

IN THE NEWS



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Automated ordering systems are both good and bad news for fast-food workers

Robo-ordering has come to a Checkers drive-through in Kalamazoo. The restaurant on Drake Road in Kalamazoo recently installed a voice-activated drive-through ordering system.

The extra efficiency that comes with automating tasks like taking orders is a boon for busy, understaffed restaurants. But the better the robots get at jobs like minding the drive-through, and even cooking, the fewer human workers chains will need.

Besides taking requests for burgers and fries, the Checkers ordering system can answer questions and even tell you what you owe. Testing it out over a few days, I found that it got the details right most of the time.

Voice activated robot and drive thru menu at Checkers on Drake Road in Kalamazoo. John Schmitt is with the Southwest Region branch of the Michigan Small Business Development Center. Schmitt said McDonald's started the trend of using automation in its restaurants when it installed automated kiosks for ordering. He said automating orders is a big win for an industry struggling with staffing shortages and high turnover.

"If I'm able to save 10 seconds, or 15 seconds per transaction, the transactions really start adding up," Schmitt said.

While the technology is providing some much-needed relief as fast food workers struggle to keep up, Schmitt admitted there is a downside to automated ordering. He said eventually, fewer human workers will be needed.

"Those entry-level jobs in restaurants, I think are slowly going to be eaten away," Schmitt said.

Schmitt said the fast food industry is ripe for automation due to its limited menus and young customer base.

"For younger people that have basically have grown up with screens, grown up with devices," he said, "being able to interact with the device is something they're very intuitively comfortable with."

Schmitt predicts that all operations at fast-food restaurants will either be fully automated or very sparsely staffed by 2030.

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