



A DRIVERLESS FUTURE

Regardless of what you've heard, there will be truck drivers for a very long time to come.

Transformative technologies don't come along all that often these days. We've reached a point where we live lives filled with countless, almost daily, incremental technological breakthroughs. We shoot billionaires and movie stars into orbit and people just shrug their shoulders. The really big breakthroughs — landing men on Mars seems to be the next Big One on the docket — are extremely difficult to execute and a long time coming.

In terms of our everyday lives, however, autonomous freight delivery, in my opinion, has the potential to be a massively transformative breakthrough. And, as I've often noted in my NACFE Autonomous Blogs and elsewhere, it will be one of those now-rare breakthroughs that catches everyone's attention, changes everyone's lives and transforms both our economy and a transportation system/network that has been in place since the end of World War II.

"Transformative" also can be interpreted to mean "disruptive," of course. And there will be some fallout from shifting to a new — and dramatically different — means of transporting freight without human drivers. And one of the most obvious disruptions is the fact that robots eventually will replace human drivers in trucks delivering freight all over North America. And the obvious question is, what will all those truck drivers do for a living?

First off, let me be clear on this point: We will have truck drivers driving trucks in this country and around the world for many, many, many years to come. Moreover, I would argue that as autonomous technology gains a foothold in our logistics networks, those jobs will actually become more valuable and demand higher pay than most driving jobs command today.

Let me explain.

First off, the deployment of autonomous trucks is going to occur at a slow, incremental pace in highly selective applications in carefully designated geographic regions. In all likelihood, the first large-scale deployments of long-haul autonomous deliveries will be in the American Southwest running routes from, say, Phoenix to Dallas.

The Southwestern deserts are ideal for autonomous truck testing today (that's why the bulk of the developers are based out there). The weather isn't as big a problem for the sensor arrays on the trucks (very little snow and ice, for example). And the runs themselves tend to be long, relatively straight and — honestly — mind-numbingly dull.

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So autonomous tech developers likely will introduce their products into that specific freight market first and then begin another long, slow, incremental learning and development curve where they flesh out their technology and begin to work on expanding its capabilities into other, more difficult markets — the Southeast, Great Plains in winter, the mountainous Northwest and, eventually, the Northeastern states.

But all of this will be years in coming because safety is — and will remain — the dominant guiding design



and introduction principle for all the OEMs and tech companies developing and launching self-driving trucks.

At this point, good, old-fashioned, Capitalism kicks in. As easier, less intense routes start to be taken over by autonomous trucks, skilled human drivers will be able to command more money for taking on the significantly more difficult routes untouched by robotic trucks.

But even as autonomous technology expands out of its likely launching point in the Southwest into other parts of North America, there always will be a demand for skilled human drivers. After all, it's going to be a long time before anyone is comfortable sending a wide load, or a trailer full of Ferraris out on a long trip without a human driver behind the steering wheel to both drive and act as a security guard. Looking at in this light, I can see a time when human drivers command high wages for performing extremely difficult driving jobs, while robotic trucks handle the boring, less-demanding runs across open countryside.

I've said for years that there always will be a certain segment of our population who feel like they were born to drive big, powerful, tractor-trailers as professional drivers. Autonomous trucks certainly will add much-needed capacity and efficiency to our stretched and strained logistics network. But the people who are drawn to a life on the road behind the wheel of a big rig will be able to find good work in this industry for years to come — long after the first robot trucks make their introductory runs across the vast American deserts.

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.



The North American Council for Freight Efficiency (NACFE) works to drive the development and adoption of efficiency enhancing, environmentally beneficial, and cost-effective technologies, services, and operational practices in the movement of goods across North America. NACFE provides independent, unbiased research, including Confidence Reports on available technologies and Guidance Reports on emerging ones, which highlight the benefits and consequences of each, and deliver decision-making tools for fleets, manufacturers, and others. NACFE partners with Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI) on a variety of projects including the Run on Less fuel efficiency demonstration series, electric trucks, emissions reductions, and low-carbon supply chains. www.nacfe.org