

TECH: BRAIN TAKES FUNDING ROLE, SEEKS TO BROADEN REACH Brain, Savioke Team For Robot Evolution

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A floor scrubber with Brain Corp. technology navigates San Diego International Airport autonomously. The San Diego company partners with manufacturers of floor cleaning machines to turn the equipment into robots. Photo courtesy of Brain Corp.

San Diego — Startups generally seek funding, not provide it.

San Diego artificial intelligence company Brain Corp., however, has teamed up with Silicon Valley-based robotics company Savioke as an investor as well as a business partner.

In late June Brain Corp., which was initially developed within Qualcomm Inc., announced it had participated in a \$13.4 million Series B financing round for Savioke, which makes indoor service robots for hotels and logistics facilities.

BRAIN CORP.

CEO: Eugene Izhikevich

Revenue: Would not disclose

Total funding: About \$125M over three rounds

No. of local employees: More than 150

Headquarters: Sorrento Valley

Year founded: 2009

Company description: Developed software that enables machines to navigate autonomously

The move is part of Brain's long-term plan to deploy its technology, which turns machines into autonomous robots, across a variety of industries.

CEO Eugene Izhikevich wants Brain to be among the beneficiaries of what he envisions as "tremendous upside" as Savioke scales.

"Why not take part in the success of this company?" Izhikevich said.

Brain joined other new investors in the funding round, including Swisslog Healthcare, NEC Networks & System Integration Corp. and Recruit, which brought Savioke's total funding to \$31 million.

Brain's technology, until now, has been deployed primarily in floor scrubbers in industrial facilities. The company has partnered with original equipment manufacturers to integrate its software into machines driven by people, which allows tasks to be performed without manual control.

The Savioke deal is intended to broaden its reach beyond automated floor cleaning machines to robots in hospitality, logistics and — Savioke's next target — hospitals.

Partnerships Are Key

Savioke has agreed to license BrainOS, the company's platform for streamlining the development, deployment and management of robots.

The investment by Brain, which has raised about \$125 million in venture funding, makes sense for a company looking to build an ecosystem in which its technology is in demand, said Steve Ardire, an AI startup advisor who follows the company.

"It is not unusual to create a war chest so they can make selective investments," he said. "When you're a leader of sorts like Brain Corp. is, it makes perfect sense. The name of the game is to stick to your competencies rather than being spread too thin."

Izhikevich said partnerships are key to Brain's continued growth.

"Today our brains are in commercial cleaning equipment in big-box retailers, in malls, in airports, at university campuses ... the goal for us is not to build those machines ourselves, but to partner with manufacturers," he said.

continued — Savioke said its latest financing will support its expansion into the hospital market. Participation by Swisslog Healthcare, which automates services for health care systems, in the Series B is expected to facilitate its entry into that industry.

Savioke founder and CEO Steve Cousins said Brain's technology could allow his startup to get robots it develops to market more rapidly.

"What's interesting about what Brain has done is that they're building a platform to make it so we may not have to build every single component of the underlying system," he said. "When we started this company, there was no option for build versus buy. ... At this point we can choose to take some components from Brain and others we can continue to build on our own."

Relay Robots



Savioke president and CEO Steve Cousins poses for a photo with the company's Relay robot, which is used today in hotels and logistics facilities. Savioke plans to incorporate Brain Corp. technology into its indoor service robots. Photo courtesy of Savioke

Before Savioke, Cousins was president and CEO of robotics lab Willow Garage, which developed the open source Robot Operating System (ROS) — which Savioke has leveraged. The company debuted its first Relay robot in a Cupertino hotel in 2014.

Since then Relay robots have been deployed to make hundreds of thousands of deliveries in hundreds of locations, primarily hotels and logistics facilities.

"Supporting leading robotics companies that can leverage BrainOS to accelerate their robotic development is one of our primary development objectives," Izhikevich said. "We have experienced strong success automating the floor care industry, and as part of our growth strategy, are now introducing the BrainOS platform across a multitude of other applications."

He said Savioke's "unique product, early traction and experienced leadership" made it the right fit.

It's just the latest partnership Brain has announced that is likely to lead to its software finding its way into robots helping humans in multifarious ways.

In November Brain announced the first of what it said would be "several" projects with SoftBank Robotics Corp., a subsidiary of SoftBank Group Corp., which is one of the company's venture backers. At the time the companies said the plan was to use BrainOS to develop an autonomous navigation system for robots "with multi-industry applications."