

TO: Jane Doe (Back-End Engineering Manager)
FROM: Parth Jhunjunwala (Software Developer Intern)
SUBJECT: Views and recommendations in dealing with the employee activism trend.
DATE: April 8, 2022

Purpose & Summary

Employee Activism is the new trend in the tech industry and each company needs to know what it is, how to prevent it, as well as handle the situation if it does occur. Employee Activism is the movement or action taken by employees protesting an organization's decision, practices, or policies. These actions create headlines because in most cases, employees are bounded by company policies to speak out against the organization publicly. Despite this, employees sometimes choose to do so, when they can no longer stand down against some common issue. One of the ways to avoid and handle employee activism for an organization is to assert its future goals and policies and adhere to them in the long run.

Discussion

Amazon is one of the companies that has been in the middle of several employee activism actions. Employees at Amazon took to the streets in Seattle in September 2019, demanding leaders to act on their climate-related policies and to cut its carbon emissions by reducing the use of fossil fuels. 8,000 employees even wrote a letter to Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos regarding the same, and a day before the strike, Bezos announced Amazon to go carbon neutral by 2040. This protest was led by Amazon Employees for Climate Justice (AECJ). The AECJ claimed Bezos' plan of action to not be aggressive enough, and they planned another rally in October 2019, with the laborers working for amazon warehouses were the focus of organizing efforts.

What Amazon is actively preventing, and has been successful in doing so, is the formation of workforce unions. These collaborated employee activism actions are for now targeted towards outside-workplace issues, but employers would now question whether these convert into unions of their own. The situation might have curbed down, if instead of announcing the goal to be carbon neutral by 2040, Bezos would have listed out a very detailed plan of action or statement, that would convince the activists about Amazon's determination towards achieving that goal.

The activism did not decline, and in January 2020, Amazon employees violated company policy and spoke out on the issue of climate change yet again. The public protest was attended by more than 350 Amazon employees, and the AECJ even published 364 employee quotes, concerning Amazon's business with oil companies. Emily Cunningham and Maren Costa were 2 employees at Amazon that were a part of the AECJ from the beginning, and Amazon fired them in an illegal retaliatory manner. Both these employees had repeatedly and publicly, spoken out against Amazon's climate policies, and Amazon had to settle the case as the Labor Board found them guilty of illegal retaliation. Although an Amazon spokeswoman, was quoted saying that Ms. Cunningham and Ms. Costa were fired not for talking publicly, but for repeatedly violating internal policies; both defendants maintained that they were fired because they were the most visible members of the AECJ. Their removal also stirred up several democratic senators, who wrote to Amazon, expressing their concern over political retaliation.

The effect and outcome of employee activism do not bode well for both the activists and the employer in most cases. The issue lies with the generational clash between the top executives and the entry to mid-level employees. The stats show that the top executives at Amazon fall within the Boomer or Gen-X ranges, whereas the average age of an employee at Amazon is 31. The protestors undoubtedly consist majorly of Millennials. The problem lies with the attitude towards social issues, such as climate change. Millennials want to raise questions and have the power to change the way things work by words, whereas Boomers and Gen-X prefer everything the way it has always been. The AECJ proves this point by speaking publicly against Amazon despite the threat of being fired.

Another issue is how hard Amazon pushes in preventing union formation. Due to this, matters that could be handled by a union speaker, instead lead to thousands of employee activists protesting in public. As an organization that heavily depends on the efficiency of the front-line works, unions in Amazon would disrupt the control Amazon has over its employees. Even to this day, no union has been successfully formed in any U.S facilities of Amazon.

Recommendations

With employee activism on the rise, leaders at all organizations need to know how to handle their responses. Brian Armstrong, CEO of Coinbase, openly announced in Coinbase's blogpost that employees should cease to engage in broader societal issues and offered activism-focused employees a generous severance package as an incentive. This, according to me, is what each organization should be prepared to do. Make a decision and stick with it. Make it public and make sure everyone knows every detail about it. Once a company has announced its decision on important social and internal policies, it is then the decision of the employee to accept or reject it. At the same time, being irreversibly firm and not open to change would hurt the company in the long run, and thus raising an issue within the company and making sure every employee is heard should be a priority for each organization.

References

- 1) Colvin G. (Oct 16, 2020). Amazon's activist employees are sowing the seeds of unionization. Fortune. <https://fortune.com/2020/10/16/amazon-employee-activists-union-climate-justice/>
- 2) Perkins K. (Jan 29, 2020). Employee Activism Strikes Again: Amazon Workers Violate Corporate Policy To Speak Out On Climate Change. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathymillerperkins/2020/01/29/employee-activism-strikes-again-a-generational-clash-at-amazon/?sh=2dc51f642564>
- 3) Weise K. (Apr 5, 2021). Amazon Illegally Fired Activist Workers, Labor Board Finds, The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/05/technology/amazon-nlrb-activist-workers.html>
- 4) Pelisson A. & Hartmans A. (Sep 11, 2017). The average age of employees at all the top tech companies, in one chart. Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/median-tech-employee-age-chart-2017-8>
- 5) Palmer A. (Oct 24, 2020). How Amazon keeps a close eye on employee activism to head off unions. CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/10/24/how-amazon-prevents-unions-by-surveilling-employee-activism.html>