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Amazon's Fast Delivery: The Human Cost

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Abstract. Fast delivery to customers required Amazon fulfillment center employees to meet high daily productivity quotas. In some of the centers, robots and people worked together. The efficiency of the robots and the company's productivity standards, made it challenging for workers to avoid injury. Candace accepted a position in a center utilizing robots and was injured on the job, just like hundreds of others. Her injuries and lack of workplace accommodations prevented her from meeting productivity quotas and consequently jeopardized her job. She wondered if customers understood the human cost incurred to achieve such fast delivery and if it was ethical to subject employees to such work environments. Students are asked to analyze the situation from various ethical perspectives and offer their opinions to Candace. During their analysis they will learn about ethics, ethical standards, stakeholders, and corporate social responsibility.

Keywords: ethics, injured workers, working conditions, treatment of employees.

1. Introduction

Candace Dixon was excited to begin working in April, 2018, at the age of 54, in the Amazon fulfillment warehouse in Eastvale, California. In June, 2018, just two months after she started, Candace was performing her work as she had been trained, but the quick work pace, volume of heavy items, and lifting repetition caused sharp, excruciating pain in the middle of her back (Letson 2019). As Candace put it, "I hurt so bad I can't even tell you." She was crying, but didn't stop. "I don't like to give up and I like to do my job well, so I just kept going. I didn't want to risk losing my job" (Letson 2019).

Her experience at Amazon was not unique or an isolated occurrence. Hundreds of Amazon fulfillment center workers reported physical injury every year (Evans 2019), as the company sought to deliver orders fast.

Candace thought about whether or not customers really understood the impact on workers of fast delivery, the ethicality of Amazon's practices, and if she should continue to work for Amazon if it's not an ethical company. What would you tell her?

2. Background

At the time of Candace's injury, approximately 250,000 Amazon employees worked in its 175 fulfillment centers, where orders placed on Amazon.com were processed (Amazon 2020c). In 26 of the centers, robots and people worked together. Jobs in the fulfillment centers were attractive to many because of Amazon's promised pay of at least \$15 an hour, training, parental leave, paid vacation, health insurance, retirement benefits and other incentives (Evans 2019, Amazon 2020b).

Amazon's pay and benefits were what attracted Candace, so she accepted a job as a "stower". Stowers stand in one place and continuously stock the stream of inventory racks brought to them by robots (Evans 2019). Some of the items she stowed were light, while others were heavy (Evans 2019). To reach the top of an inventory rack involved carrying items up a step ladder (Evans 2019). When she finished stocking one rack, a robot would "zip it away" and another rack would automatically appear (Evans 2019).

The pace was intense, driven by Amazon's promise of fast "delivered by" times, like "same day" or "one-day". Candace was required to scan "more than 300 items an hour, thousands of individual products a day," while, like her fellow employees, her productivity was constantly being monitored with data flowing in real time to managers (Evans 2019). The pressure from supervisors to maintain a high productivity rate was ever present.

After her injury, Candace went to see an Amazon approved doctor, who told her the chronic pain in her back was due to bulging discs, back sprain, and joint inflammation (Evans 2019). The doctor concluded her injuries were unlikely to improve and were entirely due to her job at Amazon (Evans 2019). She tried going back to work with instructions from the doctor "not to pull or lift heavy objects and to alternate sitting and standing," but her supervisors didn't accommodate her (Evans 2019). She wasn't provided a place to sit and continued to be required to process heavy boxes (Evans 2019).

But Candace wasn't alone. In 2018, her injury was "one of 422 reported injuries" at the center where she worked in Eastvale (Letson 2019). Data analysis revealed the facility had an injury rate "more than three and a half times the rate for general warehousing as an industry" (Letson 2019).

In a review of 2018 injury records from 23 of Amazon's 110 fulfillment centers in the U.S., it was determined workers at those Amazon facilities got seriously hurt at a rate more than double the industry average" (Letson 2019). And, the problem was not isolated to the U.S. In the United Kingdom it was reported in a 3-year period more than 600 ambulances had been called to Amazon fulfillment centers within the U.K. (Ellison 2018).

Notably, injuries were especially common in fulfillment centers where robots were utilized (Evans 2019). After the introduction of robots in Amazon's center in Tracy, California, "the serious-injury rate there nearly quadrupled, going from 2.9 per 100 workers in 2015 to 11.3 in 2018" (Evans 2019). And its Oregon center had an injury rate of "nearly 26 per 100 employees, more than six times the industry average" (Evans 2019). As a worker at the Oregon facility observed, "before robots, it was still tough, but it was manageable," afterward, "we were in a fight that we just can't win" (Evans 2019).

3. Consequences

Injured workers in Amazon's fulfillment centers unable to meet productivity requirements lost their jobs (Evans 2019). The experience resulted in personal financial and psychological distress and in some cases, their injuries were so severe future job prospects were limited (Letson 2019). Meanwhile, Amazon continued to maintain that its fulfillment center leaders apply high standards of safety performance each day and use coaching, ergonomic training, process design, equipment and technology to reduce physical injury (Amazon 2020a).

Others weren't convinced by Amazon's safety efforts or public statements. The company had previously been warned by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) that it exposed its employees "to ergonomic risk factors including stress from repeated bending at the waist and repeated exertions, and standing during entire shifts up to 10 hours, four days a week and sometimes including mandatory overtime shifts" (U.S. Department of Labor 2016). Considering the working conditions, David Michaels, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor overseeing OSHA, observed, "according to Amazon's own records, the risk of work injuries at fulfillment centers" was "alarmingly, unacceptably high" (Evans 2019).

Former Amazon fulfillment center safety managers were concerned too. Some of their observations included: "we've looked at how we could get packages to the customer in a day, but we haven't figured out how we can get packages to the customer in a day without hurting people" (Letson 2019), and it was "well known internally that the injury rates" were "too high, but there's no way Amazon" would "slow down". It wasn't "a conversation" that could be had (Evans 2019). Another stated, when you ordered "something from Amazon and you've worked inside Amazon, you" wondered, if "ordering my package" was "going to be the demise of somebody" (Evans 2019).

Amazon continued to increase pressure on employees for higher and higher productivity in its fulfillment centers (Evans 2019). The tactics resulted in every level of its management team putting pressure on the one below it, which ultimately caused first line supervisors to increase pressure on workers filling customer orders. A former senior operations manager "who had leadership roles at multiple Amazon facilities" admitted "the key to advancement" was "great production numbers, which" incentivized "you to be a heartless son of a bitch" (Evans 2019).

4. Decision Point

Fast delivery to customers required Amazon fulfillment center employees to meet high productivity quotas, day in and day out, injured or not. When Candace went to work for Amazon, one of her priorities was to work for an ethical company. Initially, she thought Amazon was such a company, now she wasn't so sure. She wondered if the working

conditions and treatment of employees in the centers were ethical, if customers really understood the human cost to get their fast packages, and whether she should continue to work for Amazon if it isn't ethical. What would you tell her?

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