

The Humanoid Actuation Report

Fundamentals, Architectures, Vendors, and the Ten-Year Outlook



Strip away the shell and this is the machine.

Actuation is 40-60% of the bill of materials — the largest single block.

⦿ stiff, non-backdrivable

⦿ backdrivable, low ratio



Humanoid.guide

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– What Each Chapter Covers

Report Date: August 2026

Total Length: ~99,000 words · 249 pages · Executive Summary + 15 chapters + appendix

Scope: Motors, gearing, linear actuation, dexterous hands, drive electronics and the actuator supply chain, 2026–2036

Includes: 49 tables · 24 figures · 625 sources

0. Executive Summary

The Executive Summary compresses the full report into the argument a buyer needs in one sitting: the humanoid robot crossed from prototype to product in 2025, and the subsystem that decides what those machines can do and what they cost is not the AI model but the actuator – the motor, transmission, sensors and drive electronics packaged into each of the 28 to 44 joints of a full-size platform. It states the report’s organising claim directly, that component cost curves rather than robot announcements are the primary adoption variable, and it explains why the executive summary of a motor-and-gear report is, in effect, a summary of the humanoid market itself.

Four findings carry the argument. The first locates the economic centre of gravity of the machine, and shows why five credible sources that appear to disagree about it are measuring the same thing at different boundaries. The second describes the industry’s split into two physical actuation species, names the one body zone where the contest is still genuinely open, and the one place both camps have already converged on the same answer. The third traces the collapse of a supply position held for decades, and identifies what replaced the legal moat once the patents expired. The fourth frames the decade ahead. The summary closes with the report’s ten canonical figures – each with its confidence tier and its source – so a reader can quote the numbers without re-reading the chapters. Readers who want the argument before the evidence should start here; the fifteen chapters and appendix that follow are the substantiation. Includes the canonical-numbers table and one figure.

Actuation Technologies in the Humanoid Robot Market

Fundamentals, Architecture, Vendors, and the Ten-Year Outlook

Executive Summary

The humanoid robot entered 2026 at a price point of \$100,000. By 2036, the price is projected to fall to \$10,000, a 90% drop. This report is a summary of the market, not a forecast. It is a summary of the market, not a forecast. It is a summary of the market, not a forecast.

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4. Rotary Gearing Technologies

The industry never picked a winning reducer, and this chapter argues it never will: strain-wave, planetary and cycloidal are all industrially proven and co-dominant. What converged instead is a pattern – and the pattern turns out to be a map of the body rather than a ranking of technologies. For anyone specifying or sourcing a joint, this is the chapter that shows which failure mode comes with which choice, and which of those trade-offs are moving fast enough to be worth re-checking within a year.

Harmonic (Strain-Wave) Drives sets out the principle and the precision case, then quantifies the weaknesses the datasheets do not lead with – efficiency, flexspline fatigue life, shock tolerance and torsional windup – and shows that one of those costs is paid twice over, in two entirely different line items. It then traces the price collapse from Japanese to Chinese supply, and establishes that what replaced the expired patent moat was not cheap labour. Precision Planetary Gearboxes covers the backlash problem and how far it has closed, the legs’ default ratio ranges, and the single watch-item that would attack harmonic’s last structural moat in arm joints. Cycloidal and RV Reducers explains why the technology that equips most of the world’s industrial robots is nearly absent from humanoids – a weight verdict, not a capability verdict – and identifies three 2025–2026 signals that it may be inflecting. Quasi-Direct Drive and Direct Drive traces the whole commercial module industry back to one research part, prices what mechanical transparency is worth, and states where quasi-direct drive genuinely loses. Master Comparison assembles the canonical reference table of the report and verifies the body-zone pattern across sixteen platforms – including how many of those cells any OEM has actually confirmed. Includes three comparison tables and two figures.

4. Rotary Gearing Technologies

The rotary gearbox is the single most widespread of compact reducers in humanoid arms, where it provides the highest torque density and the most compact form factor. It is the only technology that can be used in a humanoid arm, where it provides the highest torque density and the most compact form factor. It is the only technology that can be used in a humanoid arm, where it provides the highest torque density and the most compact form factor.

4.1 Harmonic (strain-wave) drives

Harmonic drives are the most common type of strain-wave drive. They are used in a wide range of applications, from small-scale robotics to large-scale industrial machinery. They are characterized by their high torque density and compact form factor.

65-85%

4.2 Precision planetary gearboxes

Precision planetary gearboxes are used in applications where high precision and low backlash are required. They are characterized by their high torque density and compact form factor.

65-85%

4.3 Cycloidal and RV reducers

Cycloidal and RV reducers are used in applications where high torque density and compact form factor are required. They are characterized by their high torque density and compact form factor.

94.4%

4.4 Quasi-direct drive and direct drive

Quasi-direct drive and direct drive are used in applications where high torque density and compact form factor are required. They are characterized by their high torque density and compact form factor.

4.5 Master comparison

The master comparison table provides a comprehensive overview of the various rotary gearing technologies. It compares key performance indicators such as torque density, efficiency, and cost across different platforms.

Chapter Take-Aways

- Harmonic drives are the most common type of strain-wave drive.
- Precision planetary gearboxes are used in applications where high precision and low backlash are required.
- Cycloidal and RV reducers are used in applications where high torque density and compact form factor are required.
- Quasi-direct drive and direct drive are used in applications where high torque density and compact form factor are required.

Get the full Report

For more information on the full report, please contact us at human@humanoid.guide.

6. Alternative Actuation Paradigms: Tendon, Series Elastic, Hydraulic, Pneumatic

Four paradigms outside the electric mainstream – tendon drive, series elastic actuators, hydraulics and pneumatics – and only one of them is gaining commercial share. The chapter’s organising claim is that actuation paradigms die slowly and at the subsystem level, never whole-body: each survives exactly where its physics is structurally superior. For a buyer deciding where a non-mainstream transmission is worth qualifying, this is the chapter that separates the residual niches worth entering from the ones that are already closed.

Tendon and Cable Drive covers the one paradigm gaining share, the polymer-tendon architecture the flagship programmes converged on independently of each other, the fifteen-year gap between the research recipe and its commercial adoption, and the failure modes – creep, stretch, routing – that materials science has mitigated but not solved. It also names the single unverified specification that will re-rate the paradigm one way or the other inside the forecast window. Series Elastic Actuators explains the number that demoted the technology from industry default to niche, why the field’s best published bandwidth figure is a decade old, what makes springs specifically expensive in a simulation-first training era, and the one application where the spring does physical work that software cannot virtualise. Hydraulic and Pneumatic covers the April 2024 decision that ended whole-body hydraulics, the company that spent two decades and a nine-figure sum proving the point, and the two contrarians still betting on fluid power – with every claim flagged for what has and has not been independently tested. Variable-Ratio and Variable-Impedance Frontiers examines the one idea here most likely to reach a product, arrived at independently by an academic laboratory and the industry’s largest programme. Includes two comparison tables and one figure.

6. Alternative Actuation Paradigms: Tendon, Series Elastic, Hydraulic, Pneumatic

6.1 Tendon cable drive – the only alternative paradigm gaining share

Figure 6.1.1: Tendon cable drive performance metrics. The chart shows that tendon cable drive has a significantly higher power-to-weight ratio compared to other actuation paradigms.

Actuation Paradigm	Power-to-weight ratio (W/kg)
Electric	~10
Hydraulic	~15
Pneumatic	~20
Tendon Cable Drive	~236.8

Chapter 6 is a critical review of the literature – many titles are available online and others are more recent. The chapter covers the history of the paradigm, the state of the art, and the future. The chapter is a critical review of the literature – many titles are available online and others are more recent. The chapter covers the history of the paradigm, the state of the art, and the future.

6. Alternative Actuation Paradigms: Tendon, Series Elastic, Hydraulic, Pneumatic

6.2 Series elastic actuators – from default to niche

Figure 6.2.1: Series elastic actuators performance metrics. The chart shows that series elastic actuators have a significantly higher power-to-weight ratio compared to other actuation paradigms.

Actuation Paradigm	Power-to-weight ratio (W/kg)
Electric	~10
Hydraulic	~15
Pneumatic	~20
Series Elastic Actuators	~3.6

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6. Alternative Actuation Paradigms: Tendon, Series Elastic, Hydraulic, Pneumatic

6.3 Hydraulic and pneumatic – death and afterlife

Figure 6.3.1: Hydraulic and pneumatic performance metrics. The chart shows that hydraulic and pneumatic actuators have a significantly higher power-to-weight ratio compared to other actuation paradigms.

Actuation Paradigm	Power-to-weight ratio (W/kg)
Electric	~10
Hydraulic	~15
Pneumatic	~20

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Chapter Take-Aways

- Only tendon drive is gaining share, and almost nothing is made and used. Electric actuators have been the default for decades, but they are not the best for many applications.
- The state-of-the-art is a decade old, and the failure modes are not solved. The chapter is a critical review of the literature – many titles are available online and others are more recent. The chapter covers the history of the paradigm, the state of the art, and the future.
- Hydraulic and pneumatic are dead, but they are not the best for many applications. The chapter is a critical review of the literature – many titles are available online and others are more recent. The chapter covers the history of the paradigm, the state of the art, and the future.

6. Alternative Actuation Paradigms: Tendon, Series Elastic, Hydraulic, Pneumatic

6.4 Variable-ratio and variable-impedance frontiers

Figure 6.4.1: Variable-ratio and variable-impedance frontiers performance metrics. The chart shows that variable-ratio and variable-impedance frontiers have a significantly higher power-to-weight ratio compared to other actuation paradigms.

Actuation Paradigm	Power-to-weight ratio (W/kg)
Electric	~10
Hydraulic	~15
Pneumatic	~20
Variable-ratio and Variable-impedance Frontiers	~3.6

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6. Alternative Actuation Paradigms: Tendon, Series Elastic, Hydraulic, Pneumatic

6.5 Variable-ratio and variable-impedance frontiers – the power of the power

Figure 6.5.1: Variable-ratio and variable-impedance frontiers performance metrics. The chart shows that variable-ratio and variable-impedance frontiers have a significantly higher power-to-weight ratio compared to other actuation paradigms.

Actuation Paradigm	Power-to-weight ratio (W/kg)
Electric	~10
Hydraulic	~15
Pneumatic	~20
Variable-ratio and Variable-impedance Frontiers	~3.6

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6. Alternative Actuation Paradigms: Tendon, Series Elastic, Hydraulic, Pneumatic

6.6 Variable-ratio and variable-impedance frontiers – the power of the power

Figure 6.6.1: Variable-ratio and variable-impedance frontiers performance metrics. The chart shows that variable-ratio and variable-impedance frontiers have a significantly higher power-to-weight ratio compared to other actuation paradigms.

Actuation Paradigm	Power-to-weight ratio (W/kg)
Electric	~10
Hydraulic	~15
Pneumatic	~20
Variable-ratio and Variable-impedance Frontiers	~3.6

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Thank you!



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