

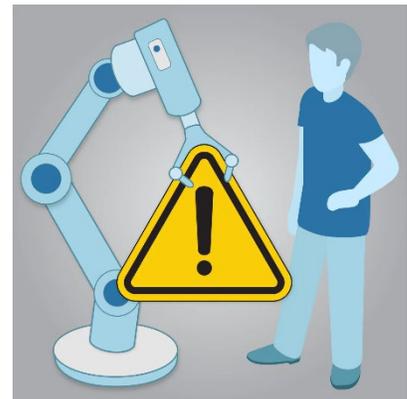


# A Word from Your Safety Committee

## Robotics in Safety: It's here. Are you ready?

I recently took a trip to Texas to witness a demonstration of a driverless, remote controlled vehicle. The only thing I can equate it to would be as if a video game came to life. Picture about ten people huddled around a screen, watching an employee operate a vehicle out on the company's proving ground, but from the comfort of his own desk. It's one of those things you need to see to believe, and even then, it still does not seem like reality.

As technology evolves, businesses must adapt or be left behind. The same applies to those of us in the safety and health industry. We've seen how Covid-19 has accelerated the integration of technology even faster than anticipated. The use of robotics is becoming increasingly common in the workplace. At the same time, it is also providing several opportunities to improve safety. For example, robots can reduce the risk of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) by reducing the need for workers to perform repetitive motion tasks. Worker fatigue injuries can also be significantly decreased with the use of robots. Unlike humans, a robot's performance does not decline the longer they remain at work. Robots can work for an extended period without needing a break. In the maritime industry specifically, worker fatigue has been a major area of concern, and there are innovative solutions within reach to relieve such fatigue.



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**Kristina DeFilippo** is the Safety & Security Manager for SEACOR Island Lines. Prior to this role, she spent 2 years serving as the company's Safety Coordinator. She manages all aspects of health, safety, security, quality, and environmental responsibilities for the shoreside and island facilities.

Before joining SEACOR Island Lines, Kristina worked as a safety consultant in the general industry and construction sectors throughout the Northeast. In this position, she provided safety training, conducted audits, and developed safety plans for various companies and municipalities.

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The benefits of robotics can certainly be something worthwhile to invest in. At the same time, the disadvantages may be cause for concern. The first thing that comes to mind is employee morale. Robots essentially make the workplace safer by removing employees from potentially hazardous environments. How will employees react to seeing more automation and less human interaction? Companies do not necessarily need to keep as many employees because robots can do their job without the risk of injury. That is not to say that robots cannot cause their own hazards because they carry that danger also. In recent years, there have been several injuries or even fatalities that resulted from interaction between workers and robotic machinery. If there's a lack of understanding or knowledge of robotic work processes, then what other risks are we potentially exposing to workers? Tackling these and other questions must be a part of any transition plan.

While there's no OSHA standard on this topic right now, the research has already begun. NIOSH recently established the Center for Occupational Robotic Research whose mission is to provide scientific leadership to guide the development and use of occupational robots that enhance worker safety, health, and wellbeing.

So, is there a place for robotics in safety? Regardless of the answer, the robots are already here and integrating. For us safety professionals, it's about finding the right balance.

