

Amazon sued by Black cloud-computing manager over alleged racial discrimination and sexual harassment

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A discrimination lawsuit by an Amazon senior manager depicts a stark contrast between the company's public statements affirming its commitment to racial equity and how the employer treats its nonwhite workers.

Charlotte Newman filed a federal suit Monday in Washington, D.C., alleging the Seattle-based commerce giant paid her less than similarly qualified white peers and executives used racial stereotypes to justify denying her opportunities for promotion.

Newman, a Black woman who works in Washington, D.C., for Amazon Web Services (AWS), Amazon's cloud-computing division, also leveled allegations of sexual harassment and assault against a former Amazon director.

"Like so many other Black and female employees at Amazon, Charlotte Newman was confronted with a systemic pattern of insurmountable discrimination based upon the color of her skin and her gender," her lawyer, Douglas Wigdor, wrote in the complaint. Wigdor is known for representing victims of alleged sexual abuse by Harvey Weinstein.

Newman filed her suit after the publication last week of an investigation by online tech outlet Recode detailing allegations by Black employees that Amazon routinely passed them over for promotion.

Amazon is "currently investigating the new allegations included in this lawsuit," a company spokesperson said in a statement. "Amazon works hard to foster a diverse, equitable, and inclusive culture, and these 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 lawsuit comes amid a steady thrum of employee organizing around issues of racial equity at Washington state's largest employer.

In social media posts, on Amazon.com and even with a pan-African flag flown between Amazon buildings, the company and its leaders have repeatedly voiced their public support for Black employees and the Black Lives Matter movement.

But in her lawsuit, Newman describes those moves as "superficial gestures ... far outweighed by Amazon's mistreatment of its Black workforce, including the vast majority of its Black employees who work in its warehouses and fulfillment facilities."

Workers have recently castigated the employer for its lack of diversity in managerial roles: At one point, for instance, there were more people named Jeff on Amazon's leadership team than there were women, Black and Latino executives combined.

Amazon does not publish detailed employee demographic data, although the company does make available overview data showing relatively proportional racial representation among all U.S. managers. Amazon did not respond to a request Monday for a breakdown showing what proportion of corporate employees and managers are people of color.

Employees, however, say people of color are underrepresented among Amazon's well-compensated corporate employees and overrepresented among lower-wage logistics workers, who make up the vast majority of Amazon's more than 1 million-strong global workforce.

By 2019, according to Newman's complaint, concern among some women, Black and Latino employees that they were being unjustly passed over for promotion had grown to the point that they petitioned Amazon's leadership team with a 15-page proposal asking the company to implement more equitable hiring and promotion practices.

Early last year, employees again emailed Amazon executives to express outrage after Amazon general counsel David Zapolsky referred to a Black warehouse worker, Christian Smalls, as "not smart or articulate." Smalls had been fired after he organized an employee walkout in New York to protest what he called Amazon's inadequate COVID-19 precautions. Many interpreted the comments as racist; Zapolsky later apologized.

Last summer, as protests over racial injustice gripped the nation, Amazon pledged to "stand in solidarity with the Black community — our employees, customers, and partners — in the fight against systemic racism and injustice."

In posts on internal websites and social media, Amazon workers said their employer's statement was at odds with its partnerships with law-enforcement agencies that disproportionately police people of color; the higher-than-industry-average injury rates at its warehouses, where one-quarter of workers are people of color; and the sea of white faces on its leadership team.

Amazon pledged to embark on a listening tour and respond to Black employees' concerns. In August, Amazon added a Black executive, Alicia Boler Davis, to its top leadership team for the first time. AWS enacted a one-year moratorium on the use of its facial-recognition software, which had been found to disproportionately misidentify Black individuals, by police departments. Some Black employees said Amazon was making progress to change its culture.

Newman, though, contends that Amazon has not gone nearly far enough in rooting out "racially and sexually discriminatory attitudes" of the kind that she has experienced in her nearly four-year tenure at the company.

Newman, a Harvard Business School graduate who previously worked as an economic policy adviser to New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker, applied to join AWS' public policy team in 2017.

At the time, she believed she was interviewing for a position with higher pay and more responsibility than the job she eventually was offered, according to her complaint.

Shortly after Newman began working at Amazon, however, she began taking on duties commensurate with a much higher salary level, she contends.

“Within months of starting at [Amazon], she in fact was assigned and doing the work of a Senior Manager-level employee while still being paid at and having the title of the Manager level,” according to the complaint. “To make matters worse, and in defiance of the antidiscrimination laws, Ms. Newman was paid significantly less than her white coworkers, particularly in valuable Amazon stock.”

Other Black employees have said they have faced similar treatment at Amazon, which in the company's lingo of tiered job titles is termed “de-leveling.” While Newman was being paid a Level 6 salary, she had Level 7 responsibilities, she says, including engaging with foreign government officials on behalf of AWS.

Newman says she undertook work above her pay grade for more than two years before she was promoted, while white men with similar experience climbed the corporate ladder more quickly. She contends Amazon's delay in recognizing her work has cost her millions of dollars in missing pay. The bulk of Amazon's compensation package for senior employees is made up of stock awards; the value of Amazon shares has risen more than 320% since Newman joined the company in 2017.

Meanwhile, Newman says, her interactions with supervisors and other more senior Amazon executives showed signs of bias against her race and gender.

Her first manager criticized her for being “too direct,” “aggressive,” and “just scary,” and warned Newman that she “can intimidate people” — according to the suit, coded feedback that's often baselessly directed toward Black women while white male peers are rewarded for verbal sparring, the lawsuit said. (One of Amazon's 14 leadership principles urges employees not to “compromise for the sake of social cohesion.”)

Managers, Newman contends, “frequently complained about the personalities of other female employees, which is not their common practice regarding men under their supervision.” Another supervisor yanked on Newman's long braids without permission, telling her, “You can leave this behind,” according to the suit.

The same employee, Andres Maz, touched Newman's upper thigh under the table during a work dinner, “close to her genitalia, and grab[bed] and grope[d] her upper thigh,” according to the complaint. Later the same night, Maz propositioned sex while Newman was waiting for a ride home. Newman told him “that she would do no such thing,” she says.

Newman filed a complaint about Maz's conduct in June 2020. His employment was ultimately terminated. Amazon did not respond to a question about the cause of Maz's termination, and attempts to reach him were unsuccessful.

The day before she complained about Maz, Amazon posted a message on Twitter committing to “spark conversation and exploration about how we — as individuals, teams, and a company — can continue to be active participants in dismantling systemic racism, oppression and inequality.

“Our work is not done, and we still have a long way to go,” the message read.

“On that, Ms. Newman and Amazon agree,” she wrote in her complaint.