

Amazon's New Algorithm Will Set Workers' Schedules According to Muscle Use

In Jeff Bezos' last letter to shareholders as Amazon CEO, he laid out a plan to increase safety by algorithmically managing workers' bodies.

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The pace and intensity of work in Amazon's warehouses is notorious, and injuries are disturbingly common. In his last letter to shareholders as CEO, posted on Thursday, founder and incoming executive chairman Jeff Bezos offered a solution that seems to stretch the definition of micromanagement: algorithmically shuffling workers around the warehouse based on which isolated muscle-tendon groups they're repetitively grinding.

"Despite what we've accomplished, it's clear to me that we need a better vision for our employees' success," Bezos wrote. "We have always wanted to be Earth's Most Customer-Centric Company. We won't change that. But I am committing us to an addition. We are going to be Earth's Best Employer and Earth's Safest Place to Work."

Bezos claims that he doesn't take "comfort" in the recent defeat of a union drive in a Bessemer, Alabama warehouse, adding, "We need to do a better

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job for our employees.”

To that end, Bezos claims Amazon will be pursuing a host of initiatives centered around improving safety conditions at its warehouses. One program seems to capitalize on Amazon's surveillance dragnet inside warehouses that already targets workers, now being used to minimize the grueling repetitive motions that lead to a significant amount of injuries, specifically musculoskeletal disorders, or MSD.

Furthermore, Bezos claims that this micro-level algorithmic management of worker's bodies will be “central” to the company's strategy going forward.

"We're developing new automated staffing schedules that use sophisticated algorithms to rotate employees among jobs that use different muscle-tendon groups to decrease repetitive motion and help protect employees from MSD risks. This new technology is central to a job rotation program that we're rolling out throughout 2021."

Amazon did not respond to a request for comment asking for more details about this program.

Bezos' letter in general paints a rosy picture of Amazon's past and future. Another initiative Bezos mentions, WorkingWell, was already rolled out in 2020 and consists of the company coaching "small groups of employees on body mechanics, proactive wellness, and safety." Bezos adds that while the primary goal is reducing warehouse injuries, it'll also aim to "have a positive impact on regular day-to-day activities outside of work."

This program seems to fit in the general trend of tech companies seeking yet more complicated solutions to the problem of overwork, without addressing the underlying issue.

It resembles, for example, a coaching system condemned by a Austin-based Facebook content moderator contracted through Accenture. In an internal note, they laid out how the coaches made little difference when pitted against a system that had every incentive to keep pushing.

"Although the wellness coaches, in my experience, are excellent at their jobs, the attitude taken by much of leadership is a huge impediment to maintaining mental well-being. Many managers seem to be under the impression that a brain is basically a machine that can be maintained in a straightforward way. If you see something that upsets you, you should be able to deal with it by stepping away and doing a breathing exercise; if the problem is really bad, you can talk to a wellness coach."

Similarly, Bezos' letter laments the inevitable effects of overwork and poses complicated “solutions” while never acknowledging obvious fixes, such as slowing the pace of work. Amazon's safety problems are the flip side of its high productivity. We have same-day, next-day, and two-day shipping because warehouse workers and delivery drivers are pushed to risk their bodies or risk losing their jobs.

Bezos even appeared to defend Amazon against recent public blowback to the company denying that workers pee in bottles, a well-documented phenomenon. “Employees are able to take informal breaks

throughout their shifts to stretch, get water, use the rest room, or talk to a manager, all without impacting their performance,” Bezos claimed.

Nonetheless, Amazon claims these initiatives, as well as others that are yet to be developed by Bezos as executive chairman, have already reduced MSD on the job by a substantial degree. It’s not clear, however, if that claim should be uncritically repeated since Amazon just last year was caught covering up rising injury rates in its warehouses.

Early on in the letter, Bezos appeals to numbers to justify his company’s existence, writing that Amazon has created \$301 billion in value for shareholders, customers, vendors, and workers. “These numbers are part of the reason why people work for us, why sellers sell through us, and why customers buy from us,” Bezos wrote. In reality, the reasons why so many people work for Amazon are a bit more complex. Amazon enjoys a labor monopsony: in many towns, Amazon is the only major employer or otherwise sufficiently large enough to suppress the price for labor (wages) in its sector overall.

But even if Amazon succeeds in improving working conditions in some ways, it will always burn through workers at high rates as it demands its workers meet inhumane quotas year-round that only grow more demanding. Amazon’s big push now is to convince people who might otherwise work retail to do backbreaking warehouse work for \$15 an hour; more than Walmart pays, but much less than a typical warehouse job. Indeed, Bezos notes in his letter, complicated algorithms that micromanage workers’ bodies are needed because “many” new employees “might be working in a physical role for the first time.”
