

Toyota banks on mobility technology for future growth

September 28 2021, by Yuri Kageyama



This 2018, photo provided by Renovo/Woven Planet shows Renovo's automated driving test fleet in Calif. Japanese automaker Toyota is revving up acquisitions in mobility technology, adding Renovo Motors Inc., a Silicon Valley software developer, to its Woven Planet team, which is working on automated driving. Credit: Renovo/Woven Planet via AP

Japanese automaker Toyota is revving up acquisitions in mobility technology, adding Renovo Motors Inc., a Silicon Valley software developer, to its Woven Planet team, which is working on automated driving.

The addition, announced Tuesday, follows the purchase earlier this year of CARMERA Inc., a U.S. venture that specializes in sophisticated road mapping updates made cheaper and faster by using crowdsourced information obtained from millions of net-connected Toyota vehicles.

The company has not disclosed the value of either deal.

Renovo develops automotive operating systems, which Toyota Motor Corp. sees as essential for developing programmed vehicles so it can transition to what it calls "a mobility company" that includes more than just cars. Renovo means "new life" or "renew" in Latin.

Renovo's data-management platform enables automakers to continuously learn from their vehicles, using a so-called "complete loop" approach, so vehicles can become safer and more reliable.

"In Woven Planet and Toyota, we've found partners committed to doing exactly what we have always wanted to do, on a global scale, and that's a great feeling," said Renovo Chief Executive Christopher Heiser.

Woven Planet, Toyota's wholly owned subsidiary, earlier acquired San Francisco-based Lyft's self-driving division Level 5. Chief Executive James Kuffner said more acquisitions may be coming.



In this Jan. 30, 2019, file photo, Toyota Research Institute Advanced Development (TRI-AD) CEO James Kuffner speaks during a workshop in Tokyo. Japanese automaker Toyota is revving up acquisitions in mobility technology, adding Renovo Motors Inc., a Silicon Valley software developer, to its Woven Planet team, which is working on automated driving. Woven Planet, Toyota's wholly owned subsidiary, has also earlier acquired San Francisco-based Lyft's self-driving division Level 5. Kuffner said more acquisitions may be coming. Credit: AP Photo/Koji Sasahara, File

"The big picture is Woven Planet creating a 'dream team' of software and vehicle engineering people globally to deliver the world's programmable and safest mobility. That's the context," he told The Associated Press.

"Always as an executive, you are trying to balance the speed and the growth versus the focus and maintaining company culture. The larger you grow, the risk is that you slow down," he said.

"We will keep growing, but we are going to be careful."

Kuffner declined comment on a recent accident at the Paralympics Athletes Village in Tokyo, when a Toyota bus equipped with automated driving technology bumped into a Paralympian athlete and injured him. The accident is still under investigation and may be an example of the kinds of hurdles to be overcome before the technology can be widely used on public roads.

The bus isn't approved for widespread use on public roads but was shuttling athletes and officials at the Village during the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics. A human driver was on the vehicle as a safety precaution. President Akio Toyoda has apologized and promised improvements.



This 2019, photo provided by Renovo/Woven Planet shows Renovo Chief Executive Christopher Heiser. in Campbell, Calif. Japanese automaker Toyota is revving up acquisitions in mobility technology, adding Renovo Motors Inc., a Silicon Valley software developer, to its Woven Planet team, which is working on automated driving. Credit: Daniel Austin Hoherd/Renovo via AP

Major automakers are working on various driving technologies. Vehicles of electric car maker Tesla Inc. equipped with its Autopilot driver-assist system have been in several crashes, including fatal ones, in the U.S.

Some analysts say companies should avoid suggesting cars sold today with such technology can safely drive themselves.

Woven Planet, known previously as Toyota Research Institute-Advanced Development, is working on technologies spanning "smart" cities, green energy and mobility solutions and robotics that are meant to eventually become consumer products, said Kuffner, who has worked on Google's self-driving cars and robots at Boston Dynamics.

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