

# 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?

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## 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