

Amazon Labor Issue - Ethics Case

Section I. A Detailed Story

1. Identification of the Moral Issue

Founded as an online book marketplace, Amazon is an e-commerce platform and online services company that is known for constant innovation and aggressive business strategies. Kara Hurst is the Vice President of Worldwide Sustainability for Amazon; her role includes overseeing the company's environmental footprint and maintaining their corporate social responsibility. Ms. Hurst holds a Master of Public Policy from the University of California, Berkley and has extensive ties to the west coast of the United States. Prior to Amazon, she was the CEO of The Sustainability Consortium and helped members develop responsible supply chains and innovative consumer products. As a Vice President, she seeks to utilize Amazon's extensive resources and competitive advantages to maintain commitments to various programs, agreements, and pledges.

Recently, Amazon has faced harsh criticism from the media and political figures for working conditions and intense expectations of laborers. In 2021, the New York Attorney General filed a lawsuit against Amazon for failing to properly protect workers during the Coronavirus pandemic. Chris Smalls, an assistant manager, was fired for speaking out against the company's handling of operations amid a COVID-19 outbreak at a New York City facility. An undercover reporter discovered that workers at a United Kingdom warehouse were urinating in bottles instead of proper restrooms, fearing disciplinary action or dismissal. Workers at a processing center near Louisville, Kentucky acknowledged that pain relievers such as Advil or Tylenol were a necessity to complete their work. Analysis released in 2021 revealed that the injury rate of Amazon delivery drivers is 50% higher than a major competitor's drivers.

Documentation of poor working conditions would indicate a struggling company or incompetent management; however, Amazon is averaging 27.68% revenue growth over the last four years and 51.83% average profit growth over the last 3 years. The company has identified the internal resources to acquire Whole Foods, Ring LLC, and NFL media rights but failed to improve their basic workplace environment and implement quality COVID-19 safety protocols. Amazon's critics have been extremely quick to point out the glaring disparity between working conditions and shareholder returns plus internal reinvestments.

Ms. Hurst has a choice: Does Amazon alter their operations and internal corporate strategy to respond to criticism and enhance their public image, or do they continue with their current operations? Should she enact change, what are the proper corrective actions that Amazon should take?

Expectations from Shareholders and the Board of Directors are extraordinarily high. Investors holding AMZN stock are expecting consistent, long-term returns for themselves and their clients; reducing financial expectations by shrinking profit margins with additional labor costs will have an undesirable, adverse effect on the business. Additionally, impressing pro-union media outlets and anti-capitalist journalists and politicians is becoming increasingly more

difficult, time-consuming, and frustrating. Finally, hiring legal staff and diverting existing resources to respond to workers' complaints is a logistical nightmare that adds to existing business challenges and pressures.

Ms. Hurst's perspective is also limited because of personal biases and background. Firstly, her career has an intense focus on sustainability and her educational background revolves around public policy and political science; she may lack the specialized business knowledge that financial accountants, managerial accountants, and financial managers rely on to complete their jobs. Additionally, many American executives are compensated with a combination of a salary and stock options; should Ms. Hurst hold a substantial amount of Amazon stock, her personal reliance on the strength of Amazon's stock price may cause her to act unfavorably towards warehouse employees. Finally, her career experience is exclusively corporate and white-collar; Ms. Hurst may struggle to resonate with the wants and needs of line-level and hourly employees.

2. Company Background

a. Company Overview

The largest online retailer tech multinational industry in the world, Amazon, focuses mostly on online shopping and the establishment of local websites around the world. Amazon's business can be divided into three: North American e-commerce, international e-commerce and Amazon Web Service (AWS). Particularly its ecommerce business has a ambition to build the world's biggest package-delivery company which helps retailers' warehouse and deliver goods according to David Glick, a former Amazon logistics executive who serves as chief technology officer at Flexe (Greene, 2020). Its main competitors in the online retail industry are Alibaba, eBay, and Walmart.

Amazon introduces itself with its four principles: customer obsession rather than competitor focus, passion for invention, commitment to operational excellence, and long-term thinking (Amazon, N/A). It strives to be the most customer-centric company at the same time the best employer with being the safest place to work. Amazon has a long-term directive of building a logistics system to deliver packages for customers and compete directly against UPS and FedEx, something it's already doing in the United Kingdom.

b. Company History

While the economy sputtered and unemployment surged with the pandemic's spreading in the spring of 2020, Amazon took a different tack. They hire 400,000 workers to stow, sort, pick, pack and deliver goods from its warehouses across the country, pushing its total employee count over 1.1 million people (Greene, 2020). This gave Amazon a high reputation by providing a image of offering job opportunities and lower unemployment rate for the society; however, they offer low wages and encourage high constant churning of workers to keep efficiency high and wages fairly low (Kelly, 2022).

According to Sustainalytic ESG assessment, Amazon is ranked as a high-risk firm out of 30, with social and corporate governance concerns taking the lead. The MSCI ESG rating demonstrates the same outcome. Although Amazon has excellent performance in terms of product carbon footprint, it has lagged in terms of corporate behavior and labor management, which lead Amazon eventually to a BBB evaluation. Lastly, Amazon possesses a 25-point from S&P ESG rating. In line with the previous two assessments, the performance of environmental, social, and corporate governance is better than the industry average. Environmental performance is at its peak (Amazon ESG, 2021).

The chart of Amazon's carbon emissions from 2019 to 2021 shows that although carbon emissions are increasing with the increase in revenue, carbon intensity -- the carbon emissions (CO₂e) per dollar of gross merchandise sales (GMS) -- is decreasing year by year, which can be reflected in Amazon's efforts investing in renewable energy (Amazon ESG, 2021).

Carbon Footprint Data

Amazon's Enterprisewide Carbon Footprint, 2019–2021

Carbon Intensity	2019	2020	2021	YOY%
Carbon Intensity (grams of CO ₂ e per \$ of GMS)	122.8	102.7	100.8	-1.9%
Emissions Category (mmt CO ₂ e)	2019	2020	2021	YOY%
Emissions from Direct Operations (Scope 1)	5.76	9.62	12.11	26%
Fossil fuels	5.57	9.37	11.89	27%
Refrigerants	0.19	0.25	0.22	-12%
Emissions from Purchased Electricity (Scope 2)	5.50	5.27	4.07	-23%
Emissions from Indirect Sources (Scope 3)	39.91	45.75	55.36	21%
Corporate purchases and Amazon-branded product emissions (e.g., operating expenses, business travel, and Amazon-branded product manufacturing, use phase, and end-of-life)	15.41	16.70	19.09	14%
Capital goods (e.g., building construction, servers and other hardware, equipment, vehicles)	8.01	10.52	15.37	46%
Other indirect emissions (e.g., third-party transportation, packaging, upstream energy-related)	12.44	15.77	18.00	14%
Lifecycle emissions from customer trips to Amazon's physical stores	4.05	2.77	2.91	5%
Amazon's Total Footprint	51.17	60.64	71.54	18%

Section II. Discussion Questions

1. What is the priority among its mission statements? Is it being the most customer-centric company or being the best employer by making the safest place to work?
2. Will taking no action and maintaining a negative public image or investing in working conditions hurt profits and shareholder expectations more?
3. What are the most impactful changes that Amazon could make with the least monetary disruption?
4. Is it acceptable to maintain current operation if more people (customers and shareholders) enjoy the benefits by sacrificing a relatively a fewer number of employers?
5. Which one is more important: short-term initiatives(profit) or long-term initiatives (public image)? And what are the short-term initiatives and long-term initiatives for Amazon?
6. Will Ms. Hurst's conflicting personal biases and experiences harm Amazon's reputation, profit, and investor expectations?
7. Who are the main stakeholders affected by any operational and organizational changes at Amazon?

Section III. Further Reading

- **Further recommended reading**

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Teaching Note: Labor Issue Dilemma in Amazon

I. Synopsis of the Case

Kara Hurst is the Vice President of Worldwide Sustainability for Amazon; her role includes overseeing the company's environmental footprint and maintaining their corporate social responsibility. Currently, Amazon is enjoying record-breaking profit and revenue numbers; however, various journalists and politicians have brought light to Amazon's failure to improve working conditions and reinvest in labor. Pressure from the Board of Directors is extremely high; investors in AMZN expect consistent growth and returns from the stock.

II. Target Audience

Undergraduate business students will learn moral reasoning through transparent ethical dilemmas to prepare them to act ethically/legally in corporate workplaces. Students in executive leadership and MBA courses can utilize this case study in conjunction with junior-level experience to learn how executive-level decisions impact an entire enterprise and the entire economy.

III. Learning Objective

- 1) Increase awareness and understanding of sustainable issues of increasing e-commerce industry after the pandemic
- 2) Application of ethical theories in real-world business decisions
- 3) Prediction of the consequences of multiple alternative business cases
- 4) Develop considerable empathy for different social points of view.

IV. Analysis of the Case

(1) Identification of the Moral Issue

Ms. Hurst has a choice: Does Amazon alter their operations and internal corporate strategy to respond to criticism and enhance their public image, or do they continue with their current operations? Should she enact change, what are the proper corrective actions that Amazon should take?

(2) Additional Facts

a. Company Facts

Industry

The largest online retailer in the world, Amazon, focuses mostly on online shopping and the establishment of local websites around the world. Amazon's business can be divided into three: North American and international e-commerce, and Amazon Web Service (AWS). AWS is cloud computing server rental to businesses to facilitate various enterprise cloud transformation. Between 2013-2021, revenue climbed by a factor of 19 and became a major source of income for Amazon (Amazon ESG, 2021).

Logistics

The company now says it has 1,700 delivery-service partners in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Spain and Germany. In total, more than 400,000 drivers deliver goods for Amazon, all of them either self-employed or working for other companies (Don, 2022). Amazon has dramatically expanded its distribution network in the past decade, placing many new warehouses near population centers so it can deliver online orders quickly. Such major retail competitors as Walmart, Home Depot and Wayfair also have opened new distribution centers as they seek to match Amazon's fast delivery options.

Current status of ESG

According to Sustainalytics' ESG assessment, Amazon is a high-risk firm, with social and corporate governance concerns taking the lead. The MSCI ESG rating demonstrates the same outcome (Amazon ESG, 2021). Although Amazon has excellent performance in terms of carbon footprint, lagging corporate behavior and labor management have led Amazon to a BBB evaluation. Lastly, Amazon possesses a 25-point S&P ESG rating (Amazon ESG, 2021). Thus, the performance of environmental, social, and corporate governance is better than the industry average.

b. Legal Issues

Federal Employment Law

Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)

Employers must pay more than 1.5 times the minimum regular wage to eligible employees not exempted from the federal minimum wage and overtime pay for over 40 hours a week (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d). In the case of non-agricultural operations, it limits the number of hours children under the age of 16 can work and prohibits children under the age of 18 from getting jobs in certain occupations deemed too dangerous (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d).

Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA)

Comprehensive programs compensate federal employees for disabilities or deaths from physical injuries sustained during the performance of their duties (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d). Managed by the OWCP, it provides a range of benefits for full or partial disabilities, permanent or partial loss of body, and many related medical costs (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d).

(3) Available Alternatives:

Plan A: Better Compensation for Employees or Hire More Workers

Consequences:

- By paying existing employees more, they are rewarded more fairly for being subjected to extremely intense working conditions, grueling hours, and long-term impacts on their physical and mental health.
- By employing more laborers, Amazon decreases the total negative impacts to each worker's physical health and increases the amount of mental recovery time between shifts/working days.
- Existing employees may be let go because of increased labor costs and the impacts on profit margins and accounting data.
- Existing laborers may see smaller paychecks because new hires will reduce the number of shifts available to existing employees.
- Amazon's reputation remains unfavorable with the media and public because the rigorous and powerless working environment will not change.
- Reduced profit margins for investors resulting from increased payroll costs.

Personal Impacts

Ms. Hurst serves Amazon's Board of Directors, whose mission is to act in the best interest of shareholders; by increasing payroll costs, Ms. Hurst hurts her own case for employment by not upholding her employment contracts and not fulfilling her job responsibilities. In addition to her current role, damaging relationships at Amazon may negatively affect her ability to find employment in the future.

Shareholder Theory

Should Amazon compensate existing employees more, their payroll costs will immediately increase. If they decide to hire more employees, increased HR efforts to identify, hire, and retain more employees will drive up costs. Shareholders are negatively affected by decreased profit margins from either option, thus this option is unlikely to occur.

Stakeholder Theory

- **Stakeholders:** Laborers, HR representatives, shareholders, dependents of employees, executives, Board of Directors, job market, economy, media reputation
- **Priority Stakeholders:** Employees, Investors, Media/Public Reputation

Paying employees more or reducing the individual effects of the intense working environment would be in the best interests of employees. By creating more equitable pay, the media and public would have a more favorable view of Amazon and their operations. The positive effects that come from more satisfied employees and increased demand from a favorable company outlook can easily outweigh the increased implementation costs, thus providing Amazon a reason to implement this option.

Virtue Theory

- **Relevant Virtues: Caring, Compassion, Commitment, Consideration**

On a firm level, this is an extremely compassionate decision. If Amazon management were a singular person, they would have the resources to support the people crucial to operations; acting in good character would mean taking care of the people who provide the foundation for your success. As a result, Amazon should implement this option.

Plan B: Invest in Factory Automation and Highly Skilled Employees

Consequence

- Employees will no longer be subjected to intense factory conditions and expectations, but reduced job opportunities create increased pressure on unemployment programs that increase the burden for taxpayers.
- Reduced short-term from massive tech investment; long-term reduction of expenses from automation replacing employees.
- Enhanced reputation by reducing employees' pressure with higher pay.
- Long-term investments in factory automation might have little short-term impact but will help Amazon get into the tech industry through skilled labor and data-collecting machinery.

Personal Impacts

Hurst might need to brace for the pressure of increased Amazon unemployment and the negative reputation of making different decisions compared to the past. However, Amazon has a high turnover rate of their factory employees and has a negative reputation of encouraging employees to quit the job to maintain the low wage cost (Kelly, 2022). Thus, this decision might make Hurst's working professionalism get doubted by society or even the company but could help break the misleading appearance of high employment rate and turn to positive reputation with a long-term result.

Shareholder theory

This decision could maximize Amazon's shareholder value. Although there might be shareholders who consider the costing problem, the decision will help Amazon grow strong on both the reputation side, employment management, and the operation system in the long-term space. Moreover, with Amazon's long-term directive of building a logistics system for the delivery, this decision would be more personable for the stakeholder to improve their factory operation system.

Stakeholder theory

- **Stakeholders:** Consumers, Employees, Potential talents, Shareholders, Family of company executives, Competitors (e.g., e-bay, Walmart etc.), Business Partners, Suppliers, Retailers, 3rd party delivery company
- **Priority Stakeholders:** Employees and potential talents.

This decision might exist a potential ethical issue of letting the workers' initiative leave the company due to the intense environment, instead of higher their wages. However, there will also be new opportunities created for engineers and other related professionals. Thus, Amazon will need to find a balance point between the corporate images, and at the same time, make good compensation for those who will be impacted by the decision.

Virtue theory

- **Relevant Virtue: Empathy, Friendly, Conscientious**

The decision originally came from an empathy perspective. The automation system will decrease the pressure of the workers, giving them a more flexible and friendly working environment. This decision is also very conscientious on both sides, by having the operation system efficient while lowering pressure on laborers.

Plan C: Marketing (Green Washing)

Consequence

- Reputation can be improved temporarily
- Not a long-term solution because if it is known to be green washing widely, the reputation may worsen than before, and it may be costly to repair a damaged image

Personal Impacts

Green washing is referred to “false, misleading, overstated or unsubstantial environmental advertising,” and is prohibited under laws and standards that regulate areas of consumer protection and advertising (Gowling Wlg, 2022). Greenwashing would hurt her personal reputation as an expert in public policy and sustainability. Her career circles around public good where she holds a Master of Public Policy from the UC Berkeley, and she was also a CEO of the sustainability consortium and developed responsible supply chains and innovative consumer products. The decision would be personal guilt to her and make her past contribution meaningless. Her personal reputation will impact not only Amazon but also her past involvements such as the sustainability consortium, at worst everything she has done as CEO of the consortium in the past can be re-evaluated.

Shareholder theory

The main concern of shareholders is Amazon’s profitability both in the short-term and the long-term. If the marketing mitigates a current risk of compromise of company’s image which will result in lower stock price, shareholders will not be on the counter side of excessive marketing covering the issue even though it has a room to be referred to Green Washing. However, some shareholders may raise concerns if its image gets worse when the public recognizes it as a deceptive response to the issue. In addition, since SEC stated in 2021, that it will determine whether the disclosure and corporate procedures and practices are consistent, and review fund advertisements for false or misleading statements, shareholders might be more careful on this decision (Norton Rose Fulbright, 2022).

Stakeholder theory

- **Stakeholders:** Consumers, Employees, Shareholders, Family of company executives, Competitors (e.g., e-bay, Walmart etc.), Business Partners, Suppliers, Retailers, 3rd party delivery company
- **Priority Stakeholders:** Shareholders and Consumers

Applying utilitarianism, the plan to mitigate risk by marketing and remain consistent with current operation brings the most utility. Currently, a lot of consumers utilize Amazon’s main competitive advantage: immediate delivery services. Investors and shareholders are pleased as well. Even though some employees work over 40 hours a week and claims for their bad working

conditions, if the current value of Amazon persists, marketing is doable for the sake of employees.

Virtue theory

- **Relevant Virtue: Transparency, Honesty, Integrity**

Ms. Hurst has been educated about public policy for her master's degree and went through the extensively responsible position of CEO. She is aware of the value and significance of transparency to the public. She may be educated to be honest, transparent, and have high integrity. For her to stay as morally sound as her background, Green Washing should not be her choice.

Plan D: Do Nothing

Consequence

- Workers will continue to operate under extremely intense conditions detrimental to their mental and physical health.
- Customers will continue to support a company that does not support its people.
- Stock prices may falter because of a poor reputation.
- Worker strikes can put enormous pressure on the company.

Personal Impacts

Hurst's reliance on Amazon's stock might not make her ignore the issue because that will cause an even worse reputation and affect the stock price.

Shareholder theory

On the shareholder side, inaction is a tough decision to make. Low wages might put less pressure on the labor cost in the short-term period; however, as time goes by, there will be consequence taking, including the drop reputation and worker's quality.

Stakeholder theory

- **Stakeholders:** Consumers, Employees, Shareholders, Family of company executives, Competitors (e.g., e-bay, Walmart etc.), Business Partners, Suppliers, Retailers, 3rd party delivery company
- **Priority Stakeholders:** Employees, Shareholders

This decision might get a huge criticizing since there will be reasonable voice of concerning Amazon to also picking other group of employees under their business to having high turnover rate. On the stock side, people will be losing trust in Amazon with its danger reputation that might makes the investment unstable. Thus, taking no action on the problem will also not be applicable in the stakeholder theory.

Virtue theory

- **Relevant Virtue: Responsible, integrity, empathy**

Doing nothing would be irresponsible and lack empathy because the company simply wants people to forget their misbehavior. If Hurst's made this decision, it would also hurt her integrity because she would disregard acknowledged issues.

(4) Decision

Mix of Plan B & C

: Invest in Company Resources (factory automation, high skilled employees) While Conducting Marketing for Sustainable Image of Amazon

In the final decision, we are having two methods to make improvements to Amazon's operation system and reputation in a short-term and long-term development.

First, marketing is required in the short-term to mitigate damage to reputation. Second, on the long-term development, we believe having investment in factory automation and highly skilled employees will help Amazon create a future development path, especially having high competence in the e-commerce market. With improved operations, Amazon will have a better reputation and gain market share in the online retail space.

Moreover, with the increase of the distributions across the US, having automation will also help Amazon decrease further labor cost, and giving more flexibility on the expenditure of transportation and delivery. In addition, shareholders might worry about the cost of marrying both plans. If Amazon's long-term mission is to build the best logistics system, these costs are expected to bring more long-term value because an established system will sustain for quite a while.

V. References and Supplementary Material

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