

Japan takes another step in replacing humans with robots

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The HRP-4 robot (left) walks beside its previous models during a press conference in Tsukuba, Japan. Its makers -- Kawada Industries and the National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology -- hope the new "slim athlete" model is a step towards a robot that can help ease greying Japan's looming labour shortage.

The replacement of humans by machines in the workplace took another step on Wednesday, as Japanese researchers unveiled a model they hope could lead to humanoid menial workers.

Its makers, Kawada Industries and the National Institute of Advanced

Industrial Science and Technology (AIST), hope the robot will be a step towards creating a model that can help ease greying Japan's looming labour shortage.

"We designed a working robot in the image of a lean but well-muscled track-and-field athlete," Noriyuki Kanehira, robotic systems manager at Kawada, told a news conference to unveil the blue-and-white "HRP-4."

Designed to help researchers develop models that could replace humans in repetitive manual labour, the latest "athlete" model in a near 10-year-old series updates the feminine, catwalk-strutting, karaoke-singing HRP-4C.

But the tone this time is altogether more serious, according to a joint statement from its developers.

"It is Japan's urgent task for the early 21st Century to develop robots that could carry out simple, repetitive works ... in a bid to complement the workforce in a country that is rapidly ageing with fewer and fewer children".

Standing at 151 centimetres (59 inches) tall, the robot in a demonstration Wednesday stood on one foot, twisted its waist, struck poses, walked in accordance to given voice commands and moved its head to track objects.

The HRP-4 boasts joints that move more freely than its predecessors and can run a range of separately-developed software applications, its makers said.

Kawada and AIST will start selling the [robot](#) to universities and research institutes in [Japan](#) and abroad from January 2011.

The price tag for what is described as a "low cost" model is 26 million yen (306,000 dollars) each. Its creators hope to sell three-to-five units a year.

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