

Labor-starved Restaurant Industry Turns to Automation for Help

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by Karen Robinson-Jacobs, *The Dallas Morning News*



George Jetson would feel at home.

Today, there's enough restaurant equipment on the market or awaiting patent to take a customer's order and payment and cook and package the food -- all with little or no human labor.

No one's predicting that robot maid Rosie will be grilling burgers outside of Orbit City anytime soon.

Still, as the nation's restaurant industry scrambles to cope with an ongoing labor crunch, many players are looking to automation to fill the bill.

"You're just seeing the tip of the iceberg in terms of integrating automation into the restaurant operations," said Hudson Riehle, senior vice president of research for the National Restaurant

Association.

"Restaurant operators will purchase technology with more zest because the traditional labor pool growth is not there."

For years, restaurateurs have seen the crop of willing workers -- traditionally teens and early twenty-somethings -- shrink.

That's due both to shifting birth rates and competition from other employers.

The restaurant industry will need 1.8 million additional workers by 2015, Mr. Riehle predicts. That compares with 3.5 million in health care, which often pays more.

Along with the labor crunch, the desire for speed and consistency create the perfect recipe for more gadgetry.

"I think people like McDonald's and Yum Brands -- any big [chain] -- they are all researching these things and trying to find out what works for them," said Dean Stanley, vice president of engineering for AccuTemp Products Inc.



Self-service stands are expected to get a good reception as long as diners can get what they want quickly and accurately.

For years, the Fort Wayne, Ind., company used a robot to draw attention at trade shows to its steam-heated griddles and food steamers.

It would have cost up to \$100,000 to create a robot to run the griddle, he said. The company found no takers, so the robot was retired.

But restaurants have continued to test and trot out automated advances.

At 3,200 of the nearly 14,000 U.S. McDonald's restaurants, drive-through workers needn't scurry to get drink orders. The chain's automated beverage system -- linked to the cash register -- drops the cup, fills it with ice and soda and conveys it to the drive-through worker, ready for lid and delivery.

McDonald's Corp. is adding the system to about 500 restaurants each year, said Robert Marshall, the chain's vice president of U.S. operations, "to speed up service and increase the ... capacity of our drive-through."

McDonald's, like other chains, declined to talk in detail about its automated efforts, citing trade secrets.

But the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office lists several automated cooking devices in which the assignee is either McDonald's or Restaurant Technology Inc., which is housed at McDonald's corporate headquarters. The assignee is given the rights to a product by the inventors.

One device is an! automated french fry machine that the company tested at several units and is evaluating, a McDonald's spokesman said.

In February, a patent was issued for an automated grill that transports food from attached freezer to grill to heated holding area.

McDonald's was listed as the assignee.

In a similar vein, Wendy's International Inc. a year ago began rolling out grills that cook a burger on both sides simultaneously, eliminating the need for flipping.

The grills are now in 2,400 of the chain's U.S. restaurants. It has 6,400 restaurants in the U.S. and Canada.

The two-sided grill, which is monitored by a computer, dramatically reduces the previous cooking time of 5.5 minutes, said spokesman Bob Bertini.

Now it takes about a minute or less, he said.

The device also eliminates the need for an extra grill worker during rush hour, he said.

Jobs threatened?

With many of the automated restaurant devices boasting speeds that cut work time in half or beyond, the question for existing labor is obvious: Are jobs ultimately at stake?

The major restaurant chains insist that they are seeking increased efficiency and consistency -- not to furlough the fry cook.

But the equipment makers acknowledge that as food preparation becomes more high-tech, staff redeployment -- and in some cases, reduction -- becomes an option.

QSR Automations in Louisville, Ky., makes kitchen display systems, or KDS, that automatically tell cooks when to begin preparing the various parts of a meal so that the steak and broccoli, for example, will be done at the same time. In restaurants without such a system, a worker often handles that function.

Heather Pitts, QSR's director of marketing, said she knows of companies that "have successfully redeployed or removed labor by putting in a KDS."

"In general, everybody likes to hear about making things easier, but they hate to hear about anybody losing their job due to technology," she said.

Mr. Bertini, of Wendy's, said the company has not "cut jobs or hours since adding the new grill."

"Freeing up a grill operator enables us to use this person elsewhere," he said. "This creates efficiencies and saves costs."

Increased productivity is the reason restaurateurs give for buying more Robot Coupe "blixers," said John Deamos, Western sales manager for Robot Coupe U.S.A. Inc., based in Jackson, Miss.

His device, a combination food processor and blender, can create enough pico de gallo to fill a 12-quart bucket in two minutes.

"It would take a worker a half-hour," said Mr. Deamos, who pitched his product at the National Restaurant Association trade show earlier this year. "We'll save 95 percent of that labor."

But he quickly added, "We're not replacing people. We're letting them do other jobs."

He said he's not aware of any of his customers using the machine to reduce labor.

"Nobody says, 'I want a machine that's going to replace our employees.' We don't talk about that," he said. "That would scare everybody."

The unmanned eatery

If that's scary, imagine the scenario envisioned by Rob Grimes, whose Accuvia food-service consulting firm co-hosted a technology trade show last year in Grapevine.

"Where we're headed is a totally unmanned unit," said Mr. Grimes, the company's chairman and chief executive. He thinks such outlets would most likely be seen in smaller, outlying areas.

"I don't think it'll be done to replace labor," he said. "I think it'll be done in places that are too small to have a lot of labor."

In units like those, the workload would be divided between diners and machines.

Consumers already can see some techno-changes in restaurant dining rooms. Dallas-based Dave & Buster's Inc. is installing ATM-type machines that can dispense its game-play cards -- sans server.

Other devices being tested include self-service ordering kiosks, tableside payment stations and in-dining room beverage stands.

Mr. Grimes and others think consumers won't balk at the increased automation, as long as they can still get what they want quickly, accurately and at a good price.

"The cost of human workers is much more than the cost of a machine, which is going to give you greater consistency," said 54-year-old Norm Cox of Colleyville, who popped into a Plano McDonald's Wednesday for "something fast."

"If automation can help maintain the constancy, I don't mind."

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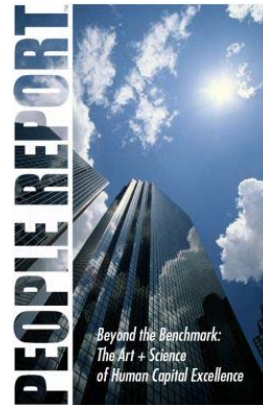


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The National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation Announces Winners of 2006 SPIRIT Awards

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The National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation (NRAEF), along with Nation's Restaurant News (NRN), recently announced the winners of the 2006 SPIRIT Awards, a program honoring those restaurant and foodservice companies that have practices and policies in place to improve guest satisfaction by improving employee satisfaction. Among the winners, People Report members TGI Friday's, Pick Up Stix, and Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf.



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