

Qualitative Case Study To Explore Former Employee Reasons For Resignation From Amazon

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[Abstract] This qualitative study, intended to explore statements of former Amazon employees, categorizes reasons for resignations, and provides answers to two questions. First, what are the three main reasons Amazon Fulfillment employees give for resigning? Second, what percentage of the total reasons do the top three represent and what minor themes exist within those three major themes? Social media comments from the subreddit r/Amazon FC and Glassdoor websites made by previous employees who self-terminated in 2021 and 2022 provided secondary data that was organized into major and minor themes. The three major themes were management issues, difficult work, and schedule hardships with six minor themes: toxic culture, poor management, negative employee engagement, physically demanding, long hours, and shift schedule. Recommendations to address the major and minor themes include a comprehensive culture change, shift modifications, and updates to the internal transfer policy.

[Keywords] Amazon, fulfillment center, employee retention, warehouse, voluntary resignation, turnover

Introduction

Since July 2021, macro forces in the economy have resulted in unemployment falling to .8 per open position in the United States (US BLS, 2022a). The competition to coax employees from their current organization results in companies offering higher-than-average hourly wages to entry-level candidates and signing bonuses for salaried talent. Rampant inflation (Desilver, 2022) makes these monetary benefits highly attractive. Therefore, switching to a new employer, though inconvenient, is financially beneficial, with 51% of job changers seeing a real yearly increase; however, 47% of those not changing experienced a net improvement (Kochhar et al., 2022) in the 2020 to 2021 period.

Turnover drives cost upward and productivity downward (Gandhi & Robison, 2021), pushing against improvements in bottom-line figures required to achieve business goals. Depending on the position, replacing an employee costs half to double their yearly pay (Gandhi & Robison, 2021). Warehousing has seen a 1.11% year-over-year quit rate increase from July 2021 to June 2022 and a month-over-month increase of 1.13% from June 2022 to July 2022 (US BLS, 2022b). Historically, the warehouse component of the e-commerce process has a high turnover, which the Great Resignation (Gandhi & Robison, 2021) exacerbated. This phenomenon continues as a macro force pressing on the warehouse industry as younger generations of employees continue to influence work culture, changing it from a command-and-control structure to an equal partnership. As partners, they have little tolerance for employers they perceive as not meeting their needs and seek new, more satisfying partnerships by changing companies.

The e-commerce industry grew to 14% of overall retail (US Census, 2022) in the second

quarter of 2022, with Amazon enjoying 38% of the U.S. online market share (MarketLine, 2021). Amazon Fulfillment turnover is more than double (Brancaccio et al., 2021) that of other warehouse organizations, replacing 150% of its workforce yearly. This means that the largest e-commerce retailer in the country loses 3% of its headcount every week. A leaked internal memo revealed that Amazon could deplete available workers by 2024 (Sainato, 2022), and before stepping down as CEO, Bezos announced a culture change to position Amazon as the Earth's best employer (Brancaccio et al., 2021). The memo and culture change announcement indicate Amazon has retention concerns and is attempting to mitigate turnover. With Amazon at double the turnover rate of competitors (Sainato, 2022), Amazon's situation presents a unique case study for business consultants looking to define and categorize causes of voluntary separation.

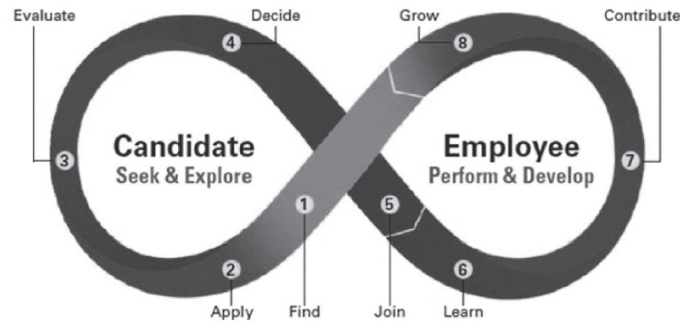
Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study intends to explore statements of former Amazon employees, categorize reasons for resignations, and provide answers to two questions. First, what are the three main reasons Amazon Fulfillment employees give for resigning? Second, what percentage of the total reasons do the top three represent, and what minor themes exist within those three major themes? Answers to these questions add to the body of business academic knowledge around employee satisfaction, its impact on an organization's bottom line, and how managers and consultants can address the issue. Amazon and companies like it can use this study's trend analysis and recommendations to reduce turnover and, thus, reduce operational costs associated with hiring replacements.

Literature Review

Two theoretical frames support this study, Herzberg's two factors (Bhatt et al., 2022) and the concept of employee-centric organizations (Ramchandani & Singh, 2020). When Herzberg initially published his work in the 1950s, it was a cultural norm to work at one or maybe two jobs before retirement. As time passed, each successive generation increased the number of different jobs throughout their careers. Currently, it is uncommon to spend even ten years at the same company, as employees now see themselves as equal partners in the employer/employee relationship and find other employment if their current company does not meet their needs. The employee-centric concept describes the new normal of cycling between candidate and employee roles (Ramchandani & Singh, 2020) throughout careers and within organizations. Employee sentiment begins with initial interactions when candidates apply, evaluate an offer, and decide if it is right for them. Then, as employees, they join the company and proceed to learn, contribute, and grow. This model (Ramchandani & Singh, 2020) represents these employee interactions with the employer as dynamic and cyclical.

Figure 1 identifies interaction times that drive sentiment as the employee revisits and reevaluates employer value. Positive or negative first impressions (Koziol & Koziol, 2020) become reinforced or changed by ongoing interactions and continue throughout the employee's life cycle at the company in an infinite loop (Ramchandani & Singh, 2020). If employees become too dissatisfied, they attempt to change their position within the company or leave entirely, thereby becoming candidates again and starting the cycle over. In this case study, the ex-employees' reasons for leaving (Koziol & Koziol, 2020) consist of stories involving one or more interactions along the infinity loop.

Figure 1*Employee Journey Infinity Loop*

Reprinted from "Employee Centric Organizations," by Ramchandani, S., & Singh, A., *Delhi Business Review*, 21(1), pg. 101.

The two factors in Herzberg's theory, hygiene and motivation, describe low and high satisfiers or dissatisfiers (Herzberg et al., 1993) depending on whether the employer did or did not meet those needs. High elements that motivate employees are recognition, advancement, development opportunities, interesting work, and trust in decision-making (Bhatt et al., 2022). Low elements are hygiene factors in that they are the minimum expectations workers have of their employers: company policies, pay, working conditions, and company culture – toxic/cordial, benefits, and job security (Bhatt et al., 2022). High factors will not motivate employees unless the low (hygiene) factors are met first (Herzberg et al., 1993). Herzberg's two factors are evident in the employee-centric concept as candidates weigh hygiene factors in deciding to join or continue with the organization. Motivation factors determine if they will look inside or outside the company when returning to the candidate cycle.

Review of Motivation Literature

Herzberg published *The Motivation to Work* in 1953 and reprised the concept with a publication of the same name in 1993. While the concept of employer responsibility for employee motivation and retention was innovative in the 1950s, it built upon Maslow's hierarchy of needs from 1943. *A Theory of Human Motivation* (Maslow, 1943) explains that basic needs like physical safety and physiological imperatives require satisfaction before higher needs emerge (Maslow, 1943). Maslow asserted that people "lacking food, safety, love, and esteem would most probably hunger for food more strongly than anything else" (Maslow, 1943, p. 373).

Herzberg's 1993 publication expanded the high and low factor model to include two relationship levels between employees and leadership. Level one relationships had neither party trusting the other, whereas level two relationships were mutually respectful and productive. The affirmative employer/employee relationship trend continued with the positive psychology movement of the 2000s that included work as a component of mental health because it is a source of suffering or happiness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). *Positive Psychology: An Introduction* (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) reviewed fifteen articles about the topic and concluded that focusing solely on fixing problems was not enough to create environments in which people flourish (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Instead, the goal was to correct egregious issues and then, with those resolved, move on to higher level fulfillment, which is congruous with

both the Two Factor theory (Herzberg et al., 1993) and Maslow's work (Maslow, 1943).

Therefore, it is no surprise that the Motivation Hygiene Theory gained traction again as the positive psychology movement emerged. Researchers reviewed scholarly writings on motivation, positive psychology, and the Two Factor theory, concluding that Herzberg's theory proved positive psychology is an aspect of human resource strategies (Sachau, 2007) by clarifying organizational satisfiers. Other authors questioned if the Two Factor theory held its weight against the business evolution away from Taylor-style functions (Bassett-Jones & Lloyd, 2005) by surveying 3,200 United Kingdom employees in government, utilities, services, retail, manufacturing, financial services, and law enforcement. The Bassett-Jones & Lloyd (2005) survey found the Two Factor theory useful, especially in translating employees' tacit knowledge into explicit process improvements (Bassett-Jones & Lloyd, 2005).

After the recessions of the 2000s, employers faced greater competition for talent as workers had more opportunities to leave with lower risk. As a result, the next evolution of the employee/employer relationship happened with the *voice of the employee*. A random sampling of 346 middle eastern workers in Jordan resulted in 300 respondents (Alfayad & Mohd Arif, 2017) and found employees who felt heard by employers had higher satisfaction. The authors specifically acknowledged Herzberg's theory in stating employee voice as a motivating factor, demonstrating the Two Factor theory was applicable into the 20-teens (Alfayad & Mohd Arif, 2017). Motivation and satisfaction are even more important in the post-COVID business world as employers face record-low unemployment and a workforce that values mental health and balance more than ever (Bhatt et al., 2022). The employee-centric infinity model (Ramchandani & Singh, 2020) encompasses this uniquely 2020s concept, yet still aligns with Herzberg's theory because it is two factor at its basis. Employee-centrism aids in defining constructs from Herzberg's theory to confirm the validity of the Motivation Hygiene Theory almost 70 years later to guide research about employee turnover.

Methods

This study uses secondary data from previous employees who self-terminated in 2021 and 2022 to code reasons for attrition. Structure for analysis was provided by identifying open, axial, and selective categories to organize reasons from ex-employee statements into major and minor themes. Inclusion criteria limit analysis to the United States and exclude Amazon business lines other than Fulfillment centers. Social media comments indicating resignation reasons found on the subreddit r/Amazon FC and Glassdoor (Stamolampros et al., 2019) websites were used for manual sentiment analysis (Young & Gavade, 2018).

First, open coding (Williams & Moser, 2019) is applied to the descriptive phrases on Glassdoor, and r/Amazon FC identifies general themes. Then, axial analysis (Williams & Moser, 2019) classifies these generalities into specific codes. Next, the researcher identifies overlapping concepts using selective coding, reducing the number of codes to no more than seven inferential themes (Williams & Moser, 2019). Finally, inferential themes with the greatest number of responses became the major themes of this study, representing the top three reasons employees leave Amazon warehouses.

Limitations of the Study

The nature of secondary data means responses are not specifically answering questions (Kumara, 2022) about resignations and may lack detailed information. Limitations to the study include the inability to ask follow-up questions as a researcher might when interviewing a human subject.

Several axial codes in the management issue major theme could be consolidated if there were more clarity in stated reasons regarding what the ex-employees meant by poor management. Lacking granular information, poor management became a catchall for remarks indicating manager-related resignation reasons like "learn to really manage" and "need better managers." Without specifics, it is challenging for an organization to create training or strategies to develop managers in ways that would decrease employee turnover. One final limitation is the lack of control over how the data is collected (Kumara, 2022) and stored online. Whether a comment stays online is at the discretion of Glassdoor social media employees and the subreddit moderator.

Introduction to Results

The comments compiled from Glassdoor.com and the subreddit r/Amazon FC on Reddit.com spanned the rolling year December 2021 to December 2022. The sum of individuals commenting was 220, with 110 from Reddit and 110 from Glassdoor; however, some individuals indicated more than one reason for resigning, leading to 347 reasons in total. As shown in Table 1, 147 reasons originated on Reddit and 200 on Glassdoor.

Table 1
Individuals and Resignation Reasons

Source	Individuals Commenting		Reasons	
	Comments	Percentage	Reasons	Percentage
Reddit	110	50%	147	42%
Glassdoor	110	50%	200	58%
Totals	220	100%	347	100%

Coding

The analysis categorized reasons into open, axial, and selective coding (Williams & Moser, 2019) to define major and secondary themes. Each selective coding category had several axial subcategories with the most significant representing minor themes. Selective coding revealed three major themes previous Amazon employees gave for leaving that encompassed 69% of all reasons: management issues, difficult work, and the schedule caused hardship. Management issues accounted for 28% of the reasons, difficult work was 23%, and schedule hardship 18%, as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2
Selective Coding Distribution

Selective Code	Number of Reasons	Percent of Total Reasons
Management Issues *	96	28%
Difficult Work *	81	23%
Schedule Causes Hardship *	64	18%
Pay	33	10%
H.R. Issue	27	8%
Disliked the Work	16	5%
Location	15	4%
Nonspecific	15	4%
Totals	347	100%

**Top 3 represent 69% of all reasons*

Thematic Findings

Despite analysis identifying thirty-eight unique axial codes, more than one-third of the minor themes came from only six codes. Similarly, selective coding comprised eight codes, yet almost three-quarters of the data resided in three codes that became major themes. The top three selective codes, representing the major themes, encompass 69% of reasons ex-employees gave for resigning, while the six minor themes combined were 36% of reasons. Major and minor theme percentages by employee level in Table 3 identify concerns that caused more resignations by hourly versus salaried positions. Hourly associates are supervised by hourly process assistants with their salaried direct managers referred to as area managers. The area managers’ report to the next level up, operations managers, who are senior operations managers supervise. Senior operations managers are not represented in the data because there were no comments on Reddit or Glassdoor from this level of employee.

Table 3
Reason Percent by Theme and Employee Level

Major Themes Minor Themes	Percent of Major Theme				Percent of All Reasons
	Amazon Associate (AA)	Process Assistant (PA)	Area Manager (AM)	Operations Manager (OM)	
Management Issues	83%	4%	10%	2%	28%
Toxic Culture	11%	0%	2%	1%	4%
Poor Management	14%	0%	0%	0%	4%
Negative Employee Engagement	10%	1%	1%	0%	3%
Difficult Work	90%	1%	7%	1%	23%
Physically Demanding	47%	1%	0%	0%	11%
Schedule Causes Hardships	75%	5%	19%	1%	18%
Long Hours	34%	0%	9%	0%	8%
Shift Times/ Overnights/ Inflexible Hours	22%	3%	8%	0%	6%

Management Issues

The first major theme was management issues, with 28% of the overall reasons coded. Management issues had sixteen axial codes associated with them compared to the two other major themes, *difficult work* and *schedule causes hardship* at seven and five axial codes, respectively. Within this major theme, three minor themes were *toxic culture*, *poor management*, and *negative employee engagement*, representing 11% of the total reasons. These minor themes were a considerable weight within the major theme, since they were thirty-nine out of ninety-six management issue reasons, or 41% of the management issues' axial code reasons. Table 3 shows most management issue respondents were associates (83% in the major category) followed by area managers with 10%.

Toxic Culture

The toxic culture minor theme accounts for 14% of the overall management issue reasons for resignation with all employee levels commenting on the culture except for process assistants. Breaking this 14% down into employee levels, associates had the most to say, with 11% of toxic culture comments, followed by area managers at 2% and operations managers at 1%. Several different Amazon Associates (AAs) called it out with specifics like "purposefully creating a toxic environment to ensure high turnover rates," "finally quit the toxic building," and "toxic culture and people." Area managers (AMs) and operations Managers (OMs) did not use the phrase toxic culture but provided insights like "too large to see circumstances that do not align with its tenets" and "poor ethics."

Poor Management

The second minor theme is poor management, with 14% of this major theme's reasons. Many reasons were vague, with various commenters using phrasing like "learn to really manage" and "advice to management: do better." However, some commenters gave specifics about feeling distanced from leadership, saying "never once have I seen my manager," "hire professional adults not fresh out of college," and "high turnover rate (of managers)...creates barriers between employees and employer." Only AAs commented on this minor theme, with zero process assistants (PAs), AMs, or OMs indicating poor management as an issue for leaving, possibly because the other levels are leadership positions and, as such, generally lumped together as management by frontline employees.

Negative Employee Engagement

The last minor theme, negative employee engagement, is 12% of the management issue major theme where AAs, PAs, and AMs all gave this reason. AAs contributed 10% to this theme, and PAs/AMs were equally divided among the remaining 2%, stating they received negative treatment or comments from higher-ups. Associates indicated their managers "made comments that make you not want to be there" and felt "managers are not kind." PAs and AMs had similar thoughts because higher-level leaders "makes you feel less than" and provided advice, such as "empathy is the key to motivation."

Difficult Work

The second major theme was difficult work, shown in Table 3, with 23% of overall reasons in the data set. AAs again provided most reasons at 90% with AMs at 7% and then PAs/OMs at 1% each. This category spanned reasons from physical to mental difficulties, including stress or workload. Since AAs provided most reasons, the physically demanding aspect of the job was the primary

minor theme within the difficult work category at 47% of the major theme. Amazon associates and PAs found Amazon physically demanding, while AMs and OMs thought it was stressful and confusing and had a heavy workload.

Physically Demanding

Unsurprisingly, warehouse work is physically demanding, but it is a significant minor theme for an organization with double the turnover of industry standards. Table 3 notes that 11% of total reasons mentioned this concern, as several ex-employees explained "heavy boxes and constant pushing and pulling motions," "it breaks down your body," and "trying to stuff boxes that were literally larger than me." It is worth noting that several different comments contained reasons that combined the physicality of the job with a non-physical work stressor like "caused me panic attacks" and "they time everything."

Pay Affected Perception

Pay was not one of the top three major themes, but its impact on employee perception of physical demands during their tenure at Amazon is worth noting. Many commenters combined pay with physical work reasons in instances of "breaking backs for paychecks," "you will work hard...they could pay more," and leaving Amazon for a job "making a little bit more without the hard labor." In this minor theme, former employees also noted the imbalance of pay versus long hours driving employee dissatisfaction.

Schedule Causes Hardship

All employment levels in Table 3 stated the schedule as a cause for leaving Amazon, possibly due to typical Amazon schedules of ten hours, four days a week. Furthermore, the schedule increases to eleven hours per shift during overtime, sometimes with an additional fifth day. Two of the five axial codes emerged as minor themes: long hours and shift times/ overnights/ inflexible hours. Together these minor themes represent 14% of overall reasons from former employees. Within the schedule major theme, 56% of AA reasons were these minor themes as reasons for leaving, while 17% came from AMs, and 3% from PAs. The third major theme was schedule causes hardship, encompassing 18% of all reasons for resignation.

Long Hours

Associates comprised 34% of the long hours minor theme and area managers 9%, while PAs and OMs did not state long hours as a problem. The ten hours shifts (11 on overtime) were seen by different associates as issues because "shifts felt they were never going to end," and the work "drained me" because it was "too many hours to work in one day." Various AMs on salary felt they "put in more hours than what you get paid for" due to "having to work after working hours" and "12-13-hour days even though your offer letter will say 10 hours." Both hourly and salaried employees were unsatisfied with breaks, with AA reasons like "long hours, short break" and AMs stating, "long hours no/short breaks."

Shift Times/Overnights/Inflexible Hours

Table 3 shows that AA reasons totaled 22% of this minor theme, with 3% from PAs and 8% from AMs, meaning both hourly (AAs / PAs) and salaried (AMs) staff were both dissatisfied enough with their schedules to leave the company. Former Amazonians found their assigned schedule did not fit their work/life balance, overnights created family issues, and the inflexibility of schedules

limited opportunities to improve balance. One AM "wasn't a fan of overnights," while another said, "your schedule really isn't your schedule." Several hourly workers indicated they "did not like night shift," while others resigned "to be rehired at Amazon for the job schedule they denied me a transfer to" and "reapplied and got the job I tried transferring to." The internal inflexibility to transfer pushed some associates to risk leaving so they could apply for openings on preferred shifts and locations.

Significance of Findings

This qualitative study intended to explore statements of former employees and categorize reasons for resignations from Amazon. While the study fulfilled its purpose, the major and minor themes provided insights about its significance in three areas. First, for Amazon specifically, there is a compilation of causes for warehouse turnover the organization may utilize in strategic improvements to reduce resignations. Second, the study provides information on the warehousing industry's turnover, considering warehousing has significant turnover overall. Third, it contributes to the pool of academic knowledge for one of the costliest expenses in any business.

Interestingly, the major themes parallel other research on employee resignation. The study showed pay was not one of the top three reasons, but rather employees felt management was inadequate, the work was too demanding, and the schedule was incompatible with their lives. These findings support Gallup surveys (Gandhi & Robison, 2021) wherein disengagement was the primary factor for turnover rather than pay. At the same time, a Pew study found income as a primary turnover reason (Parker & Horowitz, 2022), unlike the Amazon data in this study. Still, other reasons found by Pew Research do overlap.

Several concerns from the Pew study were feeling disrespected, childcare issues, and working too many hours, which align with this study's major themes of management issues and schedule hardship. However, one major theme of this study seems specific to Amazon as a primary reason for changing jobs: difficult work. This major theme was 23% of all reasons, with the minor theme of physicality found in 11% of all reasons for resigning (Table 3). Perhaps Amazon warehouses are more physically demanding than others, leading to high turnover. Compared to the industry's 49% (US BLS, 2021), Amazon's turnover was more than double (Kantor et al., 2021), and company spokespeople did not deny the statistic when responding to media (Segal, 2022). Another possibility is Amazon's ten-to-eleven-hour shifts might be too lengthy for the physical nature of the work versus an eight-hour shift.

Recommendations for Application and Research

Address Management Issues with Culture Change

The three minor themes within the management issue major theme, toxic culture, poor management, and negative engagement, are symptoms of poor culture because they exist as level one (Herzberg et al., 1993) relationships in Herzberg's model. Level one relationships have one party in charge and the other subordinate, with neither party trusting the other. Moving culture to level two (Herzberg et al., 1993) establishes a professionally distant relationship with trust between the parties to perform duties fully without inflicting harm. Therefore, the recommendation is to change Amazon's warehouse culture from level one to level two.

Considering Amazon created the culture, a management consultant or agency provides fresh eyes and new perspectives. Installing an Amazon leader and team in each warehouse reporting directly to a national leader instead of facility leadership is advisable to ensure consultants receive information required to assess each warehouse's culture and tailor recommendations accordingly. In addition to specific improvements suggested by the consultation

team, Amazon should tie cultural enhancements to performance and compensation (Schein & Schein, 2017) in performance appraisals (Hofstetter & Harpaz, 2015).

Modify Number of Hours Worked per Shift

Amazon employees may perceive the work as more physically demanding than other warehouse positions due to the four-day, ten-hour shift schedule. Adjusting to eight-hour shifts and five-day weeks is one option for addressing the major theme of difficult work and the minor theme of physically demanding activities. The shorter shift would provide more recovery time before returning to work. However, this may move resignation reasons away from difficult work to the five-day schedule causing hardship if the additional day creates work/life challenges for the staff. Focus groups, surveys, and town hall meetings to gather interest and understand what most workers prefer can offer insight into the feasibility of shorter shifts but more days. An alternative recommendation is to increase break times for recovery during the shift. This option means less productive time each shift, but a trial in select warehouses could provide data on cost/benefit of less volume from the increased break times versus improved productivity and cost savings from reduced turnover.

Restructure Overnight Shifts and Transfer Policies

This recommendation addresses the schedule hardships in the third major theme. Several commenters mentioned transfer request denials as the reason they resigned. Then they applied as external applicants to open positions on their preferred shift and were often rehired. It appears Amazon prioritizes external hires over internal transfers for preferred shifts. If this is true, changing the policy to prioritize internal transfers would reduce turnover and begin to address the reported eight billion dollars (Segal, 2022) spent annually on replacing staff.

Also, this category had a significant number of reasons from AMs and AAs since both disliked the overnight shifts and long hours. Addressing long hours for hourly AAs was already discussed in the second recommendation. As for salaried AMs, the recommendation is to assess the workload requiring twelve to thirteen hours for ways to eliminate or consolidate tasks and reduce the shift by one to two hours. In addition, a data-based determination is required to decide if the benefits of running night shifts outweigh the costs associated with replacing staff that leave due to overnight shifts. If day shifts do not have enough capacity to ship required volumes and eliminating night shifts is not feasible, the recommendation is to reduce the number of night shifts from seven days a week to four or five. This option requires less headcount per week staffed on overnights while moving more headcount to day shifts. Although there would likely still be higher turnover on nights versus days, there would be less overall turnover.

Conclusion

Currently, the US is in an era of low unemployment, quiet quitting, and rage applying as worker sentiment continues its evolution away from acquiescence to command and control organizational structures. Therefore, understanding the root causes of employee dissatisfaction can help employers progress toward employee-focused models by developing tailored retention programs. Amazon has acknowledged the need to adapt with an updated mission statement indicating its intent to become Earth's most employee-centric company. Data-based recommendations, like those in this case study, may enable Amazon's retention strategies to achieve this goal without trial-and-error cycles draining resources.

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