

'They think they can do anything': Amazon psychologist describes bullying, discrimination on the job

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An organizational psychologist formerly employed by Amazon on the management team of a Spokane, Washington distribution center claims he was fired for speaking up about bullying and inappropriate behavior

by a key leader at the massive, roboticized warehouse.

Jonathan Fahlberg, formerly a senior business partner for human resources, contends Amazon management failed to respond when he raised concerns about his supervisor, who he claims propositioned him and then retaliated against him. Instead, they were both summarily fired in late 2020 after Fahlberg made a formal request for support.

In an employment discrimination lawsuit filed in Spokane County Superior Court, Fahlberg contends he was fired in part because he is gay. Fahlberg, 46, said he found himself on the receiving end of an Amazon HR system he says fails to support workers or remove toxic managers.

"Given that they're approaching being the world's largest employer," he said, "they think they can do anything."

Amazon has aggressively defended itself, denying all allegations of misconduct while winning a protective order meant to shield Amazon's human resources processes from public disclosure.

"We disagree with the allegations made in the case, and have no tolerance for retaliation, intimidation or harassment against employees," said Maria Boschetti, an Amazon spokesperson. Boschetti declined to take questions about the matter.

Through her attorney, Fahlberg's former manager has also denied Fahlberg's claims that she groped him during a visit to his Spokane apartment while acknowledging she went to his home that night. Amazon has also admitted in [court filings](#) that Fahlberg's manager visited him at his home that night.

Fahlberg's arrival at Amazon in summer 2020 was colored by tragedy.

For 17 years, the Spokane-raised organizational and behavioral psychologist had lived in Europe, where he grew a human resources consultancy in London. Fahlberg left London in August 2018 following the death of his husband, Michael Rittiman. Bereaved and broke after Rittiman's cancer wiped them out financially, Fahlberg headed for home and, ultimately, to Amazon.

In the spring and summer of 2020, Amazon was preparing to open a new "fulfillment center" near Spokane International Airport. The facility is heavy on robots but still requires hundreds of human employees to keep packages moving. Hired in July 2020 while the warehouse was under construction, Fahlberg was brought on to provide human resources support for the 1,500 or so workers expected to be employed there.

Tasked with managing a team that bounced between six and nine people, Fahlberg said he received almost no training for work that involved 32 different software systems.

"I literally got, 'Here's your computer, do your job,'" Fahlberg said. "From the very beginning, it was a very negative experience."

Fahlberg attempted to strike up a friendship with his manager, a woman who'd recently arrived in Spokane. He said the relationship took a turn on the night of Aug. 15, 2020, as Fahlberg was marking the second anniversary of his late husband's death. His manager came to his apartment and, according to Fahlberg, groped him during an unsolicited sexual advance that shocked him.

In court papers, Fahlberg contends his manager began verbally abusing him shortly thereafter, criticizing him in front of colleagues and forcing him to work nights. During one 15-hour shift, Fahlberg said she refused to allow him to leave to care for his dying mother.

"I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye to my mother, because she kept me at the fulfillment center," Fahlberg said in an interview.

As summer turned to fall, the bullying and verbal abuse intensified, said Ryan Best, the Spokane-based attorney representing Fahlberg. During a one-on-one meeting that September, Best said in court papers, Fahlberg's manager told him "that no one liked him and proceeded to make fun of the way [he] stood, dressed, and spoke." She then threatened to punish him, the attorney continued, if he told others about the night she propositioned him.

"Mr. Fahlberg was terrified at the blatant threat to his career should he choose to seek help for the unwanted sexual advances," Best said in court papers.

Writing the court, the woman's attorney said she accepted an invitation to Fahlberg's apartment but denied that anything untoward occurred during the Aug. 15 visit. Her attorney, who did not return repeated requests for comment, described her as "happily married" and denied Fahlberg's claim that he was groped. In court papers, the attorney also denied Fahlberg's assertion that he was prevented from caring for his mother the night she died.

Fahlberg in late October submitted a complaint against his manager through Amazon's human resources system for HR workers, HR4HR, and spoke with a representative for more than an hour.

"I was struggling and I was begging for training," Fahlberg said during an interview. "It had gotten to the point that I could not handle it anymore."

During his conversation with an Amazon HR4HR representative, Fahlberg requested a transfer within the company and shared that he was concerned he'd been placed in FOCUS, a performance improvement

system. Amazon employees monitored through FOCUS are generally ineligible for transfers, Fahlberg's attorneys contend, and are treated as problem employees.

Fahlberg was fired Nov. 16, 2020, following a brief meeting with upper management at the Spokane facility. According to filings by Fahlberg's attorneys, his manager was fired weeks later on Dec. 4.

"They admitted that something was wrong and they fired her, but they wouldn't give me my job back," Fahlberg said.

Amazon usually places employees who are in danger of termination in a program called Pivot, described by Amazon as an improvement program. They're offered successively less generous separation packages, offers that fall from about three months in paid severance that dwindle to one week's pay if the employee refuses to leave voluntarily.

Fahlberg said he wasn't offered a severance package and that Amazon attempted to claw back a signing bonus that wasn't contingent on his performance. Best contends Amazon was "cleaning house" when it fired Fahlberg and his manager. The company, he said, refused to provide documents relevant to Fahlberg's claims and recently won a protective order meant to limit access to documents it has handed over during the litigation.

"I believe Amazon is hiding documents," Best said in early January. "I think [those documents are] going to show that Amazon wanted to get rid of Mr. Fahlberg because he was gay, and because his supervisor had behaved inappropriately."

Prodded by employees who circulated a petition, Amazon is currently conducting a broad investigation into how discrimination claims are reviewed at the company's cloud computing arm, Amazon Web Services.

That inquiry follows the firing Cindy Warner, a gay woman who had been an executive with AWS, and the departure of another worker, Laudon Williams, both of whom described hearing homophobic comments from Amazon leaders. Warner is pursuing a discrimination lawsuit against Amazon.

Throughout Amazon, employees generally use an Amazon-run instant messaging platform, Chime. Amazon retains control of Chime messages, which Fahlberg didn't have access to after his firing.

One text message exchange that has been disclosed appears to show one Amazon manager directing another—who said he wanted to "cya for [amazon](#)"—to include an attorney on any future correspondence about a problematic incident. Doing so, the senior manager contended, would shield the exchange from disclosure if a lawsuit was filed under attorney-client privilege protections meant to allow people to speak candidly with their lawyers.

"Slight change in approach," the senior manager wrote in an Oct. 5, 2020, exchange. "Email to me ... but make sure [Amazon senior corporate counsel for labor and employment] Jaime Cole is in the To line and put ACP in the subject. It puts all conversation about it under attorney-client privilege."

Best said Amazon leadership believes the company can do as it likes without regard to state prohibitions on retaliation, hostile work environments and discrimination.

"We're just seeking accountability," he said. "Even large companies need to follow the law."

Talking about his former employer, Fahlberg returned again and again to the notion that he'd been misled. Amazon, he said, put itself forward as a

place where anyone, regardless of their race, gender identity or sexual orientation, could build a career. The truth was far from that mark.

"This diversity image that they portray, it's a facade," Fahlberg said. "I simply want people to understand that they are not this happy company. ... And I hope it never happens to another person."

While litigation that may delay a trial continues, the case is scheduled to go to a Spokane County jury in September.

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