

Uber layoffs are 'critical' in restructuring the company, says CMU autonomy expert

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By Courtney Linder / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

At an all-hands meeting Wednesday, Uber informed [100 self-driving vehicle operators](#) at testing sites in Pittsburgh and San Francisco that their jobs were being eliminated. Most were based in the Strip District.

The cuts reflect the company's realization that some things needed to change, a Carnegie Mellon University professor said.

After a self-driving Uber in autonomous mode struck and killed a 49-year-old woman in Tempe, Ariz., it exposed the company's shortcomings in safety culture — including problems with technology testing and operator training — according to Raj Rajkumar, a CMU professor of electrical and computer engineering.

“They need to rethink their entire methodology, and this layoff announcement is perhaps one of many steps in that restructuring process,” said Mr. Rajkumar, who is also co-director of CMU's autonomous vehicles lab and founder of Ottomatika, a CMU spinoff that provides software and systems development for self-driving vehicles. The company was acquired by Delphi, now Aptiv, in 2014.

Uber's safety operators' responsibilities must be revisited, he said, and hiring and training need to be dramatically revised.

[Rafaela Vasquez](#), the operator behind the wheel of the self-driving Uber that struck and killed Elaine Herzberg as she crossed a street in March, was streaming the TV show “The Voice” right before the crash, according to police.

Uber said Thursday that it is creating 55 new "mission specialists" roles and displaced workers would be given priority in the application process. Those individuals will be trained for both on-road and test track environments.

Mr. Rajkumar believes the requirements for the new positions will likely be substantially different from the previous operator roles, with a more technical element.

He appears to be correct — mission specialists will need to understand the tests being run on the track in Hazelwood, according to Uber, and they'll need to be acquainted with how to set up scenarios on the track and communicate findings with the engineers.

Previously, a different team was responsible for such processes.

The company said it will facilitate any additional training for displaced operators hired as mission specialists.

Uber did not give further specifics on technical qualifications for mission specialist hires.

“It is also unfortunate that 100 jobs have been lost. The people element of this development is sad but unfortunately deemed to be necessary,” Mr. Rajkumar said.

“Uber hopefully will revisit the bigger picture and learn from other players in the industry.”

Courtney Linder: clinder@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1707. Twitter: @LinderPG.

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