An autonomous future doesn’t necessarily mean a future without truck drivers

The realization that autonomous trucks would be rolling down highways and delivering goods without humans behind the steering wheel set off societal shockwaves that reverberated far beyond the trucking industry.

And it’s not hard to understand why: In the majority of U.S. states today, “truck driver” is the Number One occupation for most workers. In fact, Texas tops the list with 172,000 people employed as truck drivers followed by California and Pennsylvania, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics and other sources.

And while the slow creep of automation and globalization took many of the higher-paying manufacturing jobs away from many Americans, trucking, as an occupation, seemed safe from any similar threat — until suddenly it wasn’t. If computers can drive a truck down a crowded highway, people asked themselves, was there any job that was safe from unending technological assimilation?

According to 2019 statistics from the U.S. Bureau of Labor, there are around 900,000 Class 8 truck drivers working in the United States today. It is a job that is overwhelmingly filled by white males with high school educations. Pay scales for drivers average around $25 an hour, or about $45,000 per year. And the 2020 U.S. Census reported that the largest groups of drivers are in the 45 to 65 years old age range.

As noted in a previous blog in this series, truck drivers do far more than simply guide a vehicle down the road. In many companies, they act as a salesperson or human contact between the company shipping goods and the customer who ordered it. They often are called upon to solve problems, or simply maintain good relations with a client. Drivers also serve as security guards, monitoring valuable cargo, as well as performing numerous pre-trip and post-trip inspections and dealing with roadside emergencies or simply being the “face” of large, widely-known shipping companies. And it goes without saying that these are roles that always will have to be filled by humans.

Still, given the likely timeline of autonomous technology and the fact that the largest portion of current truck drivers will begin retiring in large numbers about the same time the technology comes to market, it seems likely that a high number of those empty driver seats will be filled by autonomous vehicle systems. This is a highly complex issue — and one with very serious aspects that society is soon going to have to grapple with. Robots don’t pay taxes or buy groceries, clothes, phones, new television sets or eat in restaurants, etc., for one thing.

But, in the near-term future I don’t believe the threat is as severe as some alarmists have made it out to be. In fact, I am of the opinion that there will be a need for human truck drivers for many years to come. And, in fact, that autonomous vehicle systems actually may allow skilled human drivers to demand a premium wage for their skills.

No new technology springs into being fully formed. The first airplanes, for example, did well to fly across a cow pasture. Jetting off to London for a long weekend was decades away when the first rickety flying machines took to the air. And it will likely be much the same for autonomous trucks.

For many years to come, there will be a wide array of specialty hauling applications that will absolutely require having a human onboard and in control of the vehicle at all times.
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.

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