

A look inside Amazon's new Minnesota facility: Prayer rooms, ablution stations and 'Chutes and Ladders'

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Amazon knows its workforce.

The Seattle-based e-commerce giant recently opened its Woodbury Sort Center with about 300 [employees](#). Many are of Somali descent, so the 520,000-square-foot facility—the first Amazon facility in the east metro—includes signs in Somali. Translation services also are provided.

Three prayer rooms and pre-prayer ablution stations for Muslim purification rituals of washing the hands, head and feet are located throughout the site. Each prayer room and ablution station has separate areas for women and men to wash and pray.

"They're multi-faith rooms for anyone of any faith to practice in," Katie Riegelman, the center's site leader, said during a recent tour. "Folks are welcome to pray as they need to, practice as they need to."

There are also soundproof phone booths in case an employee needs to make a [phone call](#), and lactation rooms for nursing mothers.

The facility, located on a 73-acre plot at Hudson Road and Manning Avenue, is just starting to ramp up, and construction continues inside on the building's 330,000-square-foot mezzanine level. Once the mezzanine level is completed, packages will be sorted by robots and other automated machines on the upper level and then travel through 295 spiral conveyor belts to the lower level.

"It looks like 'Chutes and Ladders,' " said Amazon spokesman Scott Seroka.

Eventually, as many as 1,000 employees could work at the sort center, which is considered a "middle-mile" facility. That's where an Amazon package stops between the warehouse and shipping destination, Riegelman said.

A river of packages—in all shapes and sizes—flowed through Woodbury on Tuesday afternoon after first shift started at 3 p.m.

"That's our job: to keep a nice steady package flow going to our associates," Riegelman said.

Each package was scanned and sent to one of three different areas—labeled A, B and C. They were then further organized by ZIP code on pallets and wrapped in plastic. The last step involved loading those pallets onto trucks to be taken to a local post office.

All packages brought to Woodbury will be delivered by a postal carrier, Riegelman said.

"We know this one came from Ohio, went to Chicago, and now it is here," Riegelman said, picking up a small cardboard box that featured an advertisement for Amazon's new "The Rings of Power" series. "Now it's going to go to Pallet A06, and that's in Waterloo, Iowa."

Having a sort center on the east side of the metro area means Amazon will be able to provide even faster services to its local customers. The Woodbury center is Amazon's third large-scale facility in the metro area—after the 855,000-square-foot facility in Shakopee and its 750,000-square-foot facility in Lakeville.

The sort center is open seven days a week. Employees work four-hour shifts; the two shifts start at 3 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. A wrap-up shift starts at 12:15 a.m. Salaries start at \$18 an hour. It is at capacity now, but

Amazon officials expect to hire more people for the holiday season.

Security is tight at the facility. Every employee must swipe his or her security badge to enter the building on a metered entry. "We want to make sure we are creating a safe working environment," Riegelman said.

Employees gather in a special area before each shift starts—to stretch, listen to a safety tip and a standard-of-work tip, and do a call-and-response cheer for "MSP8," the facility's nickname in Amazon lingo.

Crew leaders also share success stories with employees, Riegelman said. "We'll talk about something that has gone well, something that we have to celebrate," she said.

Employees are encouraged to join an Amazon affinity group such as Women@Amazon, Glamazon or the Black Employee Network. The company has 13 affinity groups, also known as employee-resource groups, which bring employees together across businesses and locations around the world.

Business district

Woodbury Mayor Anne Burt said landing Amazon was a coup for the city, population 78,000.

Amazon and Kindeva Drug Delivery, a 3M offshoot, form the "bookends" of a 400-acre light-industrial, warehouse, showroom and office district in the city's northeast quadrant, Burt said.

"We've been expecting critical development in this area for a long time," she said. "The investment by Amazon is really a catalyst and really created a momentum for all the other projects that we are seeing occur there."

Woodbury City Planner Eric Searles said the Amazon facility is helping the city diversify its tax base.

City officials provided no [financial incentives](#) or tax-increment financing money for Amazon to come to Woodbury, Searles said. Instead, the developer, Ryan Cos., spent more than \$10 million to bring utilities to the site.

The Woodbury facility features one of Amazon's most distinctive bits of corporate culture: dozens of "door desks"—desks that have a top the size of a door and four-by-fours for legs. According to Amazon lore, founder Jeff Bezos didn't have much money for desks when he started the company in the summer of 1995. "He happened to find some doors on sale at Home Depot, so he decided to buy a door and put some legs on it," Seroka said.

Now, thousands of Amazon employees worldwide still work each day on modern versions of those original door desks.

"We have dozens of them in this building alone—all a nod to our beginning," Seroka said.

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