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I write about science, robotics &amp; innovative technologies in Europe.

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# Stepping Out Of The Lab: Steve Cousins' New Robotics Company

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*Exclusive for Forbes* – At the [Pioneers Festival](#) in Vienna, several of the leading voices in robotics, including Rodney Brooks, CEO of [Rethink Robotics](#), and Steve Cousins, former CEO of [Willow Garage](#) gathered to have a candid discussion about the future of robotics.

Cousins, also the creator of [ROS](#) (Robot Operating System), an open source software that's become the de facto standard in modern robots, announced his new robotics company, [Savioke](#). He won't go into a lot of detail, but he did say the company is focused on service robotics.



Steve Cousins, Founder &amp; CEO, Savioke

Now that Willow Garage has effectively been dispersed into its eight spin offs, Cousins told Forbes he wants to continue to work towards opening up service robotics particularly to those with disabilities, seniors and older adults. Savioke wants to deliver easy-to-use, yet sophisticated robots that help people, in other words autonomous helpers for the service industry.

When he talks, Cousins is soft-spoken, quietly brilliant but passionate about the industry he helped shape over the past decade. Willow Garage served as the underpinning of the software side of modern day robotics and having spun out eight companies that work on pieces of the robotic pie, he clearly is positioned to unite all of that expertise in his new venture.

“ROS brought the robotics community together and enabled them to stand on each others' shoulders to do things they hadn't done before,” Cousins told a crowded room at the Pioneers Festival today.

[PR2](#), the most famous of all academic lab robots still motivates him.

“What we created with PR2 has the power to change the lives of people with disabilities, to help them do things we take for granted,” said Cousins.

According to [Brooks](#), the creator of Baxter, he says the biggest challenge in robotics is figuring out how robots will help customers at a price point that makes economic sense for them to pay, i.e., it's customer development.

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“The lab is a compromise, not an economic success,” says Colin Angle, who co-founded [iRobot](#) [IRBT -2.56%](#) with Brooks and now is the CEO. “Robots in the lab are being designed in isolation, not based on real world issues or problems. I think this trend of selling robots to labs is holding back the robotic industry.”

[Andra Keay](#), from Robot Garden, Silicon Valley Robotics and [Robot Launchpad](#), says that’s not a pragmatic approach.

“I think that one of the steps robotics companies are taking to get them where they want to be is to sell to labs or academic environments. I don’t see it as a sidetrack, it’s the first place where you see robots interacting with people,” adds Keay. “Labs are low hanging fruit, and you would be a fool to avoid low hanging fruit.”

Even though Cousins built Willow Garage on the backs of academic labs, he admits the industry is a tough one to crack. And he makes a bold move with Savioke, stepping away from the deep pockets of Willow Garage to create a company that will create a robot for a specific purpose not bound for a lab. Even he will need funding to make this venture work.

“It must be something customers value and at a price point that makes sense. I think we still hear the echoes of the uphill battle that PCs and more recently tablets had to climb before acceptance,” said Noland Katter, a business development executive at AnyBots. “It may be a little more difficult for robots to gain this momentum, because it will require a change in acceptance of a larger group than individual early adopters.”

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Another newcomer on the block from Austria, [Blue Danube Robotics](#) takes a different view point.

“Robots are ready to leave the labs and do useful stuff for end users. But, you have to identify those market segments where the existing technological limitations are not perceived as limiting the user experience and usefulness of the robot by the customers,” says Walter Wohlking, cofounder and CEO, Blue Danube Robotics.

Blue Danube Robotics is still in its infancy, not even out of the lab it was created in. The robot they call BLUE is a head filled with sensors that can react to certain commands. BLUE doesn't have a body, or funding to build that body, but they are wildly ambitious and Wohlking and his team believe they are onto something.

But Angle still believes the real world is what's best for the industry.

“I think the best way to move an industry forward and generate revenue is to actually be IN the industry,” says Angle. “I know it's more economically important for me to understand how a doctor needs to use a robot or interact with a robot, which is why we put our [RP-Vita](#) in the real world, not in a lab.”

Now, according to Angle, RP-Vita is tied to solving real problems, and this goes a long way towards adoption of doctors feeling confident and using robots in the medical industry.

“We have been borrowing from other industries for a long time - wireless, telepresence, sensors, wifi and now we are really starting to create a strong infrastructure for the next generation of robots,” said Cousins. “We wanted PR 2 in labs so we could cross pollinate software and ideas, now we're at a point where we can see that paying off. It's the value proposition that's hard — if a robot has value, then people will pay for it, they must value what the robot delivers or does in order to justify the cost.”

“We believe we can build that with Savioke,” adds Cousins.



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