

Ex-Amazon drone manager says he was fired for raising safety concerns

January 17 2023, by Lauren Rosenblatt



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

When Cheddi Skeete joined Amazon's delivery drone project, it didn't take long before he noticed some things were awry.

There wasn't an onboarding process for new employees, he said. There wasn't a bathroom at one of the field sites, leaving the outdoors as the only option during shifts. And there were crashes. Lots of them.

Skeete lasted less than two years. He said he was denied promotions and ultimately fired in March after sharing concerns about the program and its crashes internally.

Now, almost a year since he was terminated as a program manager, Skeete is suing his former employer in King County Superior Court in Seattle. Through his attorneys, Skeete claims Amazon discriminated against him because he is a Black man and retaliated against him for raising safety concerns about the [drone](#) program.

"I care deeply about equal opportunity in the workplace, as well as the safety of Amazon's workers and the surrounding communities," Skeete said in a statement. "I hope this lawsuit holds Amazon accountable for the harm to me, but also encourages and forces them to take safety more seriously in developing their drone program."

Maria Boschetti, a spokesperson for Amazon, said in a statement Friday "these allegations are false and we look forward to proving that in court." The company declined to answer questions about the specific claims.

Back in 2013, Amazon began touting its vision to use [autonomous drones](#) to deliver packages—up to 5 pounds—to customers' homes in less than half an hour. After more than two dozen prototypes, the team—Prime Air—began piloting deliveries in Lockeford, California, last year.

As envisioned by Amazon, customers would place orders for Prime Air-eligible items. Drones would then fly to their backyards, hover, release the package and rise back up.

In April 2022, a Bloomberg investigation found the program was beset by [technical challenges](#), high turnover and safety concerns, according to internal documents, government reports and interviews with 13 current and former employees, including Skeete. A crash that June prompted [federal regulators](#) to question the drone's airworthiness, Bloomberg wrote.

Skeete began working at the team's Pendleton, Oregon, headquarters in June 2020. On his first day, Skeete said he asked if he could develop an onboarding process for new employees, hoping to fill in a gap he noticed immediately.

Skeete worked as a flight assistant, which meant he would move and load drones during test flights. Each drone weighed about 80 pounds, measured more than 5 feet across, had up to six motors and multiple bladed fans, according to the lawsuit.

Skeete "was shocked to learn about the lack of safety protocols in drone testing," the lawsuit read. In his roughly two years working there, several drones crashed, including one that ignited a 25-acre brush fire.

In October 2020, after there were so many crashes that Amazon halted operations, Skeete said the company began checking the motors on the drones, one possible source of the malfunctions. Less than two weeks later, the drones were in the air again.

Skeete recalled raising concerns. It wasn't possible to check 180 motors in that amount of time, he said.

The following month, another drone crashed, according to the lawsuit. In December, drones malfunctioned and crashed again at sites in Pendleton and Seattle.

At the same time, Skeete said, Amazon began restricting employees' access to flight information, videos and pictures. "Leadership decided against transparency," Skeete's lawyers said in court papers.

In the field, Skeete also said he pushed management to respond to the lack of bathrooms on another Oregon site, in Corvallis. It took six months to resolve, according to the lawsuit.

Meanwhile, Skeete was moving through the ranks of Amazon's internal system, starting as a Level 3 employee and rising to Level 4. Still, he felt he was consistently put at the wrong level and underpaid.

Skeete said Amazon told him it could not promote him from L3 to L4; instead, he would need to transfer laterally to get promoted. But, Skeete alleges, white employees made the switch from L3 to L4 without the same stipulation.

He again ran into roadblocks securing a promotion from L4 to L5, despite gaining a new title of program manager. Among about 67 Prime Air program managers, Skeete alleges, he was the only L4; all others were L5. Skeete also said he was one of only two Black employees among the Prime Air program managers.

Hoping to transfer teams, Skeete said his manager blocked him despite positive reviews and recommendations from other people at the company. Skeete believes those attempts to quash his job search related to the safety and workplace concerns he raised.

Skeete attempted to contact human resources three times with complaints of discrimination and retaliation, and to report safety concerns with the drone testing and potential violations of Federal Aviation Administration rules.

An HR worker later told Skeete they had "accidentally deleted" some of his complaints.

A month later, Amazon told Skeete there was no merit to his complaints, the lawsuit alleges, and fired him the same day.

In court, Skeete is seeking lost earnings as well as compensation for legal fees and emotional distress.

©2023 The Seattle Times.

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Ex-Amazon drone manager says he was fired for raising safety concerns (2023, January 17) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2023-01-ex-amazon-drone-safety.html>

<p>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.</p>
--