

## Big Shoes To Fill

Regardless of when and how today's leaders exit, it's not too early to start succession planning

**Robotic**  
Floor Care

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# In The Field

[Floor Equipment]

## Building A Company Around Robotics

By Pamela Mills-Senn

It's not that Jon Hill and Pat Manuel want to do away with the human equation when it comes to facilities cleaning. Rather, the cofounders of LaserClean Systems LLC want to elevate and advance the perception of the janitorial industry, as well as create a more engaged and stimulated workforce. To accomplish both objectives, the pair (along with a third cofounder, William Dillon), are focusing on technology, what they refer to as "human assisted automated solutions" or HAAS for short.

Located in Richmond, Virginia, the two-year-old company has embraced mobile robots; specifically those designed for floor care, says Hill, LaserClean's CEO. Their robotic inventory includes two TASKI Intellibot Swingobots (1850 and 2000) and the TASKI Intellibot Aerobot 1850 — all from Diversey Inc., Charlotte, North Carolina. Along with this equipment LaserClean's inventory incorporates more conventional — yet, still advanced — equipment, such as touchless cleaning machines, backpack vacuums and pulse mops.

The founders came to this effort from very different backgrounds. Dillon, chief innovation officer, has nearly four decades of experience in facility services, and serves in an advisory capacity; Hill worked as a CFO for the original Intellibot startup; and Manuel, director of operations for the company, spent 32 years in public schools as a teacher and coach.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LASERCLEAN SYSTEMS LLC



The owners of LaserClean Systems believe the use of robots can attract new people to the cleaning industry, especially the younger generation

At the time they met, Hill was working on a business model involving robotic cleaning and Manuel was still teaching. However, as luck would have it, the county he taught in had recently outsourced all their facility operations and as Manuel puts it, the results were a "disaster." Nothing was getting clean, he recalls. It was bad for the staff and for the students.

He shared his dismay with Hill and the two began talking about some of the issues related to facilities maintenance and the challenges

associated with the industry, in particular the often transient nature of the workforce.

"The work tends to be very physically difficult and the pay tends to be low," says Hill, of the factors contributing to the high turnover that characterizes much of this industry. This can lead to increased hiring and training costs for companies, expenses related to injuries and workers' compensation, as well as unsatisfactory outcomes for clients and the subsequent loss of business, he adds.

# There's a different level of employee engagement, particularly because it's more intellectually challenging than working with just a mop and bucket

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## Plotting Disruption

The two began brainstorming potential solutions and reaching out to “like-minded” people, a search that connected them to Dillon and one that resulted in the eventual founding of their company.

“We started building LaserClean around the idea of working the robots into the cleaning process,” says Hill. “Twenty years ago, robotics weren’t at the point where people were comfortable working with them, and they were not cost-effective. But this has changed because of enhancements in technology. Competition is starting to disrupt the delivery of service by combining technology and human skills. We formed this company to be part of that disruption.”

The first year was spent creating a business plan; they began reaching out to clients in the second year focusing on warehouses and K-12 facilities. As Manuel explains, they’re concentrating on markets most appropriate for robotic floor care, meaning those facilities where there are large expanses of unobstructed floor space. Currently, they’re servicing several warehouse clients and are in the process of bidding the school facilities. They’ll branch out into other markets as the technology advances, says Hill.

Their custodial team consists of 12 full- and part-time associates, assisted in large part by the robots and the other smart technologies the company offers. These associates are highly trained and certified in facility services, say both, explaining that they hire people who will help them integrate the technology into the processes.

“Because of their skill sets, they are more integrated into the company,” says Hill, referring to their associates. “The employees need to know how to run and maintain the equipment and how to work with it. There’s a different level of engagement, particularly because it’s more intellectually challenging than working with just a mop and bucket.”

They constantly do time and motion studies to tweak their process, having set up a lab where they test how to use the equipment and try out different configurations on the robots, says Manuel. This has created a culture of ongoing improvement, resulting in staff training that is changed and updated on a continual basis, further fostering associate engagement. They also have a propriety software program allowing them to measure the resources consumed; another fine-tuning measure that allows them to gain efficiencies and operate more cost-effectively.

Building service contractors and users are also invited to use the lab to innovate and collaborate on ways to deliver better productivity, says Hill. He describes this as a facility where under-controlled conditions and utilizing scientific methods, new ways of working and measuring the work performed are explored.

## Changing Opinions

As mentioned, one of the company’s objectives is altering how people view the janitorial industry, a shift in perception that could ultimately make this type of work more appealing to younger people in particular. To this end, Hill and Manuel help support a robotics club at a local high school, plan to support robotics competitions, and are also involved in a nearby tech center where they make older robotic technology available for the students to tinker with.

Students are welcome to tear the robots down, put them back together and just see how the equipment works, says Manuel, adding that these machines are helping to change the way students think

about janitorial work. Involving students in the actual operation of the robots is another goal.

“Students [could be] empowered to contribute to their school’s cleanliness through classroom, extracurricular and internship opportunities that provide hands-on chances to operate and even audit LaserClean Systems’ cleaning robots and smart technologies,” says Hill.

They also foresee hiring students, as well as retired teachers and persons with special needs to be entirely possible, says Manuel, due to the fact that automated technology makes the task of facilities cleaning less physically onerous.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LASERCLEAN SYSTEMS LLC



LaserClean Systems offers two business models: providing full-service cleaning or leasing the robots

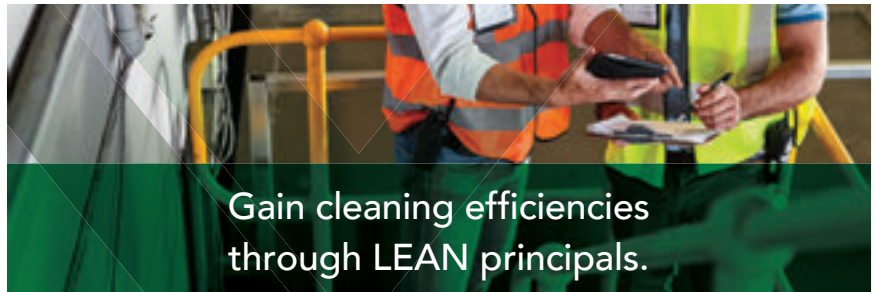
These machines — which once programmed require little monitoring while in action — also allow associates to focus on other tasks and get more done in the same amount of time (the floor care robotics used by LaserClean have a runtime of 10,000 square feet per hour; batteries last about four hours). As a consequence, thanks to higher employee productivity and better labor utilization, process management and innovative technology tools, the cost savings that robotics deliver to facilities can be significant, says Manuel.

As of this writing, the company takes two approaches to the delivery of its facility cleaning products and services: one where they provide full-service cleaning and another as an equipment company that leases and supports the machines.

“[If choosing] the latter, customers can benefit from robotic and automated facility services with none of the capital investment or the need to retain skilled technicians,” says Hill. “We envision a partnership with our customers where robots and smart technologies quietly go about the business of efficiently cleaning, with facility services

provided and supervised by a diverse team of technicians whose professionalism, training, compensation and retention rates exceed industry standards.” **CP**

*Pamela Mills-Senn is a freelancer based in Long Beach, California.*



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