



Autonomous Vehicles: A Needed Fuel To Trucking Jobs?

Insights

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The widespread concern that thousands of trucking jobs will be eliminated by the advent of Autonomous Vehicles (“AV”) has been called into question by a new workforce study from the American Center for Mobility (“ACM”) which found that self-driving technology will support, not displace, truck drivers.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 3.5 million Americans make their living as professional truck drivers in the United States. The American Trucking Association projects that the industry will suffer from a shortage of over 174,000 truck drivers by 2026 and that over the next decade, the trucking industry will need to hire roughly 898,000 new drivers.

With this background, the study commissioned by the ACM and led by Michigan State University and supported by Texas A&M Transportation Institute (“TTI”) found that AVs will support the trucking industry and not displace jobs. Specifically, the study provides that due to the existing truck driver worker shortages, as well as the belief that the transition to automated driving is anticipated to be gradual with a significant number of AVs being deployed in the latter half of 2020s, AVs in the foreseeable future could supplement rather than substitute “vehicle operators, even at the highest level of automation, allowing freight transportation and other delivery service companies to address an existing labor shortage.”

This study stands in contrast to prior predictions noting that as many as 25,000 trucker jobs could be eliminated per month as autonomous vehicle technology peaks. However, proponents of the ACM study note that “Automated technology could incorrectly be viewed as a change that will eliminate driving jobs; however, the more nuanced assessment is that over the next decade the innovation will foster broader-societal changes resulting in shifts in the workplace and workforce demand.” Additionally, Sheila Cotton, Professor at Michigan State University and ACM study lead researcher says that “this level of advanced technology has the potential to lead to the creation of thousands of new jobs in the engineering, data analysis, cybersecurity, and vehicle monitoring areas. Based on the data collected from industry experts during the study, there is already a significant demand in several of these areas related to AVs.”

The study suggests that as AV technology progresses the job function of drivers will transition to new roles. Christopher Poe, Assistant Director for Connected and Automated Transportation Strategy says that “it will be important to define, develop, and deliver targeted training for the

workforce.” Specifically, the study points out that “once highly automated vehicles do reach a high level of penetration, truck operators will need to understand how to monitor software and hardware used to automate the driving function and how to make appropriate use of advanced safety systems in these vehicles.” The study notes that for AVs to support rather than displace jobs in the trucking industry, employers should focus on: (1) identifying the specific skillsets needed by the automotive and technology industries to facilitate the creation and adoption of AVs, and (2) establishing rapid coursework and training for current employees that meets those specific needs.

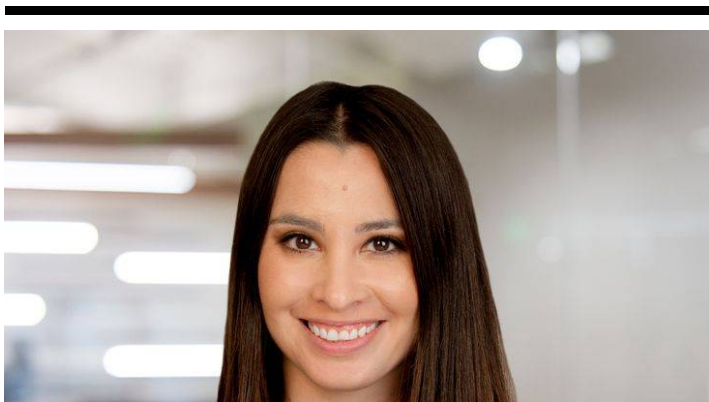
What Does This Mean to Employers?

Although the ACM study brings respite to the trucking industry, it is important to note that the study is limited to the effects of AVs in this industry for the next decade. As such, in the long-term, it is likely that AVs may displace truck drivers. In the meantime, however, employers should focus on providing the skills and training to truck drivers to be able to transition to more specialized jobs, such as vehicle monitoring (also see recent blog post, [“The 5 Paths Available to Calm the Fears of Employees Worried About Losing Their Jobs to Automation”](#)). Employers should be conscious in the manner in which coursework and training on AVs and their operation is offered to employees. Such training and coursework should be offered in a non-discriminatory manner with a focus on employers not providing such training in a manner that leads to disparate treatment claims. Making such coursework or training available only to some but not all employees or the manner in which such training is offered may lead to discrimination and failure to promote claims.

Additionally, with the advent AV technology, employers will need to reconsider whether driving is an “essential function of the job” when providing accommodations and engaging in the interactive process with disabled employees. Employees who are unable to drive due to a medical condition or who are prohibited from driving due to religious reasons, may turn to AVs as accommodations. Whether or not the provision of an AV would constitute an undue burden on the employer will likely be an issue of contention, specifically where the employer provides AVs to other employees.

If you have any questions about how to comply with the law on discrimination and reasonable accommodations, please contact any member of our [Employment Discrimination and Harassment Practice Group](#) or your Fisher Phillips attorney.

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