



Phantom Auto – Teleoperation For Logistics, Forklifts, Sidewalk Robots (And Cool Future Jobs)

By Lynn Walford - July 21, 2021



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Californian start-up Phantom Auto offers teleoperation services for forklifts, logistics, sidewalk robots and other vehicles. The company is currently focusing on logistics through what it calls tele-driving, tele-assistance and tele-monitoring.

Phantom Auto execs Elliot Katz, Chief Business Officer, and Nils Alstad, VP Product and Customer Success, give insight into how the company is tele-helping logistics and mobility globally.

“We have 70 employees. They are remotely monitoring, assisting and driving unmanned vehicles operating up to thousands of miles away. Our customers can deploy remote monitoring in live working environments. We have an active pilot with GEODIS in logistics, with forklifts in Europe that can be remotely operated in Silicon Valley,” says Katz.

Teleoperation is important in logistics when there is a dynamic environment, things can change quickly. When action needs to be taken, Phantom Auto works well for edge-case scenarios. For example, say there is a piece of paper or a plastic bag on the floor. Then a human can remotely determine what to do and assist the vehicles.

“We have live human brains to make the decisions. In some cases, the operator could draw a path or operate the vehicle remotely. Phantom Auto allows operators to operate live with real-time video for monitoring. We are working in the vehicle space. Now we are especially working in logistics, yard travel and delivery robots,” explains Katz.

“We believe that the logistics space can be worked on right now. While for passenger vehicles, will take volumes of time to work,” he adds.

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The main reason for remotely operating a forklift is safety. 1 in 10 forklift operators are in an accident. When operated remotely, the risk decreases greatly, empowering employers and the employees. Additionally, in 2020 the health risk was high due to Covid-19 operators did not want to be around other people.

Plus customers, need to expand the labour pool. Companies are having a hard time finding and retaining operators on the job. When employees can work remotely, it becomes more desirable. Employers can hire people from all over, people with disabilities and people from diverse backgrounds. Another benefit of remote operation is that remote operators can digitally switch from a facility in New York to another facility as needed in real-time, explains Katz.

“Our tech is unique. We are human-centric. We are making jobs better while making it better for the employees,” says Katz, “We are doing Zoom for physical work right now.”



“During the pandemic, we saw great growth and demand for contactless robotic delivery.”

Phantom Auto is vehicle agnostic. If the vehicle is from a different OEM it is not a problem. The Phantom Auto software can work with multiple types of vehicles. The setup includes a steering wheel, foot pedals and an e-stop to stop the vehicle. Plus, there are programmable buttons, says Katz.

Nils Alstad, VP Product & Customer Success, says the Phantom Auto equipment includes six cameras on the vehicle to enable a 360-degree view and cameras to show the location. There is complete connectivity with either Wi-Fi or LTE connections.

“Our secret sauce is our ability to provide smooth video screens. We enable the operator to know what is happening with the vehicle,” says Alstad, “To deal with latency, we monitor the video response at all times. If there is latency, we will slow down the vehicles. If the video resolution is not good enough, the vehicle will be shut down.”

Phantom Auto is working on CE certification and safety compliance. Phantom Auto has several partners including, NVIDIA, GEODIS, TS ConGlobal (ITSC), Mitsubishi Logisnext Americas, Terber...

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and FANUC's robotic arms.

"At first, we thought that we would be providing the operators for the vehicles. However, we found out that the software helps keep the workforce. Customers have many forklift operators who have worked for 10, 20 or 30 years who have now moved to remote operation," says Katz.

The good thing about teleoperation is that there is no need for experience or education to be a remote operator. There is a labour shortage right now.

"We want to make it clear there is a big difference between remotely operated and autonomous. There is a low bill of materials for remote operation. It is just in the thousands of dollars. There is no need for expensive lidars and sensors," notes Katz.

Phantom Auto teleoperation is welcome for cold storage, hazardous materials and pharmaceuticals. Then employees can operate remotely in a safe environment.



Cool Jobs of The Future

Phantom Auto also provides remote operation and support for robotic food delivery. The company is working with Serve Robotics, the Postmates robot driverless delivery company bought by Uber that was spun out on its own earlier this year.

"During the pandemic, we saw great growth and demand for contactless robotic delivery," says Katz.

He imagines the future of Phantom Auto, "Coming out of the pandemic, we believe there is a great opportunity for jobs that require no prior education or experience, unique to the logistics space. I believe it is a cool job. When employees are at a party and someone asks, 'What do you do for a living? The response will be. 'I remotely operate forklifts from thousands of miles away.'"