

Starting up

- What do you think are some of the problems of delivering goods to people's homes by robot?
- Read through the whole article. Then do the exercise below.

Reading 1

Read the article again to find:

- a) an English town
- b) an operator of delivery robots
- c) the number of robots it operates in a)
- d) their speed
- e) the supermarket chain for which they deliver
- f) the person at the chain responsible for growing e-commerce operations
- g) his job title
- h) the number of stores from which robots make deliveries today
- i) the planned number of stores from which deliveries will be made in future
- j) the planned number of robots in future
- k) two US cities where robot deliveries operate
- l) another provider of automated services

Estonian robots boost supermarkets during pandemic

In late March, as the UK went into lockdown, grocery shopping suddenly became difficult. Home delivery slots were almost impossible to get as customers raced to order online. Shoppers faced long queues, with shops limiting the number of people who could be in a store at any one time. Shoppers in Milton Keynes, about 50 miles north west of London, however, had another option. A small army of 80 or so delivery robots, operated by Estonian company Starship, kept rolling through the streets, taking groceries to homes without human contact needed. Robot deliveries of groceries have thrived during the pandemic. The robots involved look like white coolboxes on wheels and can travel autonomously — at 4 miles per hour — to any location pinpointed on a mobile phone app. They can climb up kerbs (but not stairs) and come equipped with speakers so they can “talk” to people if necessary. Customers unlock the storage compartment with their mobile phones when the robot arrives and retrieve their order.

Sometimes, says Jason Perry, head of online development at UK supermarket group Co-op Food, purchasers send back thank-you notes in the robot when it returns. “It has been a real lifeline for customers who haven’t been able to get outside their homes,” Mr Perry says. “We’ve seen a huge increase in demand for robot deliveries since the pandemic began. We’ve doubled the order numbers and seen a fourfold increase in sales.” Co-op had already used the Starship robots before the pandemic started. It was the first UK retailer to adopt them when Starship began trialling the robots in Milton Keynes two years ago. The outbreak of Covid-19 has dramatically increased the rate of adoption.

The robots’ path has not been completely smooth. Customer complaints about bugs and usage difficulties are common among Starship app reviews. Some object to the small mark-up in price on the goods that Co-op and other retailers put on the goods delivered by robot. But demand has been so strong that Co-op is increasing the service from two stores to eight. “We plan to increase to 100 robots,” adds Mr Perry. Co-op, which had been slower than many of its UK grocery store rivals to move to online ordering and home delivery, has suddenly found itself with one of Britain’s most futuristic shopping options, thanks to the partnership with Starship. In the US — where Starship had already started to operate its robots on a number of college campuses — the company has established operations in several cities such as Mountain View in San Francisco, and Frisco in Dallas.

With its automated delivery service, Starship is not the only Estonian AI company to have been increasing business during the pandemic. Since throwing off rule by the Soviet Union in 1991, Estonia has built a reputation for companies that specialise in advanced technology. Cleveron, another Estonian company, makes automated locker systems that dispense parcels and groceries to shoppers. It too has seen increased orders from grocery store customers.



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Grammar – past perfect simple

Write logical sentences based on the words given, containing one *past perfect simple* form and one *past simple* form, not necessarily in that order, of the verbs in *italics*.

- 1 Co-op already *use* Starship robots before the pandemic *start*.
Co-op *had already used* the Starship robots before the pandemic *started*.
- 2 Some of its competitors *begin* to offer online ordering before Co-op *offer* it.
- 3 Starship *operate* its robots on university campuses in the US after they *develop* them in Estonia.
- 4 Internet grocery shopping already *reach* 15 per cent of sales, even before the epidemic *break out*.
- 5 People *see* robots in films before they *meet* them in real life.
- 6 A Czech writer, Karel Čapek, *invent* the word 'robot' before it *become* generally used.
- 7 Technology experts *warn* of the dangers of robots for some time before a car factory robot accidentally *kill* a human worker in 1982.
- 8 Doctors *use* robots to help them in medical operations before robots *be* able to do operations by themselves.
- 9 The IBM 'robot' Deep Blue already *beat* Kasparov at chess before another robot *win* against Lee Sadol in another game called AlphaGo.
- 10 Cleaners *complain* that robot vacuum cleaners *can* not climb stairs, before a new stair-climbing robot was invented.

Reading 2

Which are the correct 'takeaways' from the article?

Starship robots...

- a) are liked by some Co-op customers.
- b) have had some problems.
- c) will not be used by other UK supermarket chains.
- d) have their main market in Estonia.

Further discussion / Group work

1 Would you order groceries for delivery by a robot? Why/Why not? Give reasons. For example, what sort of problems, if any, do you see in relation to access to where you live?

2 Will robots one day take over completely from humans in some jobs? If so, which jobs?

For example:

- fruit picking
- teaching
- medical operations
- street cleaning
- building construction
- car manufacturing

ANSWER KEY**Reading 1**

- a) Milton Keynes
- b) Starship
- c) about 80
- d) 4 miles per hour
- e) Co-op Food
- f) Jason Perry
- g) head of online development
- h) 2
- i) 8
- j) 100
- k) Mountain View, Frisco
- l) Cleveron

Vocabulary

1b 2a 3a 4b 5a 6a 7b 8a 9b 10b 11b 12a 13a

Grammar

- 2 Some of its competitors had begun to offer online ordering before Co-op offered it.
- 3 Starship operated its robots on university campuses in the US after they had developed them in Estonia.
- 4 Internet grocery shopping had already reached 15 per cent of sales, even before the epidemic broke out.
- 5 People had seen robots in films before they met them in real life.
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Reading 2

- a) and b)

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