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Automate trade show, largest of its kind in North America, coming back to Detroit

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A scene from the show floor of the 2017 version of Automate, the robotics show held by the Association for Advancing Automation. The show, long held in Chicago, moves to Detroit this spring. *Association For Advancing Automation*

It's been 23 years, but Automate 2022 — North America's largest trade show and conference dedicated to automation and robotics — is coming back to the Motor City this spring.

The event is produced by Ann Arbor-based [Association for Advancing Automation \(A3\)](#) and expected to draw over 20,000 attendees and 500 vendors from across the globe who will gather at [Huntington Place](#) June 6-9.

The first iteration of Automate, then called the Robots Show, launched in Rosemont, Illinois, in 1976. It bounced back and forth between Chicago and Detroit, with a final show in Detroit in 1999. In 2001, it was christened Automate and had been held in Chicago ever since.

The pandemic put a pause on everything, including this event as it last took place in Chicago three years ago. Seeing they had essentially outgrown their space in Chicago and having time to look around and kick the tires in other cities, A3 leaders examined holding it elsewhere.

Following a lengthy process and persuasive pitch by local leaders, A3 President Jeff Burnstein said they decided to bring it back to Detroit and signed a deal to hold it here through 2025.

Organizers were drawn by the synergy as Michigan is famous for its manufacturing and technology heritage as it led the way in autos for over 100 years. Additionally, Burnstein added, there are more companies connected to automation and robotics growing here, too.

Much has changed in robotics and automation and how companies and entrepreneurs are looking at it.

“Interest in robotics and automation overall is clearly at an all-time high, with robot orders breaking records,” said Burnstein. “Companies from nearly every industry, from automotive manufacturers to aerospace, life sciences, pharmaceuticals, medical device, warehousing, metals, electronics, food and consumer goods, know they need to automate to succeed, even more so as they struggle with labor shortages and supply chain issues.”

Automate will feature keynotes from folks like Daymond John (of “Shark Tank” fame, who started FUBU), and others leaders tied to automation and robotics. The [Joseph F. Engelberger Awards](#), considered the Nobel Prize of the robotics industry, will also be presented on June 8.

There is an educational component, too, with over 100 speakers talking about robotics, artificial intelligence, autonomous mobile robots, and machine and computer vision solutions.



Automate has relocated to Detroit from Chicago and will be held June 6-9 at Huntington Place. Association For Advancing Automation

Things have been heating up in the robotics industry in North America. The number of robots sold in North America set a new record in 2021, with 39,708 units sold at a value of \$2 billion, a 14% increase over the previous high in 2017, according to A3 and Thomas Insights. Growth in the robotics industry has seen a surge in orders outside of the automotive industry — which has led the way in the use of robotics. But in 2021, non-automotive orders, in sectors like logistics and consumer goods, now represent 58% of the North American robotics orders, their research showed.

With so much taking place, I posed a few questions to Burnstein. Answers have been edited for space.

Question: Tell me about the Association for Advancing Automation?

Answer: The Association for Advancing Automation (A3) is a trade association started in 1973 that advocates for the benefits of automating and supports the robotics, machine vision, motion control, artificial intelligence industries. A3 promotes automation technologies and ideas that transform the way business is done. Members of A3 represent nearly 1,100 automation manufacturers, component suppliers, system integrators, end users, academic institutions, research groups and consulting firms from throughout the world that drive automation forward. Automate is one of many events that A3 hosts to support the industry.

Q: What do you hope to accomplish at Automate?

A: We hope to demonstrate the wide range of successful automation solutions that exist, regardless of the challenge. Today's manufacturing operations are seeing increases in labor shortages and supply chain issues, and part of our goal is to demonstrate how robotics and automation can complement workers to help them shoulder these challenges.

Q: Why did you decide to move Automate back to Detroit?

A: There are three main reasons for our return to our roots in Detroit. First, we had outgrown our space in Chicago with another show we were co-located with, so we began a national search to find the best home. Second, a large number of our exhibitors, especially in robotics, have major headquarters in the metro Detroit area, which makes it easier for them to support a larger presence at the show here than they had in Chicago. And finally, the people in Detroit — Claude Molinari at [Visit Detroit](#) and everyone at Huntington Place — worked very hard to get this show here. They are great partners and Detroit offers the chance to reach new customers who didn't attend our show when it was in Chicago.

Q: How do you think Michigan is prepared to compete in this automation/robotics space?

A: Michigan has a lot going for it. We have a long history of making things, we've been innovators in the past and are home to innovative startups today. We have great universities that can provide a talented workforce. We have companies that have established leadership positions in robotics and automation. The sState of Michigan is committed to helping companies succeed, as we've seen through its support for organizations like [Automation Alley](#). We can compete and win here.

Q: How do you think the U.S. is prepared to compete versus other countries?

A: The robotics industry actually started in the U.S. back in the late 1950s, but there was a lot of resistance and, ultimately, by the end of the 1960s, robot technology invented here was licensed to Japanese companies. They, along with the Europeans, were the world leaders for decades as U.S. companies focused on developing tools for robots, software, and systems integration skills, not making robot hardware. Then, recently the Chinese emerged from nowhere to become the world's largest user of robotics with a national goal of becoming the world's leading supplier of robot technology. The U.S. has innovated in recent years in the development of new types of robots such as autonomous mobile robots, robot vacuum cleaners, and artificial intelligence, but we do not have the government support that Chinese companies have. So this is going to be a very competitive landscape going forward.

Q: Talk about talent needs?

A: There are so many unfilled STEM jobs and so many baby boomers retiring that some industries, like manufacturing, are desperate for help, which has opened up new opportunities for robots and automation. The reality is that there are lots of dull, dirty and dangerous jobs that people either don't want to do or shouldn't be doing that automation should perform. We can train people to do more valuable work — such as overseeing the process, developing improvements, and analyzing the vast amounts of data received from the machines. We will need workers to install robots, repair them, and develop new applications for using them. The list of potential jobs is vast.

Q: Will you be promoting things tied to Michigan at Automate?

A: Yes. For example, we are showcasing what Michigan can do to help grow manufacturing and automation during a special panel discussion. There will be a large number of Michigan companies exhibiting at the show and sharing their expertise during the conference. Attendees will discover Michigan is not only a great place to do business, but also a prime market to find a talented workforce.

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