

Harvard Business community backs alumna's discrimination lawsuit against Amazon

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Faculty, students and alumni at Harvard Business School signed an open letter to Amazon Friday urging better working conditions for Black employees and supporting an Amazon manager and Harvard Business alumna who is suing the e-commerce giant.

The Amazon manager, Charlotte Newman, filed a lawsuit in March over allegations of racial discrimination and sexual harassment from coworkers and superiors at Amazon's corporate offices.

"Those of us who know Charlotte know her as a woman of integrity, intelligence and strong work ethic. We know her as a person who has long demonstrated a commitment to improving the lives of others," the Harvard Business letter states.

"In pursuing this case, Charlotte has exhibited the courage, fortitude and leadership to speak up and insist on change at the nation's second largest private employer," it continues.

The letter, signed by more than 220 members of the Harvard Business community as of Friday morning, urges Amazon to make changes toward being a "fairer, safer and more diverse workplace for all of its employees."

"Some of us have worked at Amazon. Some of us may work at Amazon in the future. But all of us hope that Amazon will use this moment to change," the letter states.

The letter is addressed to Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and Andy Jassy, the current head of Amazon Web Services. Bezos said earlier this year he will be stepping down as CEO in the summer and will be succeeded by Jassy.

In response to the letter, an Amazon spokesperson said company employees "do not tolerate discrimination or harassment of any kind," and defended its handling of Newman's sexual harassment claim and discrimination allegations.

"We immediately investigated Ms. Newman's sexual harassment claim and fired her harasser. The investigation also resulted in corrective action and additional training requirements for those in her reporting line. We also reviewed Ms. Newman's interview process, leveling and onboarding, and determined that she was properly placed in her role at the company. We are currently investigating the new allegations included in the lawsuit," the spokesperson said in a statement.

The company also touted its diversity, equity and inclusion goals for 2021, which were released earlier this week, saying the objectives address and even "go beyond" some of the changes the letter requests.

The letter calls on Amazon to conduct a company wide-assessment of leveling, total compensation and promotion and to address any discrepancy based on ethnicity, gender or race by adjusting compensation and or level.

In her lawsuit, Newman alleges the company routinely engages in "de-leveling" Black and Latino employees when they are hired, meaning they are hired at a level below the job they applied for or will be performing.

The letter also calls for Amazon to eliminate down-leveling within individual loops, and to establish a global program to identify, develop and accelerate the careers of racially diverse employees and women.

It urges Amazon to ensure that employees who report sexual harassment or discrimination are immediately provided safeguard to protect them from further abuse and retaliation.

"Amazon has an opportunity to become a global leader in cultivating equitable pathways to success for all employees. I am grateful that fellow members of the Harvard Business School community decided to speak out and urge the company to do better by women and people of color at Amazon," Newsman said in a statement. "I hope Jeff Bezos and Andy Jassy listen and act with the urgency and focus that employees deserve."