

News from the international federation of robotics for robotica

Facing global challenges

By Eric Mittelstadt, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Fanuc Robotics North America Inc.

As we quickly approach the twenty-first century, changes in the business environment are fuelling a major growth in technology, including robotics or flexible automation for manufacturing.

The most obvious reason for this is growth in global competition. In order to survive, today's manufacturers must improve productivity, flexibility and time-to-market, and at the same time improve quality and lower costs. For that reason, manufacturers owe it to themselves to evaluate their production methods and seek solutions that will help them meet the major challenges posed by globalisation.

Since 1987, the IFR has played a major role in promoting the world-wide growth of technology and robotics. Over the years, our membership has nearly doubled to include 26 nations, with the objective of helping increase each country's productivity and competitiveness in the global marketplace. Our affiliations with various working groups that promote research, development, use and international co-operation in the field of robotic automation has greatly contributed to the growth of the IFR as a federation.

Being a global organisation enriches the innovative spirit by putting organisations in closer touch with world-wide trends, new developments in technology, the application of robotics in the Far East and Europe, strategies for competitiveness and the significance of service robots.

The IFR has accomplished much in just over 10 years; however, we must do more to help improve our own nations' competitive positions. As an example, in the US, critical needs in the 1980s to meet competitive challenges prompted the National Coalition for Advanced Manufacturing (NACFAM) to conduct a competitiveness study. The study resulted in several recommendations on specific public policy measures in areas related to industry's long-term modernisation needs, such as: leadership, technology development, capital availability and workforce education.

In the 1990s, those recommendations emphasised shared leadership and responsibility at the industry, community, state and federal levels. Since that time, there has been a remarkable turnaround in the global competitive position of US-based manufacturing.

NACFAM's recommendations for US manufacturing can certainly apply to nations all over the world. In fact, if countries plan to remain competitive, they must encourage an atmosphere of leadership supported by technology and a highly skilled workforce.

Together, as proponents of robotic automation, the members of the IFR must send a message to our own countries to help speed the acceptance of technology and become more sophisticated in how we compete. By moving to higher levels of skill and technology, we will become

more productive and prosperous, and the quality of our country's product base will improve.

Inaugural robot event will be launched with the 29th ISR

The 29th annual International Symposium of Robotics (ISR) will be hosted in the UK from 27–30 April 1998. It will be running alongside a new exhibition called Automation and Robotics '98.

Automation and Robotics '98 will be held in parallel with no less than eight other exhibitions at the National Exhibition Centre, Birmingham; all will be allied to either engineering or manufacturing.

There will be a major attraction for delegates to the Symposium and visitors to the exhibition.

The National Exhibition Centre is the UK's premier exhibition venue with 17 halls on one site. In April next year nine of the largest halls will all be holding manufacturing-related shows.

These include Mach '98, the UK's major international machine tool exhibition, Subcon '98 for subcontractors, Metalworking International 98, the Welding and Metal Fabrication Show 98, Engineering Lasers 98, Forging International 98, and Design for Manufacture – an engineering design event.

All shows will operate an open door policy in which visitors, once registered, can move freely from one exhibition to another.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of launching a new exhibition is that of generating an entirely new audience. Automation and Robotics '98 will have a unique advantage. During the same week in April over 50,000 people will be visiting the NEC – the established visitor base of the other shows. Many of these will already be deeply involved with automation and robotics. This gives the new event the ideal environment in which to grow.

Meanwhile, the British Robot Association (BRA) has been honoured with staging the 29th ISR. Planning of the Symposium is proceeding to schedule and over 130 speakers have booked. Subjects to be covered include advanced robotic applications, robot modelling and simulation, control systems, and mobile and service robots.

The Symposium will feature 'New Sector' sessions. These will cover important emerging sectors, recently identified by a BRA survey as growth markets. There will be a one-day programme for each sector.

Four sectors to be covered are: food and agriculture, medical and healthcare, service robots, and hazardous environments. The latter will include nuclear power generation, undersea activities, defence and space exploration.

For the exhibition, several international robot suppliers are already committed to supporting the event and others are seriously considering their options. As well as major hardware suppliers, the show has attracted system inte-

grators and suppliers of ancillary equipment.

In addition, there will be a series of daily workshops in the exhibition. These are targeted at the current growth areas for robotics and automation in manufacturing.

All in all, with the exhibition, the ISR and conferences, the NEC in Birmingham is the place to be next April.

The ISR will be organised by DMG Business Media and will be held at the Metropole Hotel, adjacent to the NEC.

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