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Danger looms on the road with technology, trucking

The shortage of truck drivers in the United States is well known. One need look no further than the highways in the United States that are lined with billboards paid for by trucking companies that seek drivers and offer sign-on bonuses.

Where a truck driver's fitness to operate a semitrailer tractor truck is questioned or his driving record is ample with driving infractions, an issue at every trucking safety director's deposition should be whether the motor carrier was experiencing a shortage of drivers at the time. A compelling closing argument that would be difficult for a trucking company to contest would be that the trucking company ignored a driver's deficient past just to keep a route serviced.

Simply put, semis without drivers do not produce revenue.

The subject of a Chicago Tribune article ("See that Semi Next to You on the Jane Addams Tollway? Starting Today its Driver May Be Keeping Hands off the Wheel," Mary Wisniewski, Nov. 25, 2019) reported that Illinois-based Autobon AI, a technology company, has introduced early stage technology in hopes of replacing a truck's wind visor with accident avoidance technology.

A truck's wind visor is located just above a truck's windshield. The visor would be equipped with multidirectional cameras, GPS and other sensors to allow the truck to

monitor road conditions and to issue warning alerts as well as to respond to them.

The company's goal is not to sell trucks but to sell this specific equipment to be installed in trucks. A unit price has not been established. The long-term goal of this area of technology would be to develop driverless trucks.

This goal is one that the trucking and technology industry experts believe still is decades away but a goal that could solve the country's increasing truck driver shortage. Self-driving technology has already been implemented in personal vehicles.

For example, the 2019 BMW X7 has lane-assistance technology where the steering wheel automatically turns without the driver assisting it when the vehicle recognizes it is drifting into an adjacent lane.

Unfortunately, this type of technology has been fast-tracked and cannot be trusted.

For example, in March 2018, a self-driving vehicle being tested by the rideshare industry hit and killed a woman in Phoenix. Immediately, the ride-share industry's self-driving "testing" on public roads came to a halt.

Autobon AI's wind visor is not meant to replace truck drivers but to provide them with assistive technology that would trigger automatic braking or automatic steering if a driver failed to react to a road hazard. The technology is well intended to reduce the number of trucking accidents.



JACK J. CASCIATO

JACK J. CASCIATO is a partner at Clifford Law Offices that focuses his practice on construction cases, trucking accidents and medical-malpractice actions.

Human error has been found to be the cause of 90% of fatal truck wrecks. However, there is a contraposition. Certainly, the most dangerous vehicles on our roads are 80,000-pound semitrailer tractor trucks driven by fatigued or inattentive truck drivers.

There is a significant difference between driving technology that alerts drivers of road conditions versus technology that automatically operates a vehicle. An issue with the latter that cannot be overlooked is that this technology could lead truck drivers to become even more inattentive, believing the technology will brake or steer the truck from a hazard.

It is not unfathomable for a truck driver to believe that if a driver takes his eyes off the road for 10 seconds to look for a personal item is now safe

because the technology will automatically brake his truck to avoid a detected hazard.

A truck traveling at 60 mph covers 880 feet of road in 10 seconds or 2.94 football fields. The trucking industry needs to recognize that this technology could compel this sort of distracted behavior or compel a tired driver to refrain from stopping at a rest area, believing the technology would save him if he were to doze off.

It is without question that the transportation and technology industry is set on continuing to develop driverless and driver-assistance technology. As this technology is continually developed and improved, it is fair to believe that over the years it could further be implemented in trucks, however, with technology failures to be certain.

Everyone who has had an issue with their iPhone, Nest or Wi-Fi knows that technology does not always work. One doesn't need to visit the Oracle of Delphi to know that future driver technology could also experience failure, failures that sadly could lead to fatal or serious truck wrecks given the size and speed of these vehicles.

Courts throughout the United States certainly can expect future trucking lawsuits to name truck drivers and their motor carriers as defendants as well as to include product-liability counts, whether premised on malfunction or design, against technology companies set on fast-tracking this technology.