WELDING JOURNAL

FEBRUARY 2026



Synchronized Automation

Laser Cutting vs. Plasma Cutting

Electroslag Additive Manufacturing

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Compounding Yields through Welding Automation



Han Kee "Charle" Ng
Director of advanced global R&D, Ennovi; AWS D16, C7, and D8 committee member; SIngapore Welding Society member

We are transitioning into a digital workforce economy, perhaps even approaching the point where robots become a common fixture in every home. Routine, repetitive tasks such as cutting, welding, and polishing — tasks that can be expressed as procedural instructions — are already widely accepted as suitable for robots or cobots. Where physical fatigue might occur due to time or weight, a machine or robot can now complete the task.

However, this is no longer the type of automation that yields meaningful returns. Automation is no longer about replacing the human hand or arm; at its core, it is about enabling humans to use industrial robots to maximize output, resulting in increased time efficiency. AWS D16.5M/D16.5:2021, *Training Guide for Robotic Arc Welding Personnel*, defines an industrial robot as "an automatically controlled, reprogrammable multipurpose manipulator programmable in three or more axes which may be either fixed in place or mobile for use in industrial automation applications."

Humans don't just adapt to one automation line — they learn and evolve. This accumulated wisdom allows firms to grow continuously, transforming the learning curve from one specialty to another, constantly yielding and compounding on that wisdom. It becomes a natural evolution to eliminate resource bottlenecks, such as stationary positions for processes, and move toward "welding on the fly," where the actual weld process is performed while the object is in motion. We no longer need buttons to be pressed, as advanced sensors in vision detection and algorithm sensing are now affordable enough to analyze about 14 image types to determine if an object is ready for welding.

The above is only for one line of automation. Imagine if several lines of automation are vested, the yields and outputs can be staggering. A general guideline is that the second automation line halves the total welding cycle time, whereas the third or subsequent automation lines introduce diminishing returns, making line balancing critical to sustain optimized output forecasts. This requires nonwelding-related expertise, such as adjusting synchronization to boost daily output, with the dilemma of incurring the cost of line maintenance per day. As real-time output soars, the cost of quality becomes a reality check, with parts consumed every second and the risk of nonconforming products prompting diversification strategies.

To protect automation investments and integration costs, both internal and external, the AWS Certified Robotic Arc Welding (CRAW) program provides a strong foundation for firms to anchor to and leverage. The CRAW program provides a unique opportunity for welding professionals to measure their skills against industry standards. By obtaining the CRAW certification, professionals demonstrate their ability to program a robot to deliver an acceptable weld and their commitment to staying current in the ever-evolving welding industry. Required re-examination or proof of active practice every three years ensures that CRAW Operators and Technicians remain at the current in their field. The CRAW program represents the combined expertise of proven Certified Welding Inspectors and Engineers coming together to chart the automation roadmap ahead. Through natural language processing and unified standards, this collaboration sets the stage for electrifying industrialization from 2026 onward. WJ

"The CRAW program represents the combined expertise of proven Certified Welding Inspectors and Engineers coming together to chart the automation roadmap ahead. Through natural language processing and unified standards, this collaboration sets the stage for electrifying industrialization from 2026 onward."

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To maintain the intimate, collegial nature of this conference, **attendance and hotel room availability are limited.** AWS has secured special discounted room blocks at nearby hotels—participants are encouraged to reserve early before rates and availability change.

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Additional Keynote Speakers to follow soon

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BY CINNAMON DIGAN

HARD AUTOMATION OR ROBOTICS:

Which One Should You Choose?

Increase your productivity by selecting the right process for the job

Every December, my sister dusts off her trusty stand mixer, and we dive into cookie-making season. Last year, I found myself in the middle of a sugar explosion with my two-year-old nephew as we decorated cookies under mountains of rainbow sprinkles. Icing was everywhere; in hindsight, a poncho might have been a good idea. By the end, we were exhausted and incredibly grateful for the dishwasher.

Hard automation is everywhere in our daily lives, saving us time, money, and elbow grease. That stand mixer is the only reason I did not wake up with a sore shoulder the next day. Dishwashers, ovens, dryers, toasters — these are all forms of hard or "fixed" automation designed to perform one specific task exceptionally well, without needing constant input. But hard automation cannot do it all. Enter robots.

The Power of Robots

A robot can handle complex tasks, making it a very flexible tool. The definition of robotics in relation to automation can be described as programmable machines that can perform a variety of tasks, often involving multiple axes and movement.

While robots have numerous uses in the 21st century, they have become crucial in the world of welding and manufacturing where we are consistently seeing the impact of the skilled labor gap.

In many applications, robots can completely replace manual welders, as long as the process is repeatable. (Because a robot is only as smart as the instructions it is given.)

Industrial robots today can weld in multiple directions, adapt to different speeds and parameters, and communicate with welding machines and peripherals, all autonomously after setup. They can even head to cleaning stations when needed. The capabilities are incredible.

So, if robots are this advanced, why don't we use them for everything?

When Robots Are Too Much

Great question. Here is the thing: Sometimes using a robot is just overkill.

Would you really want a robot making cookies for you if you had to program every step, ingredient by ingredient, spoonful by spoonful? At a certain point, it is just faster and more practical to do it yourself.



Fig. 1 — A hard automation seam welding machine.

And let's talk cost. Are you going to spend tens of thousands of dollars on a robot to mix batter, when a $300 stand mixer does the job just fine?

Then there is maintenance, cleaning, operator training, and the complexity of setup. Robots are powerful, but they can be bulky, expensive, high maintenance, and even a safety concern that is unnecessary when it comes to simpler tasks.

Robots are like the smartphones of automation, versatile



Fig. 2 — An open orbital weld head is another example of hard automation.



Fig. 3 — Hard automation and robotics working together.

and powerful, but in lots of cases, all you need is a reliable flip phone.

Why Hard Automation Still Shines

Hard automation might not be flashy, but it gets the job done exceptionally well when a high-throughput task is fixed and repeatable.

Take a seam welding machine, for example — Fig. 1. They generally only move in the Y and Z directions (side to side and up/down) and stay fixed in X (back/forth) to ensure a perfectly straight seam weld every time. Orbital welding units are similar, rotating around a joint with pinpoint accuracy — Fig. 2.

Sometimes a combination of the two technologies is used to get the job done — Fig. 3. Remember that cleaning station I mentioned earlier? That's hard automation in action with robots. Devices like contact tip changers and nozzle reamers perform specific tasks, such as cleaning or replacing welding parts in robotic cells. The contact tip changer performs this task flawlessly, ensuring the same torque on the contact tip every time. Why? Because this is its one job. A product designed for one specific task can have interesting perks for precision.

Adaptability Is Key

We've all experienced the frustration of rigid automation, whether it's navigating an automated customer service system that can't understand your needs or dealing with a self-checkout that insists you're doing something wrong. Even household features like "wrinkle prevention" on dryers have limitations; they only work for a short time and can't adapt beyond their programmed function.

This highlights a key difference: hard automation lacks flexibility compared to robotic systems. Your dryer can't fold laundry, and automated phone menus can only handle generic questions. In industrial settings, both robotics and hard automation can deliver significant benefits in speed, productivity, and consistency, but success depends on proper preparation. Highly repeatable and accurate processes require equally precise parts and fixturing. These foundational steps often determine the outcome, whether the application is managed manually or through automation.

Conclusion: The Right Tool for the Job

Understanding your specific application is critical. First and foremost, do your research. In this fast-paced day and age of technology, chances are high that there's something out there that can increase your efficiency that you did not even know about. WJ

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BY ADAM G. STEVENS, DAVID HEBBLE, AND DAN ALLFORD

Electroslag Additive Manufacturing:

A New Way to Build Large Parts

Need a 10-ton part fast? This process can handle it

Additive manufacturing (AM) of metals is an exciting new field ripe for innovation. It also has roots over 1000 years old, dating back to the first time two pieces of iron were forge welded to form a larger body. Welding has always been an additive process, making it readily adaptable to the 3D printing of metal parts. Wire arc additive manufacturing (WAAM) has been successfully used to print parts weighing thousands of pounds, achieving broad industry acceptance. Demand exists for parts that are larger still, but building such large parts with the WAAM process can take weeks or even months due to limited productivity. Electroslag strip cladding (ESC) is a high-deposition-rate welding process that has recently been applied to AM by leveraging advances in automation, resulting in electroslag additive manufacturing (ESAM).

ESC is a proven process that utilizes filler metals in strip form, rather than wire, and granular flux for shielding, rather than gas. Filler metal strips 60 mm (2.36 in.) or wider produce single-pass weld deposits at 20 kg/h (44 lb/h) or more, which would require 20 or more WAAM passes. Large-format, heavyweight parts can now be built economically using ESAM.

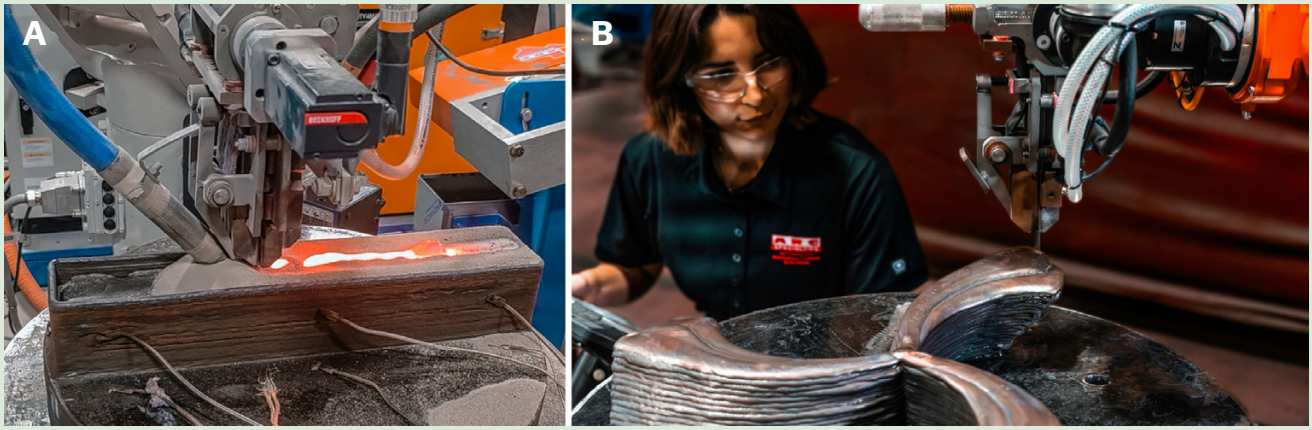


Fig. 1 — A — ESAM uses a strip electrode to rapidly deposit large amounts of material. The ESC weld beads can be optionally contained and defined by GMAW-printed walls, as shown; B — Abigail Fossati of ARC Specialties demonstrates variable-bead-width ESAM, which is enabled by simultaneous robotic rotation and translation of the strip electrode during welding.

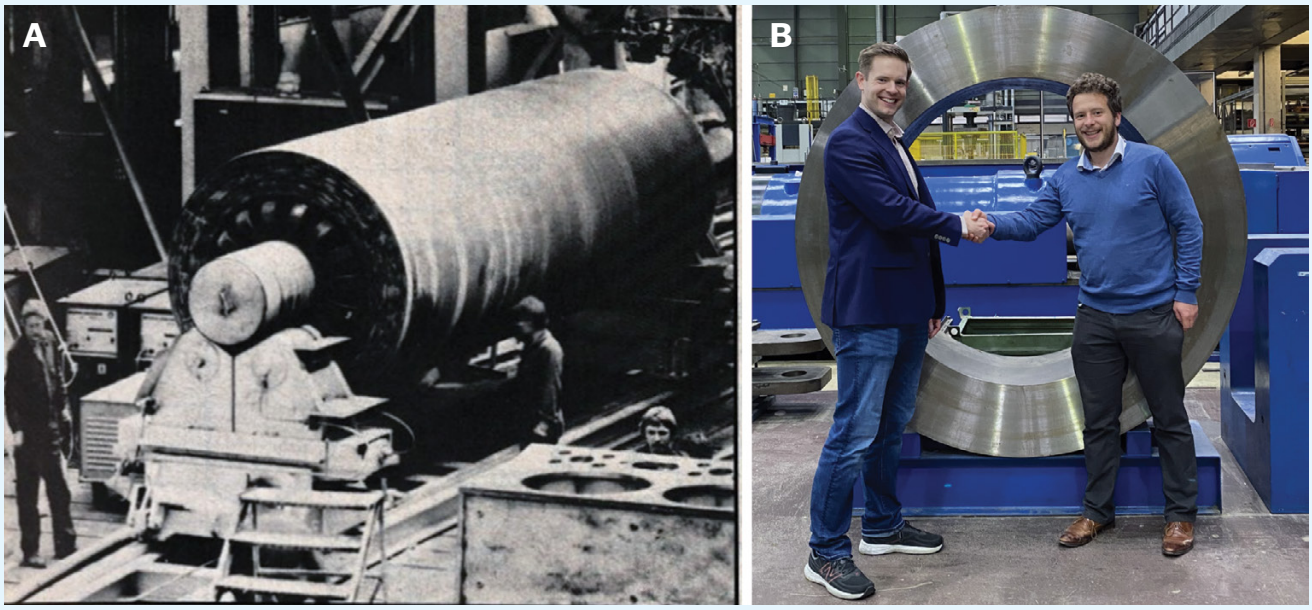


Fig. 2 — A — A shape-welded 70-plus-ton pressure vessel printed via submerged arc welding. (Source: *Welding Journal* feature article, "High Quality Large Components 'Shape Welded' by a SAW Process," September 1983 issue.) Shape welding was pioneered in part by the University of Stuttgart Materials Testing Institute; B — A "small" section of the shape-welded component remains on display to this day. (From left) Dr. A. G. Stevens and Dr.-Ing. M. Werz of the University of Stuttgart Materials Testing Institute.

Manufacturing Is Essential for Healthy Modern Economies

Secure, domestic supply chains for multiton metal components are critical for industries such as energy generation and resource extraction. AM methods, such as WAAM, are the subject of significant research, development, and deployment efforts aimed at augmenting the existing domestic casting and forging industrial base. Economically producing parts in the 10-plus ton range via AM requires increased productivity, which has been demonstrated with multiple coordinated WAAM welding robots and can now be further improved upon with ESAM by combining high-resolution gas metal arc welding (GMAW) with flux-based, high-productivity ESC.

ESAM utilizes granular flux delivered ahead of the filler metal strip and optional GMAW-printed walls to define layer perimeters and create higher-resolution features — Fig. 1. A single ESAM strip head can achieve deposition rates of 20 kg/h or more while the ESAM system retains the precision of WAAM. The ESC weld pools in ESAM are protected from oxidation during solidification and cooling by a slag-forming flux that provides process heat when molten, serving as a liquid resistive element. This flux remains in place against the weld until the deposit is sufficiently cool, preventing the formation of surface oxides that may compromise properties. Such surface oxides are common when gas-shielded AM processes are pushed to the productivity limit.

Building on Proven Technology

The importance of modern, flexible automation is highlighted by the work of the past. From the 1960s to the 1980s, shape welding was developed in Europe to produce components weighing over 70 tons, which were traditionally cast or forged, using submerged arc welding. Common examples included thick-walled pressure vessels for nuclear reactors — Fig. 2. The technology of the time limited the process to producing simple axisymmetric geometries, but since then, robotics and software have matured and costs have plummeted.

The Coordination Problem

Additive manufacturing is software intensive, and the successful AM of components weighing over 10 tons necessitates the deployment of modern automation methods and software tools to control the interplay between process parameters, finished geometry, and material properties. Each part must be sliced into virtual layers and converted into a torch path (or paths) to create the most efficient build program. The goal is the highest possible build rate with the fewest weld starts while controlling thermal gradients. ESAM adds another challenge. At high ESAM deposition rates, weld pools are large and must be maintained in the flat position. Advanced robotics solves this by enabling coordinated motion between the robot(s) and a multiaxis part positioner, keeping the slag and weld pool locally flat.

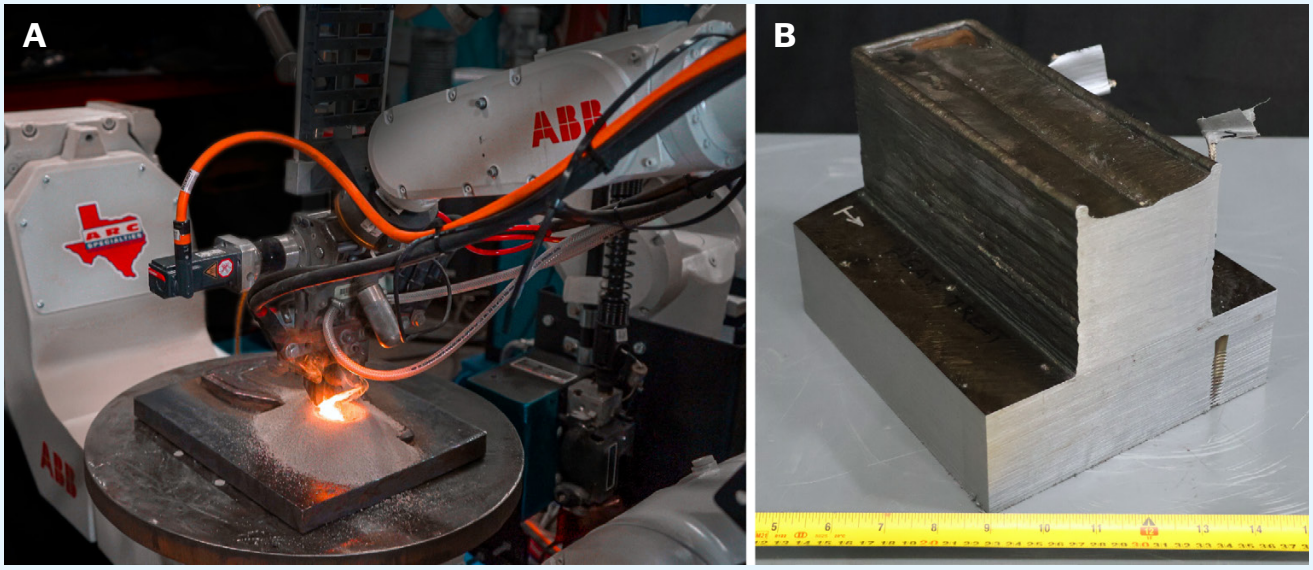


Fig. 3 — A — Prototype robotic ESAM system during testing; B — sectioned print from the prototype system for testing and characterization showing GMAW retaining walls.

The prototype ESAM system under development consists of 14 coordinated axes (two six-degree-of-freedom robotic arms and one tilt and rotate weld positioner), with each robot alternating between welding ESC and WAAM in turn — Fig. 3. Coordination is achieved by a master program, running independently of the robot controllers, that simultaneously controls the robot and part positioner motions based on a G-code file.

Next Step: Built-In Process Knowledge

Ultimately, ESAM shares the goal of metal AM in general: highly efficient production of high-performance parts across length scales. The vision is for the operator to digitally define the part geometry and material property set, after which the system will optimize production by selecting the appropriate welding process for each feature. Welding process parameters will be automatically chosen from prequalified welding procedures to achieve the required bead dimensions and local properties. Real-time adjustments will be made via closed-loop control, utilizing machine vision operating in the infrared spectrum to continuously monitor bead shape and thermal profile. By coordinating the AM process at each step with operator design intent, the system will optimize welding parameters to achieve the target part geometry and properties.

Multiple Tools Solve a Multitude of Challenges

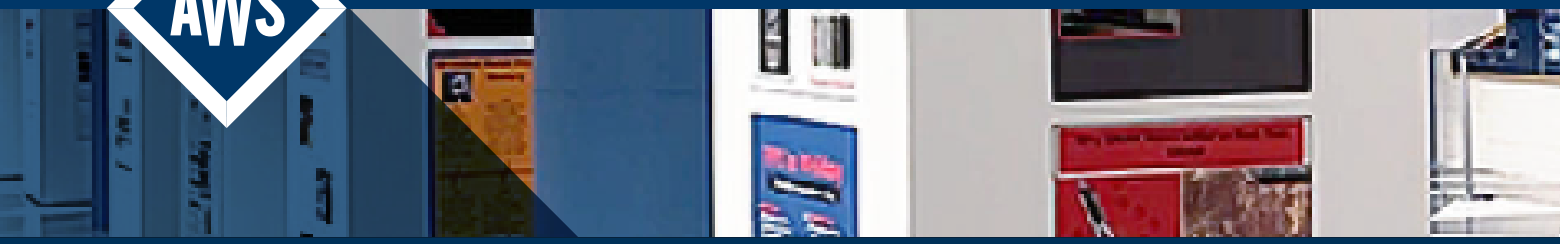
Much like how subtractive machine tool technologies feature a wide array of tools in an automatic tool changer, future additive systems will incorporate processes such as WAAM to build fine parts and features while utilizing ESAM to quickly and economically build large features. By further combining additive and subtractive technologies, AM will soon be just another step in the manufacturing process for massive metal parts. The factory of the future will have fewer specialized machines and more flexible, autonomous automated cells that incorporate multiple processes.

AM will not replace casting, forging, or fabrication; by leveraging modern automation, it will seamlessly merge with them to enable the production of products with previously unrealized capabilities, rates, and scales. Advanced sensors, combined with artificial intelligence, will automatically correct defects rather than inspect for them. This new level of automation will allow companies to specialize in their products rather than in the manufacturing process. WJ

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2026 AWS Poster Competition

At FABTECH (Las Vegas, NV) – October 21-23, 2026

The AWS Poster Competition is a key component of the AWS Professional Program. Visual displays of technical or business projects are welcome for inclusion in the competition. Authors are also invited to submit a video (~ 3 to 4 minutes) along with their posters. Posters and videos will present results from welding and additive manufacturing (AM) related studies, which are best conveyed visually, as well as research results involving study and analysis of graphs, micrographs, tables, or CAD drawings.
Please note the new categories (* below).

Submissions are Welcomed in Seven Categories:

- Students in High School Welding Programs
- High School Students in Sponsored University Programs*
- Students in Two-Year College or Certificate Programs
- Undergraduate Students in B.S. Tech. College Programs*
- Undergraduate Students in B.S. Eng. University Programs
- Graduate Students (M.Sc., M.Eng., Ph.D.)
- Professionals (not eligible for prize money)

Prizes for Each Category

- 1st Place: $750
- 2nd Place: $500
- 3rd Place: $300

Requirements and Judging Criteria:

- Posters must be submitted online. Follow the guidelines through the link below.
- Find more information about submission, design guidelines, judging criteria, lists of topics, general tips, and past winners at https://tinyurl.com/AWS-Poster-Competition-2026.
- Instructions for submission of videos will be available on the website.
- Technical topics relevant to the welding industry are acceptable (business studies, welding processes and controls, welding procedures, welding design, structural integrity related to welding, weld inspection, welding metallurgy, and AM).
- Posters and videos accepted for the competition will be judged based on technical content, clarity of communication, novelty/relevance of the subject and overall aesthetic impression.

Goals of the Competition Include:

- Advancing the science, technology and application of welding and allied joining and cutting processes, including additive manufacturing (AM) through visual communication of work undertaken to address technical and commercial challenges.
- Highlighting investigative work in the fields outlined above by recognizing the investigators and institutions that support these endeavors.
- Promoting development of students' communication skills and knowledge of welding, AM and related technologies.

Submission Deadline: July 31, 2026

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