KNAPP

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Obeta

German electrical supply wholesaler packs thousands of customer orders each day with the KNAPP Pick-It-Easy Robot powered by Covariant

Founded in 1901, Obeta is a German electrical supply wholesaler based in Berlin. With over 28,000 customers and 64 stores across Germany, Obeta sells electrical supplies like light bulbs, electrical wires, sockets, fans, smoke detectors, and circuit breakers to electrical businesses, construction businesses, industrial companies, facility managers, and public sector clients.

Key facts at a glance

- ★ Obeta faced challenges in meeting volume and throughput needs due to labor shortages
- ★ KNAPP's Pick-It-Easy Robot, powered by Covariant's AI Robotics platform, helped solve these challenges
- ★ For over two years now, the robot has been operating autonomously up to 14 hours per day, at speeds up to 600 items per hour

“Covariant and KNAPP’s AI-powered robot has become an integral part of our warehouse operations. It exceeds performance requirements for manual stations and runs autonomously.”

Michael Pultke
Head of Logistics
Obeta

Facing risks due to labor shortages

Operating 24 hours a day, five days a week, Obeta’s main warehouse receives tens of thousands of regularly changing products from manufacturers and fulfills hundreds of thousands of orders from customers and stores monthly. The labor-intensive process of sorting, picking, and packing products into order boxes is critical.

“Hiring and retaining workers is one of the biggest challenges we face in running a warehouse,” said Michael Pultke, Head of Logistics at Obeta. Obeta faces stiff competition for workers since their warehouse is located in an area with lots of other warehouses and manufacturing facilities.

The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified Obeta’s labor shortage. *“We hire workers from nearby countries like Poland and the Czech Republic, but the borders have been intermittently closed, so it’s even harder than usual,”* said Pultke about pandemic-induced closures last year.

Obeta has a long history of innovation, investing in new technologies to make their customers’ shopping experiences as seamless as possible. In 1995, they launched their first online shop. Over the past five years, they established mobile pickup points around the Berlin Ring, a highway that encircles the city, and built an express mobile app with guaranteed delivery time of less than two hours within the city of Berlin. Today, they’re in the process of opening a flagship concept store so customers can test out new ways of purchasing products.

Investing in AI-enabled robotics

Obeta prides itself on its investment in warehouse automation, which is a key part of its long-term strategy to stay competitive while keeping costs balanced. Recently, they built a new warehouse with a state-of-the-art automated storage system OSR Shuttle™ and decided to invest in an AI Robotic order picking station.

For Obeta, robotic order picking was a critical first step towards their vision of a highly automated warehouse. They understood that once deployed, an AI Robotic picking station could gather valuable data about the warehouse and its products, which could then be applied to future AI-powered robots, creating a cycle of constantly improving robots.

Achieving human-level performance

KNAPP and Covariant deployed the Pick-It-Easy Robot to pick and place products from storage containers into order boxes. The station was deployed with minimal downtime and started picking orders within days. The KNAPP Pick-It-Easy Robot powered by Covariant has been operating in production for more than two years, working up to 14 hours each day. *“We can depend on it to do its job, and don’t have to worry about it not being able to work, which is a huge win for us,”* said Michael Pultke, Head of Logistics at Obeta.

Obeta made the decision for KNAPP for several reasons:

1. Their joint solution, the Pick-It-Easy Robot, works autonomously with no human intervention.

2. It had the best picking performance and could handle a wide variety of products as quickly and accurately as manually-operated stations. It could also integrate fully into Obeta’s existing systems, enabling automation of critical capabilities like whitelisting and error handling.
3. Obeta was also impressed that KNAPP and Covariant’s robot could learn to pick products it had never seen before and improve with experience. Like other warehouses, Obeta’s warehouse receives hundreds of new products each week, so they needed a system that could easily adapt to new items without disruption.
4. Finally, KNAPP and Covariant’s roadmap for future AI Robotic systems, all using the same Covariant AI Brain software, gave Obeta confidence that this partnership would help them achieve their vision of a highly automated warehouse.

Speed
reaches a peak speed of 600 objects per hour, depending on order flow, and is equivalent to Obeta's manual picking station.

Accuracy
picks with 99 percent accuracy, even as it learns new objects each week.

Object variety
can currently handle 70 percent of pickable SKUs.

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