

Inside Amazon's Kent fulfillment center, a proving ground for the company's coronavirus response

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The four-year-old Amazon fulfillment center in Kent, Wash., has played an outsized role in the company's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Employees there began sounding alarms to management in the first half of March, and then to reporters, as the virus began spreading in the Seattle-area and demand from customers spiked. The facility—the closest of its kind to Amazon's Seattle headquarters—became a proving ground for several new safety measures implemented by the commerce giant, including coronavirus testing.

The last three anxious months have brought dramatic changes to the Kent warehouse as the company learned on the fly how to operate during a pandemic. Updates refined at the facility have been implemented across Amazon's empire.

BFI4, as the Kent facility is known (the first three letters matching the airport code for Boeing Field) has also served as a media backdrop as Amazon sought to publicize its safety measures amid a chorus of criticism. It was featured, though not clearly identified, in Amazon-produced segments run by local television news channels across the country last month. Amazon operations chief Dave Clark gave a virtual tour of the warehouse, the size of about 25 football fields, on "60 Minutes."

About 3,000 people work at BFI4, 600 to 800 per shift. The first COVID-positive [employee](#) there was reported in late March. "We just had another case, so you better get some gloves on," a worker told a reporter leaving the facility earlier this month. (Gloves are not required, though many workers wear them routinely. Everyone must wear masks.)

Hundreds more employees have tested positive across Amazon's network, with higher concentrations reported at fulfillment centers in Minnesota and Pennsylvania. The company has declined to release a full count or details about specific sites, maintaining that infection rates among its workforce have generally remained at or below those of surrounding communities. "We utilize a variety of data to closely monitor the safety of our buildings and there is strong evidence that our employees are not proliferating the virus at work," said Kelly Cheeseman, director of external communications for Amazon worldwide operations.

Changes that some BFI4 employees pressed for, such as daily temperature screenings—as recommended March 11 for all Seattle-area employers by health officials—and scores of others made through both top-down directives and suggestions from employees and management at various Amazon warehouses, are now in place.

All eyes on Amazon

"We looked at every process that existed in the building," Cheeseman said. "We evaluated, do we need that still? Could we adjust it or remove it all together?"

The rollout of these measures during the spring was uneven, with employees at some of Amazon's more than 550 U.S. distribution facilities in late April and May calling out ongoing failures to adhere to social distancing rules; inadequate cleaning; confusion about notification of positive cases and contact tracing; and frustration with the process of applying for leaves of absence and pay promised to those sickened with COVID-19.

More recently, the volume of complaints has quieted. Five BFI4 employees who had raised concerns to The Seattle Times in March and

April did not respond to questions about changes implemented since.

Amazon expects to have racked up at least \$4 billion in coronavirus costs during the three-month period ending Tuesday. That, coupled with its already high profile and the toll the virus has taken on its workers, has driven a surge of interest from health officials, regulators, elected officials and other businesses seeking to monitor and learn from the company's pandemic response.

Amazon intends to oblige as much as it can, Cheeseman said, adding that the company has had reporters tour buildings in dozens of locations across the country to see safety measures and expects to do more.

How it works

Safety measures are evident as soon as you approach the front door. A white adhesive self-cleaning surface covers the door handles—implemented first at a Denver warehouse and spread throughout the system. A janitor came by to clean the handles, as part of a stepped-up sanitation practice including a tripling of cleaning staff.

Everyone's temperature is taken on arrival each day by an infrared camera, one of a suite of precautions meant to keep sick or potentially sick workers out of the facility. Temperature screens have turned away a "low percentage" of employees across the company, Cheeseman said, but some people flagged for elevated temperatures later tested positive for COVID-19.

An employee turned away by the temperature scan is paid for up to five hours that day and asked to stay home until they've been free of fever for at least 72 hours without medication. During their absence, they may use any paid-time off they have or apply for a leave of absence.

Cheeseman said the screenings serve as a reminder "that we want you to be using your paid or unpaid time off if you're not feeling well."

Amazon's temporary unlimited unpaid time off policy was replaced in May. Now, if employees need to miss work to care for a family member or if they are at elevated risk from COVID-19, they can apply for leaves of absence.

Reminders of COVID-19 and what to do about it, both on and off the clock, are displayed conspicuously. One offers tips for safety while commuting to work, another describes proper mask handling.

"When people leave here, they remember the things they're seeing," Cheeseman said. "That's important because everybody is not just working through this pandemic. They're living through it as well."

BFI4 is one of a handful of Amazon buildings where the company is offering employees coronavirus tests.

"We feel like if coronavirus persists, a very real solution for operating our buildings will be to regularly test employees," Cheeseman said.

"We're investing hundreds of millions of dollars in testing."

Employees can self-administer a nose-swab test, under the supervision of medical staff, once every two weeks and are reminded to do so, though it's not mandatory. While Amazon is building its own testing lab, samples taken at BFI4 are currently processed by the University of Washington. Employees agree to share test results with Amazon and public health officials.

The technology linking employee names, identifications, test kits, the lab system and Amazon's internal AtoZ app was built by Amazon technicians in Seattle. "Testing started here first ... in part so we could closely evaluate" the new process, Cheeseman said. The teams building

the technology could see first-hand how it was working and make adjustments before it was rolled out elsewhere.

The company is fine-tuning its messaging about testing. Cheeseman said employees who are feeling sick shouldn't come to work just to get a test. Those employees are encouraged to consult their doctor to get a test outside of work.

Wall signs and taped lines and other markings on the floor direct people to keep 6 feet apart, but social distancing is an ongoing challenge—more so in other Amazon facilities such as those that handle fresh groceries and smaller stations where packages are handed off to contract drivers for delivery to customers. Those tend to be more crowded, making distancing more difficult, workers have said.

Amazon redeployed 28 employees at BFI4 from their typical jobs to be "social distancing ambassadors." They stand near high-traffic areas, such as outside the break rooms and bathrooms, reminding people to stay 6 feet apart and calling out anyone not wearing their mask properly, among other tasks.

That measure alone will cost Amazon an estimated \$85 million in lost productivity through the first half of the year. "They're no longer doing that picking and packing," Cheeseman said.

In addition, the building's camera systems have been used to identify high-traffic areas where more social distancing cues were needed. More recently, cameras were paired with a software system developed by Amazon's engineers and monitors to provide real-time feedback to people who are getting too close.

A 50-inch monitor placed at an intersection of two busy hallways shows people as they walk by a camera. They're circled in green if they're

sufficiently distant from one another, and in red if they aren't. The Distance Assistant system was tested at BFI4. The company plans to deploy hundreds more at other facilities in coming weeks.

Last week, Amazon made the code for the system available to anyone for free.

Making adjustments

The cavernous fulfillment center is filled with the din of miles of conveyor belts, boxes being folded and filled and taped closed, yellow totes stacked and unstacked, a corps of orange robot trolleys moving racks of merchandise from one human workstation to another.

At one of those stations on the fourth floor, Mary Peters, who lives in Tukwila, took a moment away from moving items from bins on robot-delivered racks into totes of customer orders. These workstations were already more than 6 feet apart from each other, so not much change was needed here. A well-stocked sanitation station with hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes is a few steps away. That's the case throughout most of the building.

Peters, who began working for Amazon last September, described a "really hectic" few months as safety changes were implemented amid broader coronavirus fears.

"It did change to a better stage, where I know I'm safe working here," she said from behind the blue and green BFI4 buff with a Seattle skyline covering her nose and mouth.

Some employees have worried that time spent on COVID-related [safety measures](#), such as washing hands, cleaning workstations, talking to human resources or being tested on site, would cause their closely

monitored productivity rates to suffer. Flagging productivity has, in the past, led to termination. Cheeseman said any employee can take the time they need for COVID-related tasks "without impact."

Other COVID-driven changes have sapped the output of the facility as a whole. Two employees used to work side-by-side loading boxes into the backs of outbound semitrailers. "That creates a certain amount of efficiency of how many trailers you pack," Cheeseman said.

Now, due to distancing requirements, only one person can load the trailers at a time. Cheeseman said Amazon has eased productivity expectations.

Amazon's operations leaders continue to evaluate new measures to improve safety, restore efficiency and prepare for what is typically a rush of hiring ahead of the holiday, or "peak," season, Cheeseman said. The company hired 175,000 workers in March and April to handle the flood of pandemic orders and said 125,000 of them would be offered regular, full-time work beginning this month.

"We know we're still going to have a holiday season at Amazon and so while we feel very stabilized and very confident in the safety of our buildings and associates, we're also still meeting daily, looking at new measures, looking at what we could do further," she said.

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