

Amazon says email to employees banning TikTok was a mistake (Update)

July 10 2020, by Tali Arbel



This Feb. 25, 2020, file photo, shows the icon for TikTok in New York. Amazon has told employees to delete the popular video app TikTok from phones on which they use Amazon email, citing security risks from the China-owned app, according to reports and posts by Twitter users who said they were Amazon employees. The notice said employees must delete the app by Friday to keep access to Amazon email. Workers would still be allowed to use TikTok from an Amazon laptop browser. (AP Photo/File)

Roughly five hours after an internal email went out Friday to Amazon employees telling them to delete the popular video app TikTok from their phones, the online retailing giant appeared to backtrack, calling the ban a mistake.

"This morning's email to some of our employees was sent in error," Amazon emailed reporters just before 5 p.m. Eastern time. "There is no change to our policies right now with regard to TikTok."

Company spokeswoman Jaci Anderson declined to answer questions about what caused the confounding turnaround or error.

The initial internal email, which was disseminated widely online, told employees to delete TikTok, a video app increasingly popular with young people but also the focus of intensifying national-security and geopolitical concerns because of its Chinese ownership. The email cited the app's "security risks."

An Amazon employee who confirmed receipt of the initial email but was not authorized to speak publicly had not seen a retraction at the time of Amazon's backtrack.

Amazon is the second-largest U.S. private employer after Walmart. Moving against TikTok could have escalated pressure on the app in a big way, particularly if other companies did the same. The U.S. military already bans TikTok on employee phones and the company is subject to a national-security review of its merger history.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said this week that the government was "certainly looking" at banning the app, setting off confused and irritated posts as well as jokes by TikTok users.

Chinese internet company ByteDance owns TikTok, which is designed for users outside of China; it also makes a Chinese version called Douyin. Like YouTube, TikTok relies on its users for the videos that populate its app. It has a reputation for fun, goofy videos and is popular with young people, including millions of Americans.

But critics have cited concerns, including the possibility of TikTok censoring videos, such as those critical of the Chinese government, sharing user data with Chinese officials, and violating kids' privacy. TikTok has said it doesn't censor videos based on topics sensitive to China and it would not give the Chinese government access to U.S. user data even if asked.

TikTok said earlier in the day that Amazon did not notify it before sending the initial email around midday Eastern time Friday. That email read, "The TikTok app is no longer permitted on mobile devices that access Amazon email." To retain mobile access to company email, employees had to delete the TikTok app by the end of the day.

"We still do not understand their concerns," TikTok said at the time, adding that the company would welcome a dialogue to address Amazon's issues. A TikTok spokeswoman declined to comment further Friday evening.

TikTok has been trying to appease critics in the U.S. and distance itself from its Chinese roots, but finds itself caught in an increasingly sticky geopolitical web.

It recently named a new CEO, former Disney executive Kevin Mayer, a move experts said could help it navigate U.S. regulators. And it is stopping operations in Hong Kong because of a new Chinese national security law that led Facebook, Google and Twitter to also stop providing user data to Hong Kong authorities.

Pompeo said the U.S. government remains concerned about TikTok and referred to the administration's crackdown on Chinese telecom firms Huawei and ZTE. Washington has tried to convince allies to root Huawei out of telecom networks with mixed success. President Donald Trump has also said he is willing to use Huawei as a bargaining chip in trade talks. Huawei has denied that it enables spying by the Chinese government.

A U.S. national-security agency has been reviewing ByteDance's purchase of TikTok's precursor, Musical.ly. Meanwhile, privacy groups say TikTok has been violating children's privacy, even after the Federal Trade Commission fined the company in 2019 for collecting personal information from children without their parents' consent. Concerns aren't limited to the U.S. India this month banned dozens of Chinese apps, including TikTok, citing privacy concerns, amid tensions between the countries.

Amazon may have been concerned about a Chinese-owned app's access to employee data because the U.S. government says China [regularly steals](#) U.S. intellectual property, said Susan Ariel Aaronson, a professor at George Washington University and a data governance and national-security expert.

Part of Amazon's motivation with the ban, now apparently reversed, may also have been political, Aaronson said, since Amazon "doesn't want to alienate the Trump administration."

Seattle-based Amazon and its founder, Jeff Bezos, are frequent targets of Trump. Bezos personally owns The Washington Post, which Trump has called "fake news." Last year, Amazon sued the U.S. government, saying that Trump's "personal vendetta" against Amazon, Bezos and the Post led it to lose a \$10 billion cloud computing contract with the Pentagon to rival Microsoft. Meanwhile, federal regulators as well as

Congress are pursuing antitrust investigations at Amazon as well as other tech giants.

© 2020 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: Amazon says email to employees banning TikTok was a mistake (Update) (2020, July 10) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2020-07-amazon-bars-video-app-tiktok.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.