Office Safety: Fatality Report



INCIDENT

Vickie Shannon Allen, 49, started working at Amazon as a counter in a fulfillment warehouse at Haslet, Texas, in May 2017. At first, like many employees, Allen was excited by the idea of working for one of the fastest growing corporations in the world. That feeling dissipated quickly after a few months.

Allen's story began on October last year when she injured her back-counting goods on a workstation that was missing a brush guard, a piece of safety equipment meant to prevent products from falling onto the floor. She used a tote bin to try to compensate for the missing brush guard, and hurt her back while counting in an awkward position.

NEED TO KNOW

Molten metal iron works, plastic and chemical plants harbor very serious and dangerous materials/products and work practices. Compare this work environment with white collar office environment.

Compared to the molten metal and massive machines found in workplaces, office hazards seem pretty tame.

The white-collar office environment has a plethora of ways office employees are injured.

1. Slips, trips and falls.
2. Fires
3. Chemical hazards.
4. Lifting
5. Heavy objects.
6. Office entanglement.
7. Office collisions

BUSINESS / REGULATIONS

Amazon is now the world's most valuable retailer. Its customers are served by over 140 fulfillment centers like the one where Allen worked across the US. The revenues from these centers have made founder Jeff Bezos the world's richest man according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index.

A Guardian investigation has revealed numerous cases of Amazon workers suffering from

workplace accidents or injuries in its gigantic warehouse system and being treated in ways that leave them homeless, unable to work or bereft of income.

In the meantime, Allen has become homeless after a workplace accident left her unable to do her job.

“I noticed managers would ask you questions all the time about any bathroom breaks, performance and productivity. What they do is code your time, and they are allowed to change it at will. To me, that’s how they get rid of people,” Allen said.

The injury was the beginning of an ongoing ordeal she is still working to amend at Amazon. Over the course of a few weeks, Amazon’s medical triage area gave her use of a heating pad to use on her back, while Amazon management sent her home each day without pay until Allen pushed for workers compensation.

“I tried to work again, but I couldn’t stretch my right arm out and I’m right-handed. So I was having a hard time keeping up. This went on for about three weeks,” Allen said. Despite not getting paid, Allen was spending her own money to drive 60 miles one way to the warehouse each day just to be sent home.

Once on workers compensation, Allen started going to physical therapy. In January 2018, she returned to work and injured herself again on the same workstation that still was not fixed.

Allen went back on medical leave and took an additional two weeks of unpaid leave because she didn’t have the money to drive to work. In April 2018, an MRI scan showed her back was still injured, but just five days after her diagnosis, she claims Amazon’s workers compensation insurer, Sedgwick, had the company doctor drop her as a patient.

“By June 2018, they finally had that station fixed. It took them eight months to put one little brush guard on this station,” Allen said. On 2 July, she met with management at the Amazon fulfillment center, who offered her a week of paid leave for the issues she had to deal with over the past nine months.

“They’re also going to pay me for 24 more hours for last week. They haven’t said anything else,” Allen explained.” They offered me a buyout, only for $3,500, which meant I would have to sign a non-disclosure agreement to not say anything derogatory about Amazon or my experience.”

STATISTICS

A 2014 report released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than 3 million nonfatal workplace injuries and illnesses were reported by private industry employers in 2013.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, OSHA, “Adapting tasks, workstations, tools, and equipment to fit the worker can help reduce physical stress on a worker’s body and eliminate many potentially serious, disabling work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). **Each year, MSDs account for more than $15 billion in workers’ compensation costs.**

Conditions that can lead to MSD problems include:

- Repetitive movements that increase pressure on nerves and irritate tendons.
- Sitting in awkward positions, or straining neck to look at a computer screen that is too high or too low.
- Static postures and lack of breaks

PREVENTION

Falls:

The leading causes of office injuries are slipping, tripping and falling. Falls from the same level cause more accidents and injuries than falls from ladders or scaffolds, and they can happen just as easily in the office as anywhere.

Here are some ways to prevent falls:

- Keep the office free from clutter. Boxes should be stacked out of the way of traffic. Trash and spills should be cleaned up from the floor.
- Re-route electrical cords away from traffic areas.
- Report and repair any defective chairs. And as far as office chairs go, if they have wheels under them, they should have five legs.
- Close drawers so nobody will trip over them. A trip over an open drawer can cause worse injuries than just bruised shins.
- Don’t use makeshift ladders such as boxes stacked on chairs. Use stepladders and stepstools correctly.

Fires

- Make sure or encourage that emergency numbers, first aid contacts and evacuation procedures for your office are posted where everyone will be sure to see them.
- Know where to find fire extinguishers and how to use them.
- Do not overload electrical circuits.

Chemical Hazards:

- Know the chemicals that you work with or around. A tour of your office could reveal a surprising number of hazardous materials like cleaning fluids, art supplies and solvents.
- Use appropriate protective equipment, such as gloves or safety eyewear when handling these products.

Safe Lifting:

- Many workers consistently make a conscious effort to safely lift loads in the shop because they are prepared for the possibility of injury. But you can also be injured by lifting a box of envelopes because you are not expecting to get hurt in an office and therefore do not lift it properly.
- Don’t lift a load you cannot handle, such as office furniture or equipment.
- Plan your lift carefully so that your leg muscles, rather than your back, handle most of the load.
- Don’t twist your body even when lifting a light load.
- Make sure your back is straight and your footing is secure. Use ladders and stepstools safely.

Heavy Objects:

- Filing cabinets can cause serious injury. Open just one drawer at a time. If you open more than you risk the cabinet falling over onto you. Load filing cabinet drawers evenly, starting with the bottom ones.
- Make sure shelves are securely anchored, and do not overload them. Do not place heavy objects on overhead shelves.

Office Entanglements:

- Long hair, jewelry and loose clothing are all potentially hazardous around office equipment. They can become entangled in moving parts of typewriters, computer printers, postage meters and other equipment.

Office collisions:

- When opening a door without a window, be aware that someone may be on the other side and about to do the same thing. If the door opens away from you, don’t fling it wide with a great amount of force, this type of accident has caused broken noses, broken glasses, cuts and eye injuries.
- If a door opens towards you, approach it slowly and cautiously watching for any signs that it may be starting to move. By being aware of the hazard you may be able to avoid an accident. Keep one arm raised and slightly bent at the elbow to absorb any sudden and forceful movements.
- Mark glass doors or floor length windows clearly, using eye-level stickers or tape to help people see the hazard. Many serious accidents have happened with people walking into, and sometimes right through, unseen glass.