A decade ago, at the very dawn of this Autonomous Age now quickly taking shape around us, I talked with several “futurists” to get a sense of how it would develop, what its potential was, and how it would transform trucking.

The vision of a not-too-distant future these visionaries painted for me was an exciting one: A planet with a truly global super economy supported by a truly global trucking industry. In this future, I was told, new construction-project capable 3D printing machines would enable the construction of new highways, crossing oceans, connecting Japan with Korea, and North America to Russia.

These new, international highways would be populated by fleets of driverless trucks, endlessly roaming the planet and delivering goods — Nebraskan grain to Poland, and 3D printing machine raw materials from the Ukraine to Japan, for example — with these driverless trucks stopping only to take on new cargo and fuel, and deal with maintenance issues. In addition, all of these things could happen in as little as 50 years’ time, I was assured.

It was a compelling vision of the future. And, for the record, I still find it to be plausible in many ways. Certainly, many of the technological innovations hypothesized in the 1960s series Star Trek are now commonplace. However, as is often the case with predictions of the future, it appears now that we will have to adjust somewhat that initial 50-year timeline on transportation predictions.

To be fair, at the time most of the futurists I spoke with expected to see autonomous trucks in routine daily operation by 2020. We’re obviously not there — yet. But, if the current optimistic projections bear out, we may see that goal reached in the next five years or so. And that’s not a bad miss by any standard when you’re trying to peer into the future.

When autonomous trucks arrive, the learning curve will be steep. But a few easy preparations today can help make that eventual transition from manned trucks to autonomous ones go a lot more smoothly.

By Jack Roberts

The future always has belonged to people willing to embrace new technology and leverage the advantages it gives them over their competitors. Autonomous vehicle technology will be no different.

The second point is that it is clear that to one degree or another, autonomous vehicle systems will play a critical role in helping fleets in the near future attain those mandatory productivity and efficiency levels.

And while much of this technology, and the changes it will bring, still seem to be over the horizon, the fact is that now is the time to begin preparing your fleet for an autonomous future. This is a challenging proposition, given the hectic, unrelenting pace of fleet management today. And yet it also is critical to begin preparing now. Because as is often the case with technological revolutions, companies that wait too
long to adopt new technologies often fall so far behind their more progressive competitors on the efficiency, productivity and profitability fronts that it becomes impossible to catch up.

One easy way to do this is to designate someone in your management structure as your fleet’s designated point person for tracking and studying autonomous vehicle development and planning on how, and when, to being evaluating these technologies as they come on line to determine which systems are a good fit and when and how they should be phased into everyday operations. The creation of the Chief Information Officer title was recognition of the growth of digital information systems impacting company operations. Perhaps a Chief Automation Officer and associated staffing may be needed?

Give that person a reasonable education and travel budget. Once we pass through the current COVID-19 crisis, there will be many autonomous truck conferences and demonstrations all around the globe. And many of them will address the very issues your fleet will be attempting to learn about as your team embarks on this educational endeavor. Make sure your autonomous point person gives your management team periodic updates (quarterly, perhaps) on what they’ve learned, what technologies or systems look promising and what the potential upsides and downsides of adoption will likely be.

Perhaps the most critical action you can take now is to set the proper tone for anticipating and adopting autonomous technology. This means setting an example — from the very top of the organizational pyramid — and relaying a consistent message that says to everyone in your fleet: Understanding and adopting autonomous technologies and other emerging technologies is critical to the future of the company. Sooner or later, these technologies will enter the marketplace and begin being used in everyday fleet operations. To ensure both the future and the profitability of this fleet, it is our intention to evaluate and adopt new technologies that we deem suitable for our operations as soon as it is economically feasible to do so.

The future always has belonged to people willing to embrace new technology and leverage the advantages it gives them over their competitors. Autonomous vehicle technology will be no different. Whether or not your fleet is a winner or a loser when this technology does enter into mainstream use, will depend to a large degree on how soon and how seriously your fleet begins preparing for that eventualty.

About the Author: Jack Roberts is a transportation journalist who has been covering North American commercial vehicles for 25 years and has developed a reputation as a leading authority/futurist concentrating on new trucking technology, including autonomous vehicles, battery-electric trucks and emerging blockchain technology.