

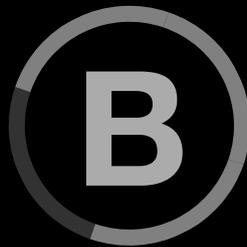
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Inside Amazon's Robotic Fulfillment Center

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How Jeff Bezos Became the King of E-Commerce



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Join me as I observe the workers at Amazon's gargantuan new fulfillment center in Essex, England. They can't see me, but I'm voyeuristically watching them – how they move, the noises they make, and how they interact with each other as they march methodically across the metallic floor, hauling back-breaking payloads.

One comes near, and I peer at the identification badge. Name: Amazon Drive #329921. I'm told by a more talkative colleague of theirs that it's one of several thousand two-wheeled drones moving products across this two-million-square-foot depot. What it lacks in personality, it makes up for with an efficiency and precision with logistics operations that no human could dream of.

“Cheerio, it was nice to meet you,” I say to #329921, as it rotates a perfect 90 degrees and drives its haul of DVDs, barbecue equipment and tea bags to the human warehouse picker awaiting its arrival.

Amazon invited me to tour the modern facility in which I met this machine, and out of the four storeys that comprise most of the square-footage, three are staffed predominantly by Kiva robots about the size of a manhole cover, orange in color, with optical sensors on their tops and bottoms. They move at perfect right angles to each other, pausing to let others pass like cab drivers. It's mesmerizing; what I'm seeing borders on a dystopian scene from our ultimate future, where robots efficiently take over many of Earth's most important industrial jobs.

But it's also an amazing facility, and one that feels like it was truly built for machines, not people. I can't see any chairs or stools. There's no radio playing, or TV screens to distract an idle mind. If you want natural light, go outside, because windows appear to be a luxury. There are vending machines, yes, but they dispense gloves and earplugs, not Mars bars and Red Bull.

What's even more amazing to me is that it all makes complete and total sense. The humans I do see are largely handling things like packing boxes for customers, wrapping Christmas gifts, or giving journalists tours. Others are employed on site to maintain the health and functionality of their autonomous comrades. Meanwhile, the robots are gleefully occupied with tasks humans don't want to do, like cart 1,500 pounds of product on their backs for hours on end.

I'm paid to be a critic, and to see through any propaganda a company wants me to appreciate. Amazon, among many large tech companies, has been fingered for its working conditions in fulfilment centers, and a handy fact sheet given to me upon arrival reminds me that part of the reason I'm here is to educate me on the apparent reality ("Minimum wages will increase!" "Comprehensive benefits package!" "1,000 new highly skilled roles in the U.K.!" Just some of the key messages.)

But the thought I leave this fulfillment center with actually has nothing to do with any of that. Rather, I depart having been reminded that the future of industry will not involve all humans walking out at 5 p.m. on a Friday, replaced entirely by robots from 9 a.m. the following Monday. It'll be a long transition, where humans and robots collaborate, and it's one that's already well underway. Many of the humans I saw were doing jobs that wouldn't have existed before the robots were built, while others were doing a faster job because they were.

The only thing that truly made me sad was that when I met Amazon Drive #329921, it wasn't equipped with Alexa, the web retailer's digital assistant. "It's so good to meet you too, Nate," it could've said, and made my day. "It was me that carried your recent order of 'Heavy Duty Toilet Plunger - Large' last week!"

Maybe it's best it couldn't talk.

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