

As Seen In TIA's 3PL Perspectives – September 2018

The Big Lie? Why Driverless Trucks Won't Happen in Your Lifetime

The likelihood of driverless trucks making a meaningful trucking impact in our lifetime is close to zero. Yes, that's my opinion, and I'm sticking with it. I propose investor losses will be widespread and there will be few winners to speak of in the fallout of the driverless truck craze.

Look, I love grandiose dreams of automation and scientific discovery, like most of us do. But, I also appreciate reality, and reality pays the bills. For those of you reading this, I encourage your written responses if you disagree. In fact, I'll follow up this article with your replies, especially if your arguments can persuade me that Schwarzenegger *Terminator* type commercial truck technology will be taking over the roads before I'm six feet under (which I hope is 40+ years from now).

So, in no particular order, here are 16 reasons why driverless trucks just aren't in the cards anytime soon:

- **Quality Drivers Will Resign.** The moment large carriers announce that driverless trucks are being introduced, all self-respecting drivers will walk away. Why stay with a carrier who is working hard to put you out of work? Any carrier trying this tactic will find themselves with no drivers left to haul their customer freight.
- **Unions Will Protect Drivers.** Love them or hate them, the driver unions will be the first to organize mass protests and strikes. The pressure will put driverless trucks on the shelf.
- **Government Regulations.** A driverless truck still needs to meet all the requirements for weight, inspections, paperwork, and cargo handling that today's trucks abide by. That means these driverless trucks need to go through weigh stations, get pulled over, open the trailer, hand authorities the relevant paperwork and solve DOT regulation issues as they occur. Impossible.
- **Issues on The Route.** What happens when there is an issue on route? Who handles breakdowns? Changes a tire? Pulls off safely? Navigates a gas station?

Fills up gas? Recharges the electric battery (assuming no gasoline is needed)?
Moves the cargo to accommodate an extra pickup or delivery?

- **Driving Conditions Change Rapidly.** Just think of the things that change on the road: rain storms, flooding, standing water, high winds, snow, ice, road debris, accidents, road work, detours, emergency vehicles, wild animals, wild children! Today's drivers are perfectly equipped to make responsible decisions when facing uncontrollable conditions. How will driverless trucks "see" and handle the thousands of changes in driving or road conditions?
- **We Already Have A Driverless Truck.** It's called a train. Intermodal freight moves work perfectly well for most needs.
- **Pickups and Deliveries Are Messy.** Any driver that's ever navigated a loading or unloading facility can testify that they can be messy, cluttered, tight, difficult, unpredictable, and require a lot of human communication... by drivers.
- **Cargo and Accident Claims.** Who's responsible and how are they handled? There is no driver to talk to an inspections officer or the police. No driver to help minimize and report a cargo claim. No driver to minimize accidents after they occur by safely pulling to the side or contacting the highway patrol and helping other drivers that may be involved.
- **Public Outcry After an Accident.** The first time a driverless truck ends up in a devastating accident with fatalities, everybody from government and the general public will demand they are shut down until "all issues are resolved". We all know that "all issues" will never, ever, be resolved.
- **What About Fueling?** Long-haul runs will require fill ups. Yes, tank sizes can be increased, but that adds weight, meaning less cargo can be hauled. Electric trucks do not solve this because the sheer weight of the batteries just to run 300 miles could cut cargo weight by 25% or more. So, even if the issue of weight is resolved, who fills the gas tank en-route? Who plugs the truck in to charge the batteries?
- **Cargo Thieves Will Love Driverless Seats.** We all know that cargo theft occurs today, but can you imagine how much fun organized cargo thieves will have when there is no driver?

- **Dangerous? You Bet.** Not only will these driverless trucks suffer simple computer “glitches” and cause havoc by stopping in the middle of a road, making left turns instead of right and going to the wrong locations, but hackers will also love them. They could be told to go to an alternative delivery location to be conveniently unloaded by thieves, or worse, they could be reprogrammed to run into a busy downtown area at full speed with the brakes disengaged.
- **More Drivers May Be Needed, Not Less.** Assuming that pickup(s) and delivery(s) will be handled by human drivers, as many promoters of driverless trucks are saying, this means the drivers needed for a load just increased from 1 driver to 2 drivers per load (one on each end).
- **Delivery Times Will Slow Down.** These hulking rigs would move as slowly as a sleepy snail. They will be set to run at 10% under the speed limit (for liability reasons) and they will navigate turns like a blind elephant. Transitioning to or from the “driverless” part of the journey will necessitate having trucks sit idle for hours or days waiting for a human to take over. Time is money.
- **Drivers Monitor and Perform A Myriad of Auxiliary Functions.** Who will secure freight if it shifts during transport? Who will help load incompatibly sized or overweight freight? Who monitors and verifies reefer fuel, load temperatures, trailer brakes and lighting? Who verifies the reefer is running properly and knows what to do to save a load of produce if there’s an issue?
- **Few Loads Are “Trouble Free”.** In-transit changes are common and must be expected. The pickup or delivery order may change, weather issues are common, and shipper or receiver changes of various kinds are common. Anyone who has been in this business for a New York minute knows that issues occur frequently, and often it’s an experienced driver that helps solve the issue or executes the orders handed out by dispatch, the shipper or the receiver.

Think about this for a moment. Why haven’t airlines done away with pilots? It’s certainly a much easier problem to solve than driverless trucks because airplanes can essentially take off, fly, and land themselves. They also don’t need to refill in the air and there isn’t a lot for them to hit up there. Yet, almost every commercial flight in the world has between 2 and 4 pilots on-board and that isn’t changing any time soon.

Trust me, driverless trucks aren't even close to becoming a reality. Building some utopian driverless truck future without building a bridge to connect it to how we all work today is wasted energy, and frankly, futile. Will they exist in 50 years? 100 years? *Maybe*. But first, we have to collectively get from how we work today to how we'll all work tomorrow. That comes one inch at a time, and it takes decades, if not a lifetime.

So, just like the NASA program invented things for us like memory foam, freeze dried food, wireless headsets, the dust buster, home insulation, LED lighting, scratch resistant lenses, and CT scans, perhaps all this spending on driverless truck research will, at least one day, provide us with less road rage and perhaps a better electric car battery.

Tim Higham is the president and CEO of AscendTMS, the world's most widely used Transportation Management Software (TMS). Learn more at: www.TheFreeTMS.com