Most of the talk regarding autonomous truck technology has predictably centered on the fleet side of the business. But what about shippers? Will they embrace self-driving trucks, as well?

It’s only natural that the bulk of discussion, debate and even concerns about autonomous truck technology has focused on the fleet aspect of the industry. This is understandable given that fleets will bear the brunt of disruption in the early days of autonomous truck deployment in North America in terms of operational changes that will stretch from the maintenance department to the front office to the driver’s seat.

But what about the shipper side of the freight business? How will the customers who actually contract with fleets to move goods feel about the onset of autonomous trucks hauling freight? Their collective take is important. Because shippers have a lot of power when it comes to the pull-through effects of new technology in trucking. Look no further than “green” companies pressing the adoption of zero-emissions delivery trucks and vans as the commercial vehicle electrification trend charges up nationwide today.

From a very high view, it seems that shippers will have an overall favorable view of autonomous trucks. After all, shippers are primarily interested in moving goods as cheaply, safely and as efficiently (i.e., as quickly) as possible. And autonomous truck technology promises to do all of those things in ways that human drivers, constrained by Hours-of-Service Regulations cannot. Moving goods essentially around the clock will be a windfall for shippers, who are obviously interested in getting their goods to consumers as quickly as possible.

Moreover, studies conducted by autonomous tech developers and OEMs indicate that autonomous trucks will be safer, burn less fuel, emit fewer emissions and require less maintenance than today’s human-driven trucks do. If these predictions prove out, these features will be a win-win-win for shippers and fleets, alike. In the long run, it seems logical to assume that autonomous trucks may reduce costs for many shippers as these efficiencies spread across the industry as a whole.

On the other hand, autonomous trucks will be such a dramatically transformative technology in our society that shippers will have to bear considerable costs and rethink some long-held operational procedures of their own in order to take advantage of the efficiencies offered by self-driving trucks.

To date most of the talk about autonomous trucks has centered on carriers. However, shippers will play a key role in how quickly the technology is accepted.

For starters, the process of scheduling, docking and loading/unloading trucks at factories and distribution centers is going to have to be completely rethought and reworked. Any job currently handled by a truck driver picking up a load will now have to be handled by someone at the shipping facility — whether it’s simply bumping
docks, securing the load or visually inspecting the truck itself to make sure it’s ready to hit the road. Will these chores be handled by the shipper? Will third-party logistics companies do this work? Or will fleets actually have representatives on hand at their customers’ facilities to take care of these critical issues? All of this remains to be seen.

Another area that will require attention from shippers is cargo security — particularly in the case of valuable or sensitive freight. In these instances, shippers may decide to pay extra for human-driven trucks to add another layer of security to the shipment. Or, perhaps they will want to provide that security themselves, or contract with a third-party to make sure there are no problems during shipment.

None of these problems are insurmountable, of course. However, they will require some new thinking. And new jobs, or new business opportunities may arise to deal with them effectively.

It seems likely that given these various shipper demands, there will be a mix of both computer- and human-driven trucks on the road until technology and the marketplace sort all of these details out.

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**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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