

Cyborg-walkers stride toward Japan's robotics future

August 3 2009, by Kyoko Hasegawa



Japan's robotics venture Cyberdyne employee wearing the robot-suit "HAL" (Hybrid Assistive Limb) walk on a street in Tokyo. The three Japanese cyborg look-alikes turned heads on busy Tokyo streets and subway trains Monday as they made their way to a robotics conference on a hot summer's day -- without breaking a sweat.

Three Japanese cyborg look-alikes turned heads on busy Tokyo streets and subway trains Monday as they made their way to a robotics conference on a hot summer's day -- without breaking a sweat.

Two men and a woman, wearing what looked like white plastic exoskeletons over black outfits, were testing -- at a pace of 1.8

kilometres (1.1 miles) an hour -- robotic suits designed to give mobility to the injured and disabled.

"What on earth is it?" asked Hisako Ueda, 43, digital camera in hand, as she and her 10-year-old daughter Ayaka gazed at the trio striding through Akihabara district, a high-tech geeks' paradise also called Electric Town.

Undeterred by the onlookers' stares, the three completed their mechanically assisted trek by train, taxi and on foot from the suburb of Tsukuba, 50 kilometres (30 miles) north of central Tokyo, to the robo-meeting.

One of the three robotics company employees, 32-year-old Takatoshi Hisano, said the futuristic 11-kilogramme (24-pound) outfit -- which can detect and preempt its user's movements -- made the two-hour commute that much easier.

"I'm not tired at all," he said with a smile when they arrived at the building where the robotics industry meeting was about to start in a fourth-floor room. "Let's take the stairs instead of the lift."

The high-tech suits were developed by Yoshiyuki Sankai, a professor at Tsukuba University, whose company is already leasing them to several hospitals and nursing homes and has just received an order from Denmark.

At the meeting, the three were greeted by assorted robots -- including Toyota's personal transport assistance [robot](#) "Winglet" and Fuji Heavy Industries' automatic floor cleaning machine -- alongside plenty of humans with high hopes of turning the sector into the new face of [Japan](#) Inc.

Japan has launched a five-year project of putting so-called people-assisting robots into widespread practical use, the government-backed New Energy and Industrial Technology Organisation (NEDO) said in a statement.

"We believe that the robotics industry in this people-assisting field will expand one hundredfold," said NEDO senior official Katsuya Okano. "But for this goal, what's lacking is a safety standard, which we aim to set up."

A government survey in Japan, now a fast ageing society, estimates that the global market for such robots, including nurses and domestic maids, will expand to 6.2 trillion yen (65 billion dollars) by 2025.

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