BOEING IS TURNING TO ROBOTS AND OUTSOURCING

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For most of its 100-year history, when **Boeing** turned out more planes, employment soared and the Seattle-area economy prospered. When the rate of production fell, layoffs followed and the local economy crashed.

The cycle was so predictable that Boeing workers had a phrase for it: "Headcount goes by rate."

Now that longstanding cycle has broken down.

The world's largest plane maker is in the midst of its biggest peacetime boom, churning out 20 percent more planes than when the last big cycle peaked in the 1990s.

But it is doing so with one-third fewer workers. In their place, Boeing is turning to robots and outsourcing.
In the past year, Boeing installed four banks of two-story riveting machines at the factory that makes its 737 aircraft in Renton, Washington. When it switched them on in May, the age-old clatter of hand-held rivet guns gave way to the whispery hiss of the 60-ton robots, which Boeing says can work twice as fast as people, with two-thirds fewer defects.

At its sprawling plant in Everett, Washington, Boeing has installed robotic arms to drill and rivet together fuselages for the 777 jetliner.

The machines are "taking what is in the neighborhood of 50,000 to 70,000 fasteners in the 777

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fuselage that are today applied by hand and automating them," Boeing Chief Executive Dennis Muilenburg said in a speech at an aerospace trade fair in Seattle in September.

It's a "huge transformation in how we build airplanes."

Boeing says automation is essential to improve quality and worker safety, lower costs and keep up with its European rival Airbus, which also is automating and churning out more planes to meet worldwide growth in air travel.

But while Boeing says the robots have not caused any layoffs, the company is not predicting significant job growth either.

"Increased automation means we can go higher in rates with a stable workforce," Barry Lewis, head of wing manufacturing operations at Boeing's 737 plant, said during a recent factory tour.

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