

Amazon relies on 'serendipity' for office return; employees want data

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Adam Selipsky, head of Amazon's cloud computing business, wouldn't give employees any data to back up the decision to require workers to come back to the office.

But he did have some stories to share, according to an Amazon Web Services [employee](#) who attended the all-hands meeting.

A discussion with a quantum computing professor in Tel Aviv, Israel, sparked a second, impromptu meeting with a different group of [employees](#), Selipsky said at the all-hands. Though that technology lesson may not have changed those workers' lives, Selipsky continued, it still exemplifies "the serendipity" of a return to the office.

Over the course of the year, "just think about ... the serendipitous things that can happen," Selipsky said, according to a transcript of the meeting shared with The Seattle Times by the Virginia-based AWS employee and later by Amazon.

"Serendipity" seemed to be the crux of Selipsky's argument for a return-to-office mandate. "Actual data ... it's very hard to come by," he said, especially "any data that I think would stand scrutiny."

For some Amazon employees, "serendipity" isn't enough. Workers who have asked the company to share data have been provided anecdotes and a consistent trope that innovation is more likely to happen in person.

That has left some workers feeling demoralized, distracted and undervalued as they struggle to stay focused and motivated, according to interviews and internal communications shared with The Times.

An Amazon manager, who is based on the East Coast and asked to speak anonymously to protect their job, said it is "dehumanizing," and feels as if leadership doesn't trust its employees to understand their reasoning. In Slack messages, employees anonymously posted that Amazon's decisions were "dystopian" and creating "just a horrible situation."

About 30,000 people signed a petition in March asking the company to

reconsider its mandate. A group of workers sent two more letters to Beth Galetti, Amazon's head of human resources, asking for information, specifically what metrics Amazon used to inform its decision. Some workers walked off the job in protest.

"The biggest thing that people have complaints about at the moment is the lack of communication and the lack of transparency on what the expectations are right now and what are the expectations shortly down the road," said the AWS employee, who asked to remain anonymous to protect their job. "It's like pulling teeth to get anything there."

Amazon said it has communicated extensively with employees on its decision. On different occasions and in different forums, the company shared observations that led to its updated policy, Amazon said in response to questions from The Times.

Amazon asked workers to come back "because we believe it would yield the best long-term results for our customers, business and culture," Amazon spokesperson Brad Glasser said. "We knew that there would be some adjustment period, so we've worked to support people as they've figured out their routines."

"With three months under our belt, and a lot more people back in the office, we're reiterating our expectation that people join their teammates at least three days in the office," he continued.

The company declined requests from The Times to share any data points that factored into its decision to change the remote work policy.

Unanswered questions

Amazon workers have been asking the company for more information since it announced the change in February. The mandate went into effect

in May.

Announcing the mandate, CEO Andy Jassy told employees that it was easier to "learn, model, practice and strengthen our culture" when workers were in the office together most of the time. The company tried many different models of hybrid work and determined that collaborating and inventing is easier and more effective when people are working from the office, Jassy continued.

Employees found out about the change by email—days after an all-staff meeting. One employee who asked to remain anonymous to protect their job said they felt leadership didn't want to "hear the reaction."

It isn't the first time Amazon employees have felt disillusioned by recent company decisions. Complaints about confusion, surprise and lack of data to back up company decisions echo the same concerns workers expressed when Amazon began job cuts last year. The company has laid off 27,000 employees since November.

After Amazon announced the return-to-office mandate, workers formed a Slack instant messaging channel to share frustrations and details on the policy. In March, employees submitted a petition asking Amazon to reconsider.

In May, hundreds of employees walked off the job in protest of the mandate, in a joint action with a group of workers calling on the company to do more to address its impact on climate change. Organizers said nearly 2,000 people joined the walkout while Amazon said about 300 participated in Seattle.

Workers were surprised again in July, when Amazon began telling some they would have to relocate as part of the mandate.

Glasser said then that Amazon continues to "look at the best ways to bring more teams together in the same locations, and we'll communicate directly with employees as we make decisions that affect them."

But, the Virginia-based AWS employee who asked to remain anonymous, said that didn't match their experience. Amazon did not offer any official communication about the relocation requirement, the employee said, and co-workers continued to be surprised as they learned they were impacted.

That employee said it can be hard to focus on work with so much uncertainty. Many co-workers turned to Slack to make sense of what Amazon shared.

"You can spend your whole day watching the Slack channel and see things change hour by hour," they said.

Hoping to get more answers, employees asked 14 questions about the return-to-office mandate at Selipsky's all-hands meeting in June, according to a spreadsheet obtained by The Times of all the questions submitted virtually.

"For people who feel that their voices, input and concerns were ignored during the return to office mandate, what can AWS do to repair their broken trust?" one employee asked. About 150 people signaled they hoped Selipsky would address the inquiry.

"What metrics, if any, are you using to evaluate whether RTO has been a success?" another employee asked. "If those metrics indicate that it has not been a success, when will you re-evaluate the RTO edict?" More than 200 people upvoted that query.

Selipsky did not answer any questions regarding return to office,

according to the spreadsheet. He opted instead for questions about hiring and artificial intelligence.

Amazon told The Times it could not address every question about the company's return-to-office decision. It said it has worked to answer questions about employees' individual situations in a timely manner.

Mike Hopkins, [senior vice president](#) at Prime Video and Amazon Studios, told employees at another all-hands meeting that the return to office is working, according to a copy of his remarks Amazon shared with The Times. "I don't have data to back it up, but I know it's better."

Jassy also opted not to share data about return to office in an all-hands meeting he led, according to the AWS employee. Jassy instead answered a question about the types of music he had been listening to.

Amazon's direction

The East Coast-based manager starts every morning looking for emails or news on which workers Amazon will require to relocate. The two top performers on their team might be on that list, and the manager worries they'll quit rather than move.

"I cannot afford losing them," the manager said. If it comes to it, the manager told those employees, "you can stay with me in my house."

Glasser, the Amazon spokesperson, said the relocation mandate affects a "relatively small percentage of our team and it's not a one-size-fits all approach." Employees are encouraged to talk to HR or their manager if they don't feel they have all the information they need, Glasser added.

But the East Coast manager said they "don't have answers."

They're frustrated by the lack of clarity and are fielding questions from other members of their team. As a manager, they're still not sure if they will have any decision-making power in determining who has to show up and who might get an exception.

The manager said they've been less productive since returning to the office. Without any cubicles or assigned workspaces, there is no privacy, they said. Anyone can overhear your phone call or peek at your monitor.

Amazon contends the return has gone well, both for workers and the communities where it operates. In Seattle, Amazon's return to its South Lake Union campus has led to an 82% increase in foot traffic between May and July and an 86% increase in credit card transactions at restaurants in the neighborhood, according to data shared from Amazon.

Janet Phan, a senior technical product manager based in Redmond, said she feels Amazon has done a good job communicating expectations with employees. The company gave employees advanced notice of the upcoming change, so they had time to plan out how the new requirements would fit into their daily lives, said Phan, who was connected with The Times through Amazon.

Metrics are "not a concern for me," she said, adding that it would be hard to measure something like baseline productivity before and after remote work. On her team, nobody's asking "Why are they doing this to us?" Phan said.

Some employees welcomed the return to office mandate, and told The Times they were looking forward to seeing co-workers in person, solidifying a distinction between work and home, and drumming up business for the shops and restaurants around Amazon's campus.

Selipsky told AWS employees at the all-hands meeting in June he had

seen the benefits of working in person firsthand. After sitting for a press interview, Selipsky and his team wanted to make changes to an upcoming press release.

If completed remotely, work on those changes could have taken hours, Selipsky said, as the string of emails and virtual meetings lingered. In person, it took eight minutes.

He told employees it was "important to have backbone," and to "vigorously express" our points of view. "Defend them even when they're unpopular," he said.

"I don't say that there's a single homogenous reaction [to return to office]," Selipsky continued, "But ... this is our direction. This is what we're doing."

"Nothing is clear"

In August, three months after the return to office mandate went into effect, Amazon indicated for the first time some employees may not be complying—and that it would step up enforcement.

"We now have three months under our belt with a lot more people back in the office, and you can feel the surge in energy and collaboration happening among Amazonians and across teams," Amazon wrote in an email to some employees.

"We are reaching out as you are not currently meeting our expectation of joining your colleagues in the office at least three days a week," the email continued. "We expect you to start coming into the office...."

Amazon said it sent the email only to employees who met certain criteria: those who had badged in fewer than three days a week for five

of the past eight weeks, or those that hadn't met the requirement for three of the past four weeks. That only applied to workers whose building had been fully open for at least two months.

The company said it took steps to ensure the email went to the correct recipients but there may be cases where it did not.

That email added to the confusion workers were already facing, according to internal Slack messages. It was sent to employees who believe they had been complying with the mandate.

The East Coast manager didn't receive the email but said, lately, "we just don't know what to do. ... Nothing is clear right now."

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