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AMAZON MAKES PUSH TO REDUCE WORKER INJURIES

Online retailer rolls out safety videos, on-the-job stretching exercises and staff meditation zones.

By Sebastian Herrera
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Amazon.com Inc. is establishing a program focused on improving the health and wellness of its hourly warehouse staffers, after years of criticism over worker safety at its depots and a pledge by Chief Executive Jeff Bezos to offer a better vision for employees.

The company said Monday that its new program, called WorkingWell, aims to better educate some of its employees on how to avoid workplace injuries and improve mental health on the job. The online retailer began testing parts of the program two years ago and plans to expand it to 1,000 facilities by the end of the year, said Heather MacDougall, vice president of world-wide workplace health and safety at Amazon. The company said it aims to cut recordable incidents in half by 2025. The program has been in 350 sites in North America and Europe.

Amazon recorded 5.6 injuries per 100 workers in 2019, the last full year of data, compared with the 4.8 rate nationally for the warehousing and storage sector, according to company and federal workplace data. Amazon says it monitors workplace injuries more closely than other companies, which might cause its reported injury rate to be higher.

Mr. Bezos said last month that the retailer needed to do a better job for employees after a recent, unsuccessful push by some Alabama warehouse workers to unionize. The vote is under appeal. In a letter to shareholders, Mr. Bezos called reports of unsafe working conditions at Amazon warehouses inaccurate.

Ms. MacDougall said Amazon, which employs about 950,000 people in the US, was acting because of the frequency of workplace injuries in the warehousing industry and because the coronavirus pandemic has heightened the awareness of healthcare needs. Amazon is particularly concerned about musculoskeletal disorders, she said in an interview. The disorders, known as MSDs, account for 40 percent of work-related injuries across the retailer's facilities, it said.

"We've recognized that there is work to be done when it comes to reducing MSDs," Ms. MacDougall said.

Under the WorkingWell program, warehouse employees gather on a rotating basis near their work stations to watch videos about injury prevention, including how to lift items properly. Depending on their roles, employees also are given hourly prompts at their stations that guide them through various stretching and breathing exercises. Amazon, which uses tools to track worker productivity, said the prompted exercise breaks can last from 30 seconds to a minute each.

The company also is installing kiosks where employees can watch videos that show guided meditations and calming scenes and sounds. New wellness zones provide dedicated spaces for workers to stretch or meditate, and the company plans to introduce a mobile app that

would let employees view similar educational tools at home. The company also is developing staffing schedules that rotate employees among jobs that use different muscle groups to reduce repetitive-stress injuries.

Amazon's program doesn't include a significant reduction in the rate at which employees are expected to work. That pace has been a source of worker complaints. Some employees, for example, are expected to take about 300 items off shelves each hour. Ms. MacDougall said the company assesses employees based on what it believes are achievable benchmarks.

"When we set rates, they are based on taking into account a variety of factors that will make sure our employees can perform the work safely," she said. "I don't think rates make our work unsafe."

Jack Dennerlein, a professor at Northeastern University whose research has focused on musculoskeletal disorders, said introducing educational tools in workplaces is often not enough to substantially reduce injuries. Generally, he said, measures that provide mechanical lifts or reconfigure how a workplace is organized have a bigger impact.

"It should be fitting the job to the human, not fitting the human to the job," Mr. Dennerlein said.

Mr. Bezos has said Amazon needs to innovate to reduce injuries.

The company's employee-safety initiative comes after a year in which its warehousing practices have been under scrutiny. Some workers held walkouts at several Amazon facilities last year to protest what they said were unsafe working conditions amid the spread of Covid-19. The company has said it spent billions of dollars to respond to the virus, including on employee testing. It recently started offering employees on-site vaccinations at warehouses.

Amazon said it is investing more than \$300 million in safety projects in 2021. Mr. Bezos said the company's emphasis on preventing injuries contributed to a 32 percent drop in musculoskeletal disorders at the retailer in 2020, compared with the previous year.