

Bezos's call for automated staffing schedules to reduce injuries fails to address employee concerns

Article

Jeff Bezos **wants** Amazon to use “sophisticated algorithms” to track the muscle groups used by warehouse workers and ultimately reduce workplace injuries. The proposal, made in a recent lengthy shareholder letter, came on the heels of a **failed** unionization effort at its Bessemer, Alabama, warehouse and amid growing scrutiny of the company’s labor practices. In the letter, Bezos said Amazon is developing “automated staffing schedules” that rotate workers between jobs prioritizing different muscle groups to avoid repetitive motion that could lead to injury. Bezos claims early studies of the automated staffing schedules decreased musculoskeletal disorders—like sprains and strains—by 32% and halved employees’ time away from work.

Critics and Amazon workers claim Amazon’s increasing reliance on AI tools and automation has left employees feeling like robots. For years, warehouse workers have **decried** Amazon’s automated tracking software used to **determine** “time off task” and other productivity metrics. Some workers say these systems make them feel akin to robots, a characterization Bezos refuted in his letter. For context, Amazon warehouses already rely on vast combinations of **physical** robots and AI-powered **software**, and the company **hopes** to one day make them fully autonomous. Until then, warehouse workers must fill technological gaps left by Amazon’s current robots and automated services, a concept that New York Times columnist Kevin Roose refers to as “machine-managed jobs” in his recent book “**Futureproof**”: “In these relationships, all of the power and leverage resides in the machines—humans are simply the plug-and-play accessories that follow orders,” he writes.

While warehouse automation can reduce physical injuries, research has shown it can also have deleterious long-term effects on workers. Emerging tech and automation have yielded mixed results for workers, **according to** a 2019 report from UC Berkeley’s Labor Center. The report claims new technologies can help reduce monotonous and physically strenuous activity, but also warns it could also negatively affect workers’ health, safety, and morale, ultimately accelerating worker turnover. Additionally, the report says that automated monitoring tools, like the ones Bezos proposed in his letter, “threaten to constrain workers’ autonomy and introduce new rigidities into the workplace.”

Growing conflicts involving automation may encourage legislators to take a more active role in regulating AI in workplaces:

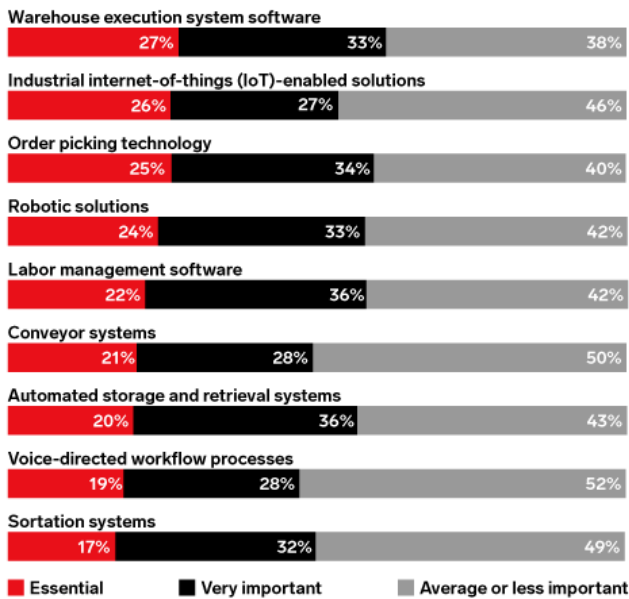
- In 2019, Illinois **passed** the AI Video Interview Act, which **requires** employers using AI in job interviews to obtain consent from the candidate and provide explanations of when employees use the tech to analyze videos of job applicants.

- Last month, England and Wales' Trades Union Congress **called on** legislators to urgently regulate how companies use AI at work, citing a **report** claiming AI is outpacing employment law.

The EU is currently **considering** new rules that would heavily curtail the use of AI for mass surveillance and rating social behavior.

Extent to Which Select Types of Automation Are Essential to the Success of US Companies, May 2020

% of respondents



Note: n=434 in senior roles with companies that directly manage warehouses, distribution centers, or fulfillment centers; numbers may not add up to 100% due to rounding
Source: Honeywell, "2020 Intelligated Automation Investment Study" conducted by KRC Research, July 8, 2020

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