

# Is Robotics a Potential Answer to America's Looming Healthcare Crisis?

Michael Wong 23 September 2011

*Would you entrust a robot to take care of a family member's healthcare needs?*

While America's aging population is not as great as Japan's (13 percent vs. 23 percent over 65 years old) [CIA 2011], many futurists are studying Japan's utilization of advanced technology to provide practical healthcare solutions. I interviewed Robert Romasco, an executive whose experience includes Fortune 500 C-suite roles in a number of industries (healthcare, financial services and retail). Bob, a graduate of the Harvard Business School, also serves on the Board of Directors for AARP.

*Why would anyone consider using a robot to take care of a family member?*

**Bob:** Most people, if they had the finances and time, would likely want to take care of their family members. However, the majority of Americans do not have the luxury of secure finances and time. For example, last year I recall a Wall Street Journal article [Whitehouse 2010] that referenced how the average net worth for Americans was

about \$182,000 a person, of which the average was pulled up by a small group of the very wealthy. Moreover, the continued, unstable employment situation for Americans drains discretionary time, not adds to it. Given the costs of taking care of our loved ones—the annual fee of a private nursing home room is on par with the cost of sending your child to an Ivy League college—I believe the country needs to figure out innovative ways to provide healthcare support.

*So, how might robots play a role?*

**Bob:** A number of interesting products are being developed that can help ease the limited time and money constraints that most families have with providing senior care. Imagine an elderly couple where one spouse needs help to get in and out of bed. While their children/relatives might be able to help out with such a simple task for a few hours per week (if they live close by), realistically they can't be there all the time. In Japan, RIBA—a robot nurse disguised as a giant teddy bear—can help lift patients to their feet [Salton 2009]. So this device can help provide 7 day/24 hour support for a couple who need such help when they are alone.

[See a similar robot in action here:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/rikenchannel?feature=mhee#p/u/3/wyNa7b4eHRo.>]

Panasonic has been working on a robotic bed that

transforms into a joystick-controlled wheelchair on the user's spoken command. While it might be some time before they're made available on a large scale here in the U.S., the point is for Americans to look for new solutions to address our most pressing needs, of which health care is clearly one.

*What could prevent such creative solutions from becoming reality in the United States?*

**Bob:** Well, this question isn't limited to just health care, but frankly applies to a bigger challenge for most entities (profit and nonprofit), and that is a preoccupation with younger population segments. Still, a potential solution like the above provides value across many age-based client segments. Moreover, marketing to the elderly can be challenging, and a number of firms have failed because they did not secure the necessary insights and data to build compelling strategies. But I liked the recent article in *The Economist* [2011] that discussed how the Ueshima coffee shops were successfully able to draw in elderly Japanese consumers via approaches that challenged key marketing assumptions. For example, at Ueshima, apparently their medium-sized coffees cost about 10 percent more than Starbucks'! Still, through the subtle but purposeful design layouts of their shops and targeted food choices that appeal to the elderly, the chain has been successful in securing a loyal following of this group. Hence, innovative solutions to address healthcare needs

are possible, if there are leaders willing to look across geographies and industries for new ideas.

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