

## Robots set their sights on a new job: sewing blue jeans

WILL a robot ever make your blue jeans? There is a quiet effort underway to find out — involving clothing and technology companies, including Germany's Siemens AG and Levi Strauss & Co.

"Clothing is the last trillion-dollar industry that hasn't been automated," said Eugen Solowjow, who heads a project at a Siemens lab in San Francisco that has worked on automating apparel manufacturing since 2018.

The idea of using robots to bring more manufacturing back from overseas gained momentum during the pandemic as snarled supply chains highlighted the risks of relying on distant factories.

Finding a way to cut out handwork in China and Bangladesh would allow more clothing manufacturing to move back to Western consumer markets, including the United States.

But that's a sensitive topic. Many apparel makers are hesitant to talk about the quest for automation, since that sparks worries that workers in developing countries will suffer.

Jonathan Zornow, who has developed a technique to automate some parts of jeans factories, said he has received online criticism — and one death threat.

A spokesperson for Levi's said he can confirm the company participated in the early phases of the project but declined to comment further.

Sewing poses a particular challenge for automation. Unlike a car bumper or a plastic bottle, which holds its shape as a robot handles it, cloth is floppy and comes in an endless array of thicknesses and textures.

Robots simply don't have the deft touch possible with human hands. To be sure, robots are improving, but it will take years to fully develop their ability to handle fabric, according to five researchers interviewed by Reuters.

But what if enough of it could be done by machine to at least close some of the cost differential between the United States and low-cost foreign factories? That's the focus of the research effort now underway.

Work at Siemens grew out of efforts to create software to guide robots that could handle all types of flexible materials, such as thin wire cables, said Mr. Solowjow, adding that they soon realized one of the ripest targets was clothing.

The global apparel market is estimated to be worth \$1.52 trillion, according to independent data platform Statista.

Siemens worked with the Advanced Robotics for Manufacturing Institute in Pittsburgh, created in 2017 and funded by the Department of Defense to help old-line manufacturers find ways to use the new technology.

They identified a San Francisco startup with a promising approach to the floppy fabric problem. Rather than teach robots how to handle cloth, the startup, Sewbo, Inc., stiffens the fabric with chemicals so it can be handled more like a car bumper during production. Once complete, the finished garment is washed to remove the stiffening agent. — **Reuters**

# SSS offers new voluntary retirement savings program

THE Social Security System (SSS) said on Thursday that it launched a new variant of its voluntary retirement savings scheme, known as the Worker's Investment and Savings Program Plus (WISP Plus).

It said in a statement that voluntary WISP Plus scheme accepts a minimum of P500 per payment. It is an evolution of the current WISP, a mandatory provident fund which is open to all private-sector workers, including overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) and the self-employed.

In June, the SSS announced that WISP generated a 6.39% return in its first year of operation, which the pension fund said outperformed the 10-year Treasury bond, which averaged 4.1% in 2021.

"We have been spearheading the concept of work, save, invest, and prosper to our members. WISP Plus is a program both for saving and investing. It is an affordable and tax-free savings scheme which will allow our members to save by contributing to the program and investing because their money will generate earnings," SSS President and Chief Executive Officer Michael G. Regino said.

WISP Plus serves as an additional layer of protection apart from retirement benefits members receive from the regular program, Mr. Regino said.

The SSS said interested members can join WISP Plus via their My.SSS accounts.

To qualify for the program, members should not have filed for any final benefits claim, such as retirement or total disability benefits, the SSS said.

Two programs the SSS is currently implementing will be part of WISP Plus, SSS said. These are the Flexi-fund Program for OFWs, and the Personal Equity and Savings Option Fund offered to members living in the Philippines and paying maximum monthly contributions.

Separately, Mr. Regino said in briefing that starting Jan. 1, the new SSS contribution rate will be 14%, up from the current 13% as required by the terms of the Social Security Act of 2018.

For employed members, employers will absorb the 1 percentage point increase in the contribution rate, while individual paying members, such as self-employed, voluntary, non-working spouse, and OFW members, will shoulder the whole contribution rate since they have no employers, SSS said.

Additionally, SSS said that it will also adjust the minimum and maximum monthly salary credits (MSCs), which will serve as the basis of the monthly contribution of a member.

The minimum MSC will become P4,000 from the current P3,000-P4,000 while the maximum MSC will rise to P30,000 from the current P25,000. — **Aaron Michael C. Sy**

### OPINION

## Dealing with seminar absentees

**T**wo workers failed to attend a kaizen seminar that you conducted two weeks ago. Despite ample notice and reminders, the absentees gave excuses that are difficult to verify. Our suspicions were roused by the fact that the seminar was scheduled for Saturday, with all participants given cash allowances. How do we sustain the kaizen program and bring the two absentees up to speed so they can help us in the program? — **Gray Matter**

The issue boils down to two major questions — who benefits more from a company-sponsored training program — labor or management? What's the assurance that after attending several training programs, the employee will stay on and put their learning to good use by the company?

The answer to the first question is debatable for some people, but not to Bruce Rudy, who says in his 2022 article in *Harvard Business Review* that "learning and development programs are critical for the success of any organization."

Dr. Rudy, a University of Texas System Regents' Outstanding Teaching Award winner and associate professor of management strategy at the University of Texas at San Antonio, said training programs "ensure that employees have the skills and capabilities necessary to do their jobs well, and demonstrate to those employees that their employers believe they are worth investing in — ultimately boosting company culture and fostering greater commitment to the organization."

### IN THE WORKPLACE REY ELBO

**ELBONOMICS:**  
Whatever happens, don't make training a penalty for wayward employees.

On the second question, there is no assurance that employees will stay after attending a management program. If you want to compel workers to stay for a certain number of years, you'll have to require them to sign a training agreement that the organization will be investing in.

This includes sending employees to affiliate companies or suppliers in other countries to learn advanced technologies that they may be expected to bring home and train other workers in. Other factors might be the duration of a foreign training program and the quality of work performance exhibited by the employees benefiting from such a program.

A foreign-trained worker is typically expected to stay in the company between two to three years. After that, the employee becomes a "free agent" who can move elsewhere.

A similar arrangement could be required of people who have shown great potential and may be rewarded with an all-expenses paid post-graduate program at places like the Asian Institute of Management (AIM).

### DISCIPLINARY ACTION

However, if we're talking of a one-day program, it would be onerous, if not administratively burdensome, for management to require all participants to sign a training contract. For one, the cost of many one-day programs is often negligible, even considering a \$1,000 expert professional fee, renting a training venue, meals, and other logistical support.

If you're thinking of penalizing the two workers for insubordination, then I would caution against that, unless you're covered by a specific provision of the company's code of conduct. If that's the case, then go ahead and do it without delay. The example made of the two could signal to the other workers that it is not possible to simply ignore a training program.

I've seen this happen many times with some of my clients who hire me for management training. The potential for waste is enormous. Imagine a 25-participant seminar where 10 don't show up. The cost of the wasted food and the failure to maximize the venue space (if rented) can add up.

Of course, I understand that your basic concern is how to bring the two absentees in line with other employees who attended the one-day program. Depending on the training methodology and the materials used by your resource person and facilitator, you can require the two absentees to duplicate what others accomplished during the seminar.

In my case, you can require the two absentees to read the accompanying workbook for the kaizen workshop. After reading the book, arrange for them to take an online test, with three attempts allowed to pass. If they pass, the next step is to require them to select a problem and solve it using my prescribed 8-step problem-solving guide.

I can make myself available online to review their presentations at no extra cost. If they fail the exam, document everything and take it up again next time when you review their work performance.

### RETRAINING

The two absentees must have realized the gravity of missing the seminar. If necessary, they must be coached by their direct boss, if the boss attended the program. This is better than ignoring the two absentees. If necessary, do a bit of retraining with the help of their work colleagues.

As you can imagine, retraining is more difficult than training. But there's always a better way of doing things with the help of the line supervisor and work colleagues. Make the direct boss responsible for the retraining process. Make it crystal clear that you expect everyone to do their share.

Let the colleagues of the two absentees understand that kaizen is a team effort. Whenever possible, require them to attend all meetings whenever they discuss certain problems. Soon enough, the two absentees will follow everyone else's lead.

Chat with REY ELBO about any questions on Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter or e-mail [elbonomics@gmail.com](mailto:elbonomics@gmail.com) or visit <https://reyelbo.com>





## Power Maintenance Updates

by **MERALCO ADVISORY**

The following are scheduled power interruptions necessary for the regular maintenance and upgrade of our power distribution facilities, to ensure the delivery of safe and reliable electricity to your areas. Rest assured that Meralco is doing everything to quickly restore your electricity according to schedule.

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2022**

**CAVITE (DASMARIÑAS CITY; GEN. TRIAS CITY AND SILANG)**

BETWEEN 10:00AM AND 10:59AM AND THEN BETWEEN 4:01PM AND 5:00PM — PORTION OF CIRCUIT ABUBOT 38XZ

Portion of Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo Highway from near Juanito Remulla Sr. Road (Governor's Drive) to and including Metropolitan Homes Dasma Subd. in Bgy. Sampaloc I, Dasmariñas City.

Eurotiles Industrial Corp. along Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo Highway in Bgy. II, Silang.

BETWEEN 11:00AM AND 4:00PM — PORTION OF CIRCUITS ABUBOT 38XZ; AND DASMARIÑAS 416DM AND 415DM

Portion of Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo Highway from Tirona Ave. to Governor's Drive in Bgy. San Agustin I, Dasmariñas City.

Portion of Juanito Remulla Sr. Road (Governor's Drive) from Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo Highway to Arctic South Auto Care Center in Bgy. Sampaloc I, Dasmariñas City.

Portion of Juanito Remulla Sr. Road (Governor's Drive) from Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo Highway in Bgy. Sampaloc I, Dasmariñas City to Arnaldo Highway including Shakey's in Bgy. San Francisco, Gen. Trias City; Pamela Homes, Westwood Highlands Subd., Village Park Subd., Cedar Woods Residences Subd. and West Beverly Hills Subd.; Asiong St.; Langkaan and Humayao Roads; Dasmariñas Water District and Polytechnique Manufacturing Inc. in Bgys. Langkaan I & II and Sampaloc I in Dasmariñas City.

Portion of Crisanto M. delos Reyes Avenue from Juanito Remulla Sr. Road (Governor's Drive) to near Tapia Elementary School including Sitio Julugan and Sitio Palindong; Rich Land Recycling Materials & MF and Roos Metal Works Company in Bgys. Buenavista I, II & III, Manggahan, Pasong Kawayan 1 & 2 and Tapia in Gen. Trias City.

**REASON:** Retirement and relocation of facilities, line maintenance and installation of poles along Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo Highway in Bgy. San Agustin I, Dasmariñas City, Cavite.

**BULACAN (BOCAUE; AND BALAGTAS)**

BETWEEN 12:00NN AND 5:00PM — PORTION OF CIRCUIT SAOG 412SAO

Intercity Ricemillers Industrial Compound in Bgy. Wakas, Bocaue; and Bgy. San Juan, Balagtas.

**REASON:** Line maintenance work inside Intercity Ricemillers Industrial Compound in Bgy. Wakas, Bocaue; and Bgy. San Juan, Balagtas in Bulacan.

**MONDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2022**

**BULACAN (ANGAT)**

BETWEEN 10:00AM AND 3:00PM — PORTIONS OF CIRCUIT BALIWAG 331YW

Portion of Gen. Alejo G. Santos Highway from near Bisita ni San Jose ang Manggagawa Church to and including California, Talbak II, Tubao, Tubao II, Marcelino Cruz, Libis Na Malit, M. Cruz, Maximo and Balbina Capistrano Sts.; Fresh Q Enterprises Corp. and Genetron International Marketing in Bgys. Sulucan and Encanto.

**REASON:** Line reconducting and upgrading of facilities in Bgy. Sulucan, Angat, Bulacan.

**TUESDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2022**

**LAGUNA (CALAMBA CITY)**

BETWEEN 9:30AM AND 4:30PM — PORTION OF CIRCUIT LAGUNA BEL-AIR 410LBA

Register now to receive FREE texts about our Power Maintenance Schedules!

Text MERALCO <space> ON <space> your Service ID Number (which can be found in your bill) to:

Smart/Talk 'n Text 717-16211

Sun 0925-77-16211

Globe/TM 0917-55-16211

For more updates, follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

**facebook** /meralco **twitter** @meralco

For emergencies, call: 16211

**WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2022**

**LAGUNA (CALAMBA CITY)**

BETWEEN 9:00AM AND 4:00PM — PORTION OF CIRCUIT CPIP 41CPP

Samsung Electro-Mechanics Phils. Corp. along Industrial St. in Calamba Premiere Industrial Park (CPIP), Bgy. Batino.

**REASON:** Replacement of facilities along Industrial St. in Calamba Premiere Industrial Park (CPIP), Bgy. Batino, Calamba City, Laguna.

**LAGUNA (CALAMBA CITY)**

BETWEEN 9:15AM AND 4:15PM — PORTION OF CIRCUIT CPIP 413CPP

Samsung Electro-Mechanics Phils. Corp. along Industrial St. in Calamba Premiere Industrial Park (CPIP), Bgy. Batino.

**REASON:** Replacement of facilities along Industrial St. in Calamba Premiere Industrial Park (CPIP), Bgy. Batino, Calamba City, Laguna.

**LAGUNA (CALAMBA CITY)**

BETWEEN 9:30AM AND 4:30PM — PORTION OF CIRCUIT CPIP 415CPP

Samsung Electro-Mechanics Phils. Corp. along Industrial St. in Calamba Premiere Industrial Park (CPIP), Bgy. Batino.

**REASON:** Replacement of facilities along Industrial St. in Calamba Premiere Industrial Park (CPIP), Bgy. Batino, Calamba City, Laguna.

**WEDNESDAY TO THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21-22, 2022**

**BULACAN (MALOLOS CITY)**

BETWEEN 10:00PM (WED., 12/21/22) AND 3:00AM (THU., 12/22/22) — PORTION OF CIRCUIT MALOLOS 35YV

Portion of Kabyawan St. from A. Mabini St. to and including Felicisima Village, San Felipe Subd., Puroks 1, 2 & 3, Barrio Kapitolyo Subd. and San Jose Subd. in Bgy. Mojon.

**REASON:** Line maintenance and replacement of facilities in Bgy. Mojon, Malolos City, Bulacan.

