

Autonomous trucks could put drivers' jobs at risk

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Hagerstown, MD - Autonomous trucks could be a potential risk for truck drivers. According to [PBS economics](#) correspondent Paul Solman, the rise of autonomous trucks could either make or break the careers of those in the trucking industry.

Automotive companies such as General Motors and Volvo have been seeing greater success in developing autonomous trucks in the past few years. Recently, [Volvo](#) employed a fleet of its self-driving trucks to a mining company to deliver limestone down from the mine to a nearby port. For the trucking industry, these successes have meant a potential solution could be near for the industry's low employment rate.

Approximately 500,000 [reefer trailers](#) are currently in operation on U.S. roads and [94 percent of hazmat shipments](#) are done daily by truck, yet the trucking industry is in need of at least [51,000 more drivers](#) than it currently has.

The goal for autonomous trucks has been to bridge this significant gap and to make the roads safer for drivers. Up to 6 million [car accidents](#) occur in the U.S. every year and nearly [77 percent](#) of vehicles on U.S. roads are in need of some type of maintenance. "Along with many hazards," said Solman, "something like a quarter of all work-related fatalities are truckers."

This high-risk environment accompanied by many hours away from home and lower salaries, Solman says, are just a few of the reasons why the trucking industry has a chronic shortage. Yet, autonomous trucks may do more than fill the 51,000 trucking gap. Some truckers such as long-haul operator Finn Murphy believe self-driving trucks may be the end to the trucking occupation altogether.

"They have got their eyes on the prize. Get rid of drivers," said Murphy in an interview with Solman. "I think it's going to happen within the next three years or so, where you have a level-four autonomous vehicle, which means it doesn't need a human operator."

There are approximately 2 million commercial truck drivers currently employed in the United States. Many of these truck drivers are older men without college degrees.

While college degrees aren't necessary for every industry, jobs that don't require them are at greater risk for automation. In fact, up to [73 million](#) U.S. jobs are at risk of being replaced by robots.

Although humans will still be needed as operators and conductors, the number of people necessary to perform those jobs is limited. This puts into question the future of many working-class Americans.

For now, automated features are still being developed to make trucks safer and more fuel-efficient. Companies like Volvo are still piloting their self-driving trucks.

Steve Nadig, the head mechatronics engineer at Daimler Trucks North America, says that platooning is expected to be more prevalent in the next three years. Platooning in the case of automated trucking is when automated trucks follow a driver-led truck. It allows multiple trucks to be electronically linked together.

In five to 10 years, automation in the trucking industry could be far more advanced, threatening the jobs of many truckers.

"[As] automated features come online, it's going to allow the industry to use less-skilled drivers, which will extend a long-term trend in trucking wages where drivers are earning less, working longer hours, staying out on the road for long period of time," said sociologist Steve Viscelli.

Murphy says automation and job replacement have been an issue for years. The question, he says, is how the U.S. plans to help its workers.

"[The] average age [of a truck driver] is 55," Murphy said. "These guys are going to be computer programmers when they didn't finish High School? I doubt it."

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