

Robot Connects Va. Manufacturer And Dominican Republic

Rebecca Layne, Associated Press

CLEAR BROOK, Va. (AP) — In a house in the Dominican Republic, Erwin Deininger moves a computer mouse.

Thousands of miles away in Frederick County, a 4-foot-tall state-of-the-art robot comes to life in a small factory, out of place among the old wood paneling and mechanical pencil sharpeners that adorn the walls and the steel machines that grind and crank on the factory floor.

Located on Martinsburg Pike in Clear Brook, the factory is Reimers Electra Steam Inc. — a manufacturer of electric boilers and steam generators since 1908. It has been at its present location since 1947.

Deininger, 51, an electrical engineer, lives in the Caribbean but works remotely for the company through a \$5,000 video conferencing VGo robot — the 88th one ever made.

"The company is old, but we're on the cutting edge," said Anne Burkhardt, who works in accounting. "It's the security of knowing that when we need (Deininger's) expertise, he's closer than a computer and phone call away."

Company President Roger Burkhardt bought the VGo to keep the 13-year veteran — one of only three engineers — on staff after his wife's work took him away from the area.

"Erwin is invaluable," he said. "He's an excellent engineer, excellent employee and excellent friend. Having someone with his skill and attitude is important."

Deininger moved to the Dominican Republic in August after his wife, who is an attorney with the United States Agency for International Development, was transferred to the Caribbean nation for a four-year stint.

Five years ago, when she was transferred to the Netherlands for three years, he worked from afar using Skype - an application that allows users to see and talk to each other via a computer screen.

But this time around, Burkhardt hit the Web to find a more efficient way for his employee to work.

A VGo was the answer.

The robot is equipped with two driving and two balancing wheels, a bumper, series

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of lights, microphone, speaker, camera, and two-way video display, on which Deininger is seen in his faraway room.

Through the VGo, Deininger controls the robot's direction and speed, and can talk and take pictures. Employees often find the robot patrolling the factory floor, offering advice on equipment repairs and projects, or roaming the office asking them about family and weather.

"He just shows up out of nowhere," Roger Burkhardt said. "The robot has become Erwin. If he could open doors, he'd be unstoppable."

Deininger controls the robot for about an hour a day. When he's done, he drives it into a docking station at the facility to recharge.

"Does it replace me completely?" Deininger said from the small VGo screen on Wednesday. "Of course not, but it's halfway between not being there at all and being there physically."

The robot can be accessed online anywhere in the world through a special program. Burkhardt said he sometimes works after hours through the robot from his home so he can talk to employees on the second shift. When finished, he logs out, and the robot can be used by someone else.

"In the first couple of weeks, it was a novelty," he said. "Now, we don't pay attention. We just say, 'There goes Erwin.'"

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