

Company Rents Out Robot As Temp Worker

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TOKYO -- It can greet people, show DVDs and hand out balloons. "Ubiko," a robot-on-wheels with a catlike face, is joining the crew of temporary workers supplied by a Japanese job-referral company to stores, events and even weddings.

Next month, the 44-inch tall robot will be selling mobile phones at a store, said Akiko Sakurai, a spokeswoman at the company, Ubiquitous Exchange.

Ubiko can be hired as a temporary worker for two hours for 105,000 yen, or \$890.

"We see this as serious business. There are jobs that robots are better at," Sakurai said Wednesday. "People do develop an attachment with the robot, and it's lovable."

The \$255,000 robot, which comes a camera and infrared sensors, greets customers with a nasal electronic voice, shows DVDs with a projector in its head and hands out balloons and other goods with wireless remote-controllable arms, she said.

Ubiko is short for "ubiquitous computing" and "ubiquitous company" but also sounds like a Japanese female name, which often end with "ko."

Tmsuk, the Japanese manufacturer that makes the robot, sold three last month to a hospital, where they are working as full-time, rather than temporary, receptionists and guides, said company spokeswoman Rie Sudo.

One of the hospital's robots serves as a receptionist and has been programmed to greet visitors. It also has a touch-panel on its body, and visitors can use it to get directions for where they want to go.

"Just give it electricity, and a robot can work for long hours, even doing repetitive work, and you don't have to worry about labor laws," Sudo said.

Japan's declining birth rate means that in coming years it could face a labor shortage, and some experts believe that robots could be part of the solution to that problem.

Robots are very popular in Japan partly because of the popularity of "manga" comics and animation that portray robots as friends and aides to humans.

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On the Net:

Official Ubiko Web page: <http://www.ubiko.jp>

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