

Ex-Amazonian critical of return-to-office mandate says she was forced out

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Standing outside Amazon's Seattle headquarters in May, Pamela Hayter told her colleagues she wasn't nervous.

"We're here today because it's the right thing to do," the eight-year Amazon veteran said to a group of employees who had participated in a walkout in hopes of getting the company to reconsider a recently issued return-to-office mandate.

Hayter was one of the only then-current Amazon employees to take the microphone at the May event. Weeks before, she had created a Slack channel, titled #remote-advocacy, which became the meeting ground for workers to share concerns about RTO, draft a petition against the policy, and plan the walkout where Hayter addressed a crowd of hundreds.

By August, Hayter had left Amazon and accused her former employer of retaliation for her remote work advocacy.

Hayter filed an unfair labor practice complaint against Amazon that month, alleging the company forced her out under false pretenses and left her unable to dispute the claims.

Amazon disagrees with most of Hayter's assertions and maintains Hayter wasn't penalized for voicing criticism.

"We respect the right of every [employee](#) to share their experience, but these claims are without merit and we will demonstrate that through the [legal process](#)," spokesperson Rob Munoz said. "The truth is that Ms. Hayter was told that she was not meeting expectations many months before we updated our RTO guidance and the two issues are completely unrelated."

Today, Hayter, formerly an executive assistant and program manager at Amazon, is still searching for her next permanent role, and suspects her vocal support for remote work may be putting off potential employers. She still hears from Amazon employees daily—many of whom she didn't know but said they needed someone to talk to about concerns with

returning to the office and life after Amazon.

"I didn't think anything of it when I started that (Slack) channel. I didn't even really start it with this idea of activism in mind," Hayter said in a recent interview. "I just wanted a space where people could kind of talk. And I myself needed that space."

"But even with knowing what I know now, I still would have gone a little harder," she continued. "I wish I had had the guts to be even louder."

'The nail in my coffin'

Amazon announced in February it would soon require employees to work from the office at least three days a week. CEO Andy Jassy told employees Amazon had experimented with different forms of remote work over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and had ultimately decided that in-person collaboration fostered innovation.

Enforcement of the mandate varied by location, as Amazon prepared its buildings to welcome thousands of employees back. In Seattle, most buildings reopened by June.

Leading up to the reopening, tens of thousands of Amazonians urged the company to reconsider, expressing concerns about commutes, caregiving and the mental burden of working from an office, a burden heightened for women and people of color.

Roughly 20,000 employees signed a petition in March asking for a more flexible policy. About 2,000 employees participated in the walkout in May, according to organizers. Amazon estimates 300 employees participated in Seattle.

Hayter said the group took action because they thought leadership didn't

know this sentiment existed. Then, when it was clear leadership had heard the concerns, the group wanted Amazon to share the data and reasoning behind the RTO decision. "It didn't seem as if we were being considered at all," she said.

The walkout, Hayter said, "was the nail in my coffin."

Shortly after, Hayter said she received an email from Amazon's employee relations team, letting her know they were opening an investigation after a complaint that Hayter had encouraged her colleagues to "be angry" at the company and "tell leadership we aren't going to take it anymore."

Hayter said investigators reviewed the remote advocacy Slack channel. They closed the investigation after about a week, she said, telling her they did not find any evidence.

Amazon maintains there was not a formal investigation. The company says the Slack messages channel did not prompt any actions.

Hayter's trouble started before then, though, according to both Hayter and Amazon.

In April, about two months after Amazon's RTO announcement and the creation of the Slack channel, Hayter said she received a "below the bar" ranking on an annual review. That was the first time she had received a negative review after eight years at Amazon, Hayter said.

Her manager told her she wasn't "bringing them along on the journey," was "too insular" and that the company didn't know her processes for getting work done, Hayter recalled.

In July, Hayter said Amazon placed her in Pivot, a performance

improvement plan that sets strict benchmarks for employees. If employees miss them, they can be fired. At Amazon, Pivot is known for being nearly impossible to escape.

Hayter said her manager told her she failed to meet all of Amazon's leadership principles, specifically docking her on earning trust, delivering results and having a bias for action.

Amazon disputes Hayter's timeline. The company said Hayter was told she wasn't meeting expectations before the return-to-office mandate, and that it had worked to help her identify solutions and other roles that better fit her desire to work virtually. Amazon did not deny that Hayter had received coaching and been placed in the performance management program.

Asked about Pivot in general, Amazon said employees have multiple avenues if they feel they are not receiving a fair assessment of their performance. Hayter ultimately chose to leave the company, Amazon said.

"While we normally wouldn't discuss an individual's performance, Ms. Hayter decided to publicly share inaccurate information and we think it's important to correct the record," said Munoz, the spokesperson.

Fearing Pivot was the beginning of the end of her time at Amazon, Hayter resigned. Her last day was Aug. 1.

Fear 'permeates everything'

Backed by the United Food and Commercial Workers union, Hayter is now pursuing an unfair labor practice complaint filed with the National Labor Relations Board.

Attorneys for Hayter and the UFCW argue in the complaint that Amazon violated labor law by "discharging" Hayter's employment due to her "support for fellow Amazon employees' working conditions."

Amazon faced a similar charge in 2020, after two employees who had criticized the company's impact on [climate change](#) and its treatment of warehouse workers also accused Amazon of retaliation. The NLRB ruled Amazon had illegally retaliated against those two employees when it fired them that year.

Now, Hayter's departure and the legal complaint could feed the fear of speaking out that some Amazon employees have felt since the RTO announcement. While some workers say they feel comfortable expressing their opinion and that Amazon has done a good job informing workers of the expectations around RTO, others say there's an indication that leadership no longer wants to hear any criticism.

One employee who asked to remain anonymous to protect their job said they were told in a meeting that leadership is "at their wit's end of people not coming in."

Even for people who do want to comply, there's uncertainty around how to do so, the employee said. Different managers' "difference of opinion could lead to me getting fired," the employee said. "There's some rule books that we haven't seen."

In August, Amazon sent an email to some workers noting that they had not been coming into the office three times a week, sending a signal that the company was paying attention. In September, the company told employees it was tracking how often individuals swiped their badge to get into the building.

Earlier this month, managers received a memo on how to approach

noncompliant employees, according to Business Insider, which viewed a copy. That guidance permitted managers to take action, including termination.

"As is the case with any of our policies, we expect our team to follow them and will take appropriate action if someone chooses not to do that," Amazon's Munoz said in a statement to The Seattle Times.

As employees wait for more details on enforcement, some are still searching for the data behind Amazon's decision to change its policy. Most requests for metrics have been met with anecdotes about water cooler conversations and brainstorming on Amazon's famously ubiquitous white boards.

For Hayter, the lack of transparency made Amazon feel like a different company than the one she started at eight years ago.

Now, fear "permeates everything," she said. "If you don't toe the company line, you're out."

Three months after leaving the company, Hayter said she often gets asked if she was nervous about taking action.

"Never. Not one time," she says in response. "In my head, I kept thinking, 'What is there to retaliate against?'"

Throughout it all, she felt as if she was living up to Amazon's leadership principles. She had been just doing what "you're always told" at Amazon: "If there's a problem, solve it. And we were trying to solve it."

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