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Kiva Systems robotic fulfillment systems deliver product directly to workers.

Robotic-fulfillment firm launches product publicly

01/03/2006 08:02 AM

By [Efrain Viscarolasaga](#)

Remember WebVan.com? The Foster City, Calif.-based company brought home delivery of groceries to 26 cities across the country, including Boston, and went public with its business model in 1999, raking in \$375 million before going bankrupt only 2 1/2 years later.

Mick Mountz, founder and chief executive officer of Kiva Systems Inc., remembers it too. He was part of the business process team at WebVan, designing a next-generation distribution strategy for grocery home delivery. That experience led to the creation of Kiva

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Systems in 2002.

Located in Woburn and funded by \$6.5 million it received last March from Bain Capital Ventures, Kiva Systems has been in semi-stealth mode, developing its robotic order-fulfillment system, but last week announced the general availability of its system as well as its first customer: Staples Inc.

Staples, which is based in Framingham, bought a Kiva mobile-fulfillment system for its Chambersburg, Pa., fulfillment center, just in time for the holiday rush. Financial details of the deal were not provided.

Kiva's relationship with Staples began last summer, with a live pilot deployment in Coppell, Texas. Don Ralph, senior vice president of logistics operations for Staples North American Delivery, said the increase in productivity during the Texas pilot run was so significant, Staples officials went with a full-scale deployment in Pennsylvania.

Kiva's system is based on three parts: the robot, the pods and the guidance and tracking software.

Through use of the software, which is connected to the warehouse-management platform, each robot — a small vehicle about the size of a picnic cooler and guided by barcode markers on the floor — is directed to a specific pod that holds an ordered product. Instead of directing the picker to the product, the vehicle brings the pod to the picker, and marks the product with a laser.

"Productivity typically goes up by three times traditional systems," said Rob Stevens, vice president of business development for Kiva. "The time to turn around orders is shortened from one or two days to a matter of hours."

The robots can present a new pod to each worker every six seconds.

In the robotics world, order fulfillment falls under the heading of materials handling, and it is the fastest-growing segment of robotics in the world, according to Don Vincent, executive vice president of the Robotic Industries Association in Ann Arbor, Mich. The biggest growth areas in the first nine months of 2005 were for robots used in material-handling applications, arc welding and spot welding, according to Vincent. The automotive industry as a whole, traditionally the largest robotics user, increased its robotics orders by 44 percent from January through September, according to association data.

"The goal of the industry is to get beyond the automotive application and get stronger in other industries, like aerospace, pharmaceutical and materials handling," he said.

Such uses are finding suppliers in New England. Larger, well-known robotics companies such as iRobot Inc. of Burlington; Brooks Automation Inc. in Chelmsford; and Foster-Miller Inc. of Waltham are all working on robotics applications in industries from health

care to defense.

Smaller companies such as Vecna Inc., with labs in Cambridge, are also helping to establish a burgeoning robotics cluster in New England.

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