



## MISSION CONTROL

*A NASA-like future may await the next generation of truck drivers.*

**F**irst, let me be clear on one crucial point: Truck drivers aren't going anywhere for a very, very, very long time.

It's true that autonomous truck technology currently shows vast potential for transforming the trucking industry. But, the experts say, autonomous technology will move into trucking in carefully monitored, incremental steps over a long period of time. And even when the technology is fully mature and deployed in every conceivable North American market, men and women still will be able to find good-paying jobs driving trucks.

On the other hand, there also will be a significant number of autonomous trucks in long-haul and regional/super regional applications by that point in time. And no matter how good autonomous technology is, these trucks still are going to need a significant amount of human supervision to function at their highest possible capabilities and to deal with emergencies when they inevitably occur.

So will truck drivers transition to being "truck supervisors?"

It seems highly likely.

There already are multiple examples of what a future job as a truck supervisor might look like. Several autonomous truck developers have "mission control" centers where a supervisor monitors the progress of a test vehicle (with human drivers also onboard) as it makes test runs. These specialists are there to track the telemetry coming off the truck, to generally monitor its progress, to make certain it's operating safely at all times, and

to assist with any emergencies or breakdowns that occur.

In future fleet operations, a similar job seems very likely. Vehicle supervisors likely would work an eight-hour shift in a modern, comfortable, command center, with a set number of trucks — say, 10 to 20 vehicles — under their supervision. During the day, these mission control specialists would be responsible for everything truck drivers do today — except physically being onboard and controlling the vehicle.

**“ In the future, it is likely that drivers will become truck supervisors who will track the telemetry coming off the truck, to generally monitor its progress, to make certain it's operating safely at all times, and to assist with any emergencies or breakdowns that occur.**

I suspect their primary responsibility will be to guarantee cargo deliveries to shippers, and then arrange and schedule the next load the truck will haul. It's true that some futurists say that trucks will handle this part of their routes autonomously with freight "Uberization" technology. But I disagree. Trucking is still very much a relationship business and will remain so for a long time to come. I just



can't see fleets handing off such a vital aspect of their business and customer service to an app — at least not initially.

Other aspects of a fleet mission control specialist job would include working breakdowns when they occur, dealing with emergency or law enforcement officials, rerouting trucks due to inclement weather or accidents and — of course — scheduling maintenance at timely intervals.

Freightliner first proposed a “logistics manager” job of this sort back in 2015 when it debuted its Inspiration autonomous truck. And, at the time, Daimler experts theorized that these jobs would be held by drivers onboard an autonomous truck as it cruised down the highway.

But I think we've already moved past that specific part of that vision. In my estimation, there won't be a need for a human minder onboard an autonomous truck. So, my prediction is that these fleet mission control jobs will be a standard 40 a week job, with the worker logging off and going home to his or her family every evening. Moreover, it is entirely

possible that this job could easily be done remotely, from home, with an everyday laptop computer.

It will be many years before even the most advanced autonomous truck can adequately deal with every aspect of business, safety, law enforcement and maintenance the way a human driver can. There will be jobs for drivers in trucking for many years to come. In fact, it's possible that younger people may start behind the wheel in local, urban and regional routes, and then transition to mission control jobs as they gain invaluable experience and get older. I wouldn't be at all surprised if this model becomes a standard career path for fleet drivers in the near future.

**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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