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The European Union and robotics technology

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No doubt robotics technology is going be utilized more and more in a wide range of different situations. Each domain has its own needs and requirements.
The robotics market place is also complex including a miscellaneous range of opportunities.
The European Union has put together a number of EC Directives Directives, which are incorporated into national regulations in key areas such as safety.

At this moment, Directives relevant to the robotics domain are the following:
Directive 2001/95/EC concerning general product safety. This requires that no producer shall place a product on the market unless it is a safe product.
Directive 2006/95/EC: low voltage directive. This provides common broad objectives for safety regulations, so that electrical equipment will be acceptable for use in all EU countries.
Directive 2004/108/EC on electromagnetic compatibility. This sets the essential requirements for all electrical and electronic equipment that may interfere with other equipment or that may be interfered with by other equipment.

The directive states that the result must be a device that cannot be disturbed by electromagnetic interference and that in itself limits the generation of interference in such a way that the other equipment is not disturbed by it.
Directive 2006/42/EC: Machinery Directive. This is written to promote the design of machinery that is as safe as possible according with the status of technological development. Most robots to date have been classified as machines and hence the robot safety standards are designed to give guidance for fulfilling with this directive. One of the key issues is how the wide variety of human-robot interaction can be attained with the appropriate level of safety measures in place.
Directive 2001/104/EC:

medical device directive, which standardizes the laws relating to medical devices within the EU. The key issue to note here is the definition of a medical device, which is the following:
“ Any instrument, apparatus, appliance, software, material or other article, whether used alone or in combination, together with any accessories, including the software intended by its manufacturer to be used specifically for diagnostic and/or therapeutic purposes and necessary for its proper application, intended by the manufacturer to be used for human beings for the purpose of:

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• diagnosis, prevention, monitoring, treatment or alleviation of disease
• diagnosis, monitoring, treatment, alleviation of or compensation for an injury or handicap,

investigation, replacement or modification of the anatomy or of a physiological process
• control of conception
and which does not achieve its principal intended action in or on the human body by pharmacological, immunological or metabolic means, but which may be assisted in its function by such means."
Directive 2009/48/EC: Toy Directive. This directive establishes the safety assessment that manufacturers need to carry from analysing the various hazards that a toy may present. This includes consideration of chemical, physical, mechanical, electrical, flammability, hygienic and radioactivity hazards, and an assessment of the potential exposure to them. Some toy robots exist and clearly need to be regulated under this directive.

Europe currently has a leading role in industrial robotics, supplying the world market, but this position is vulnerable. Aside from well-known Japanese suppliers, new companies are entering the European market. The typical business model of the established suppliers of industrial robots is to work closely together with system integrators. In this way, the suppliers concentrate on the technology of the robot manipulator and controller and the application related know how resides mostly with smaller companies doing the integration work.
The larger of the equipment manufacturers are actually "global players", supplying not only the European markets, but also markets abroad.

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