to stay competitive. It is not only about cutting costs, robotics opens up opportunities for employees to upskill and reduce physical strain from repetitive tasks," Crackett explains.

Yaskawa's focus on innovation ensures that South African businesses have access to the latest advancements in robotics and automation, enabling them to remain competitive in a rapidly evolving global economy. As South African SMEs face increasing pressure to modernise and compete on a global scale, robotics and automation offer a path to increased productivity, efficiency and profitability.

"Yaskawa Southern Africa is at the forefront of helping SMEs overcome the barriers to adopting robotics by offering tailored



Easy-to-use Yaskawa collaborative welding robots give fabricators the flexibility to create and switch welding jobs quickly and easily.

solutions, flexible financial models and robust training programmes. By building a strong robotics ecosystem and contributing to the country's industrialisation goals, Yaskawa is not only simplifying robotics for SMEs but also driving economic growth and job creation in South Africa," concludes Andrew Crackett.

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