

Amazon Manager Says Black Workers Face Bias In Hiring, Pay

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By **Anne Cullen**

Law360 (March 1, 2021, 4:46 PM EST) -- Amazon was hit with a race discrimination lawsuit Monday by a Black business development head who says the retail giant discriminates against Black workers, especially women, in hiring, compensation, promotions and leadership appointments.

In a complaint filed in D.C. federal court, [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) employee Charlotte Newman said she and other Black applicants are hired at lower tiers than they're qualified for — a process she called "de-leveling" — and are paid and promoted less than their white counterparts.

Amazon has a "consistent practice of paying Black employees less than similarly situated white employees," said Newman, a former congressional adviser who is now Amazon Web Services' head of underrepresented founder startup business development. She also argued there's "a near-total lack of Black representation in and very few women" at the company's highest rungs.

Newman said the discrimination started when she was hired in 2017 for the role of public policy manager, a lower-tier position than she had sought. She said her experience, including a few years as a top adviser to Democratic Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., qualified her for a senior management role.

She wound up doing the work of the senior manager anyway, Newman said, even though she wasn't receiving the salary attached to that title or being paid as much as her white coworkers, particularly in Amazon stock options. It took more than two years for her to secure the senior title, according to the complaint.

Being a Black woman at Amazon engenders even more mistreatment, she said. An AWS director named Steven Block — also named in the suit — criticized her for being "aggressive," "too direct" and "scary" in meetings, according to Newman. One time, a coworker told her she looked "like a gorilla" in a black blazer, according to the complaint.

"Such shocking racial insensitivity is fostered by management's neglect of racial equity issues and the company's lack [of] emphasis on workplace training and robust antidiscrimination policies," the complaint said. "This was by far not the only instance of racially offensive and dismissive conduct Ms. Newman experienced from coworkers and managers."

Newman also accused former AWS director Andres Maz of sexually assaulting and harassing her, including one time when he groped her under the table during a work dinner.

She said she filed complaints against both Block and Maz in June, but received no updates for months, during which she was forced to still interact with Maz on work calls until she complained.

Maz was ultimately fired four months after she voiced concerns about him, according to the complaint, but Newman said that decision doesn't "solve or wipe away the effects of his harassment."

"Nor has the company taken any steps to remedy the professional or financial effects of the opaque and subjective processes that kept her and other Black and female employees at lower levels, with decreased compensation, and out of upper management," she added.

Block was required to undergo some training, she said, and remains at the company in a leadership position.

A third AWS executive, public policy vice president Shannon Kellogg, also held up her progress at the company, according to Newman. Kellogg and Block "frequently complained about the personalities of other female employees, which is not their common practice regarding men under their supervision," Newman said.

Newman said she eventually requested to transfer out of the public policy department for fear of continued mistreatment and retaliation from her supervisors, landing at an AWS business development arm in November.

An attorney for Newman, Wigdor LLP's Douglas Wigdor, said in an emailed statement that Amazon "has an obligation" as an industry leader to "to lead by example and promote a level playing field for all workers regardless of their race."

"Sadly, despite its emphasis on innovation, Amazon still treats Black employees like second-class citizens by shutting them out of high-level corporate roles, paying them less than similarly situated white employees and dismissing their concerns about equity and safety," Wigdor said.

He added that because of his client's lawsuits, he expects other former and current Black workers at Amazon to come forward.

Newman said in the statement that "Amazon should harness the power of diverse leadership, instead of dimming the light of Black employees."

An Amazon spokesperson responded in an email that the company "works hard to foster a diverse, equitable, and inclusive culture," and that Newman's allegations "do not reflect those efforts or our values."

"We do not tolerate discrimination or harassment of any kind and thoroughly investigate all claims and take appropriate action," the spokesperson said. "We are currently investigating the new allegations included in this lawsuit."

Contact information for Maz was not immediately available.

Newman is represented by Douglas H. Wigdor and Lawrence M. Pearson of Wigdor LLP.

Counsel information for Amazon, Block and Kellogg was not yet available.

The case is Charlotte Newman v. Amazon.com Inc. et al., case number 1:21-cv-00531, in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.