

Gatik CEO sees future of autonomous trucking in short hauls

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This photo provided by Gatik, shows Gautam Narang, CEO and co-founder of Gatik. Late last year, autonomous vehicle startup Gatik announced a big step-- it eliminated the safety operator from behind the wheel of two self-driving trucks

as part of its partnership with discounter Walmart. Now, the Palo Alto, California company is looking to speed up the process of fully driverless truck operations in the next few years. Credit: Gatik via AP

Late last year, autonomous vehicle startup Gatik announced a big step: It eliminated the safety operator from behind the wheel of two self-driving trucks as part of its partnership with discounter Walmart. Now, the Mountain View, California firm is looking to speed up the process of fully driverless truck operations in the next few years.

The company stands apart from other autonomous delivery companies because it doesn't haul goods directly to shoppers. Rather, its autonomous trucks deliver groceries and other goods from big distribution centers to retail locations on fixed, repetitive, short distances, a critical link to the delivery system. For example, Gatik's two fully autonomous driving vehicles for Walmart haul goods on a fixed 7.1 mile (11.4 kilometers) route in Bentonville, Arkansas, where Walmart's headquarters is based.

Gatik, which operates a fleet of 25 autonomous trucks, has pilot programs with Walmart in Louisiana and Arkansas as well as Loblaw Cos. in Ontario, Canada. Last year, it expanded into Texas with fresh sources of capital. It has developed proprietary software that is a hybrid between classic robotics and machine learning-based algorithms, and its trucks feature sensors with a 360 degree view.

Among its rivals are TuSimple, which did a fully autonomous test of a semitruck on a freeway in Arizona last year. There's also Aurora, which is working with Volvo on an autonomous truck, and Alphabet Inc.'s Waymo, which is working with UPS.

The pandemic-induced online spending surge only accelerated interest in autonomous trucking. It's put more pressure on retailers to deliver goods in a few hours and has pushed more stores to place small distribution hubs around its stores, instead of relying on one big distribution center located several hours away. Autonomous trucking can also help ease the trucking shortage made worse by the pandemic and cut logistic costs by up to 35%, says Gatik CEO and co-founder Gautam Narang.

The Associated Press recently interviewed Narang about the future of autonomous driving and the regulatory environment. The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Q. How's it going?

A. Over the last few months, we have been operating these trucks seven days a week, multiple times daily. A lot of learnings. Obviously over the last few months, the algorithms have gotten even better. In the early days, we did have a safety passenger and a chase vehicle. We still are operating in that fashion today. But we are now even more confident that in the next few months, we will be able to operate these trucks without anyone in the passenger seat and without a chase vehicle as well.

Q. How much has the trucking shortage spurred interest in autonomous trucks?

A. There's a need for over 60,000 drivers in the local trucking space. That was last year. That number is expected to grow north of 160,000 by the end of this decade. And these are conservative estimates. We can address this growing shortage by adopting automation. What we have seen is all the big companies are now very open to adopting a solution. So this is inevitable. The biggest question that we're trying to answer is how quickly can we get the solution out at scale in a safe manner and what applications of autonomy would be automated first.

Q. So how fast can you scale it?

A. In Arkansas, we started our commercial operations in the summer of 2019. It took us about 24 months to get to a point where we could take the driver out from behind the steering wheel and operate in a repeated fashion. That time to learn is reducing as we get more data, more experience and our technology gets better. So that window where the driver can be taken out safely is shrinking.

Q. Will you concentrate on short-haul delivery in the future?

A. This is going to be the focus for the next few years, but it's easier for us to move upstream and handle longer routes. So today as a company, we can handle routes that are anywhere from single digit miles all the way up to 300 miles (483 kilometers). We do drive in complex urban scenarios and highway driving as well. So driving in a highway scenario is very much possible.

Q. How do you address safety concerns?

A. When you talk about connecting point A to point B, we do take the safest possible routes. We avoid making multiple lane changes. We can avoid schools, hospitals, fire stations. So all of that is fair game. As long as we move those orders from point A to point B within that delivery window. And that has been our focus from day one. Safety is front and center to everything that we do. We're not rushing to anything. It's important for us to do it right.

Q. What's the regulatory landscape look like?

A. There are 21 states in the U.S. that allow for driverless operation. That means we can take a driver out in 21 states in the U.S. and commercialize ourselves. But for long-haul trucking, they have to work

with multiple states to make that long-haul trip possible because today all the policies are still very much at the state level. There's no federal policy today. Obviously, there are bills that are being voted upon that we expect to come through in the next few years. But for now, all the policies in the space are still very much at the state level. So it benefits us a lot.

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