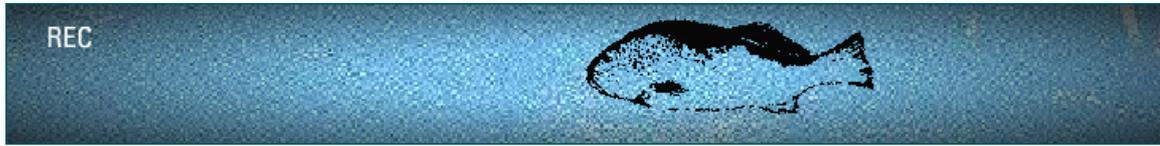


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### Local

## Age of machine arrives to sound of crunch

Timothy Chui

Tuesday, November 11, 2008

Bosses are looking to recruit machines to save recurrent payroll costs during the financial crunch.

"This is because human resources managers are encountering pressures from the top to cut overheads and customer service workers are usually the first to face the ax," Chinese University department of management consultant Joyce Iun Sio-kin said.

She said another factor is the proposed minimum wage law, making the cheaper upkeep of machines more attractive than paying wages.

Lai Po-ming, managing director of automated kiosks provider Major Link, said companies may make use of self- service machines to reduce manpower.

"In such an economic downturn, companies are looking at ways to reduce costs while still maintaining a certain service level, so automation is one way to go and stay competitive."

Lai said simpler machines sold for between HK\$20,000 and HK\$50,000 - money that may be recouped within a year when compared with payroll costs.

With machines already a fixture at cinemas and parking lots, the Hospital Authority also has kiosks for prescription payments and Hong Kong International Airport recently introduced 42 self check-in kiosks, letting travelers bypass counters.

Since the airport self-help service was soft-launched in March, a daily average of 1,500 travelers - 3.5 percent of the six participating carriers' passengers - have used the service, according to an HKIA spokeswoman, who added use would grow steadily as passengers become more comfortable with the system.

Hong Kong University also deployed five self-checking machines at its library earlier this month, with deputy librarian Peter Sidorko saying they are part of a long-term cost-cutting strategy.

The library hopes to channel about 80 percent of book checkouts through the system so staff can be freed for other duties.

Apart from increasing efficiency at frontline operations, firms attracted by a growing demand for streamlined operations are hoping to cash in as businesses tighten their belts.

"Fifty to 70 percent of company overheads are tied to their workforce," software company SuccessFactors vice president Jay Larson said.

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Hong Kong, the company's automated human resource management software complements existing HR accounting roles while providing employee evaluations based on goal achievements and skills targets.

Boasting 2 to 3 percent in cost savings by identifying which staff to retain, the software also allows managers to define goals and provide feedback.

According to Larson, this can lead to a more efficient and meritocratic approach to retain staff while creating a performance-based corporate culture.

Corporations needing to downsize their workforce should also help soften the blow on staff, reputation, risk and morale, director of Talent2 human resources consultant Amanda Oldridge said.

She suggested firms provide emotional, career and financial counseling for staff facing the ax to maintain the morale of the remaining employees.



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