

Ofori Agboka Transcript

Ofori 00:00:01: The excitement, the energy, the magic in the methodology. The system runs, but it's it does well because of the people. The people and the machinery work hand in hand, and it's exciting. It's magical. I've been at Amazon five and a half years, and I'm so proud of what the team's doing. I think seeing is believing, you know? It's one thing to read about it, hear about it, but as you saw on Walk the Floor, it's safe, it's innovative, it's inclusive, it's clean. And, you know, people are learning, and we bring in people from all over the world, all walks of life and backgrounds, and we find a way to work together.

Matt 00:00:32: To thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape, brands must move at an ever-increasing pace. I'm Matt Britton, founder and CEO of Suzy. Join me and key industry leaders as we dive deep into the shifting consumer trends within their industry, why it matters now, and how you can keep up. Welcome to the Speed of Culture. Up today on the Speed of Culture podcast, we're thrilled to be joined by the great Ofori Agboka, the Vice President of People Experience and Technology at Amazon, who oversees Amazon's global workforce. Ofori's team ensures that everything from fulfillment centers to delivery operations run smoothly during high-demand events like today, which is Cyber Monday. Ofori, thanks so much for joining today on this busy day.

Ofori 00:01:14: No. Thank you, Matt. Thanks for being here. It's a pleasure and honor to have this opportunity to speak with you.

Matt 00:01:17: Absolutely. You know, I was just walking through this incredible warehouse and seeing all the logistics and all the machinery and robotics and the hardworking people here that make all this happen. What is one thing that most people don't know about running a workforce that's behind such a logistical marvel that is Amazon?

Ofori 00:01:35: I wouldn't say there's one thing that people don't know, but I'm happy to share with you so that you can see.

Matt 00:01:40: Please. Yeah.

Ofori 00:01:41: The excitement, the energy, the magic in the methodology. The system runs, but it's it does well because of the people. The people and the machinery work hand in hand, and it's exciting. It's it's magical. I've been at Amazon five and a half years, and I'm so proud of what the team's doing. I think seeing is believing, you know? It's one thing to read about it, hear about it, but as you saw on Walk the Floor, it's safe. It's innovative. It's inclusive. It's clean. And, you know, people are learning, and we bring in people from all over the world, all walks of life and backgrounds, and we find a way to work together and learn and grow together. So I don't

know if I answered your question completely, but but I'm I'm excited to share and talk about what what we have going on here.

Matt 00:02:17: And, of course, Cyber Monday is unique because there's so much volume, and you're shipping so much goods out of warehouses like this, which means you have to scale the workforce. For peak seasons. What does that look like as someone who's overseeing, you know, people operations?

Ofori 00:02:31: Yeah. So I work with a fantastic group of PXT. PXT, what we call People Experience in Technology, which is commonly, you know, politely known, maybe, as HR. We believe people, the right experience, the supplement with technology, but with that, we prepare year-round for days like this. This feeds into our goal of making sure we have great selection, low prices, and speedy delivery to employees. In a place like this with a fulfillment center, we have multiple, around hundreds of fulfillment centers like this around the country. This is where small business owners—were more than 60% of what you see in these in our facilities is contributed by a small business owner, and we're

Matt 00:03:05: A lot of people don't realize it.

Ofori 00:03:06: Yeah. That's right. We're fulfilling the order, and we're we're sending it out. But to prepare for that scale, we've announced that we hired over 250,000 employees ramping up the season, so that's full-time, part-time, seasonal. And, you know, many people are gonna stay on with us. Some people join us just for the season and come back each year, but it is, as you said, to scale it, we prepare, but we learn. We learn what our footprint looks like. We learn what what customer orders and patterns are. We try to get ahead of what the shopping season may be. And as we grow, we are putting our fulfillment centers and our delivery stations and and whatnot closer to the customer. So we were constantly analyzing to make it better and, again, ultimately deliver that customer promise.

Matt 00:03:44: And when you bring on 250,000 employees, what does training and onboarding look like at that level of scale?

Ofori 00:03:49: You know, it's it starts with making sure selection, making sure people clearly know the type of operations and opportunities ahead of them. People join us, and it's onboarding. Onboarding, making sure they understand our safety, our practices, our policies, where you go for help, and what it means to you, to making sure they understand their pay, make sure they understand their benefits. But, you know, that standardized work, we call it behind a smile when people onboard. It is very important that we give people a great customer experience as an employee to start up and ramp up well so they can go on and continue to be very, very successful.

Matt 00:04:21: And when people stay, they get brought on during a peak season, and you bring on 250,000 people. And as you said, some are temporary, others stay and make a career out of it. What are the attributes that are most common for people, whether it's in the warehouse or in the boardroom or otherwise, take off and really succeed at a place like Amazon?

Ofori 00:04:39: Fantastic question. What I found with Amazon, what I really love. I love a lot of things, but really being grounded in our leadership principles. We have 16 leadership principles and Bias for Action, Customer Obsession, Think Big, Learn and Be Curious. Those are attributes that, whatever level of employee, wherever you stand, those things, the more you dive deep, as an example, that you demonstrate those abilities, you can grow. You can continue to—well, you're gonna grow either way. But if you wanna advance your career and do different things, those type of attributes. And if I step away from the leadership principles, an example is optimism. Optimism in just the willingness to be a team player.

Matt 00:05:13: Yeah.

Ofori 00:05:14: And wanna learn and hear and grow. And that curiosity of, well, what can I do next? It's one thing to recognize that you work at this building, but when you recognize for the greater Amazon and the bonus opportunities, people who demonstrate that, we're willing to let you in. Come on in. Give us a try. Let's learn and grow together.

Matt 00:05:30: Of course, today on Cyber Monday, a big topic in the business world is the impact of AI, especially on the shopping journey. And I would imagine for people to succeed at Amazon, no matter where they are in their organization, being adept at AI is certainly a distinct advantage. How do you look at the new set of skills that's required in the AI era for people to be able to thrive?

Ofori 00:05:49: I think this is multifaceted. There's the overt AI that many people are talking about these days, but then there's the ad at Amazon. We've been dealing with AI machine learning more than twenty-five years. Our robotics and technology in the last ten years, some of it is so seamless that you won't even know. Okay? So it's just how we work. It is shaping the nature of work. So let's start with our customer-facing site. And when you go on amazon.com and shop, you know, we're understanding your your buying patterns, what you like, what you're what you're used to, what you don't like. We're understanding the address. We're understanding the shipping routes. We've added, again, an overt form of technology, AI, Rufus technology, where, you know, this busy holiday season, you don't know what to buy. You don't know what you wanna get. Well, we've got a curated section of the 100 best gifts for him, 100 best gifts for her. Couple that with, "Hey, Rufus, I wanna buy a special gift for my wife, my spouse, my partner. She likes this. Help me out." There's a gift for everybody, and that's that AI that is machine learning and learning you. In the workplace, again, with our employees, when that customer pushes that button to buy a product, our systems are working behind the scenes

that feed into a fulfillment center like this to make sure where is that product located. Is it near the New Jersey area? Is it near Texas? Where should we be sourcing or fulfilling that shipment from? What's the best route? How fast can we get it to that employee? So now the leader, the employee here, our team member that is sorting or stowing, AI is working all around them, and it's bringing the product to them. So, if you, as you walked in our fulfillment center, those pods that are on those herculean mobile units—

Matt 00:07:20: I saw that.

Ofori 00:07:21: Those technologies that we're proud to build, proud that we built over a million of those units in America, those units bring the product through AI technology to their employees. So they're experiencing AI right now. Then on top of it, I think the thirdly, when we dive deep into our employees and upskill them and preparing them for the future

Matt 00:07:39: Yeah. That was my next question.

Ofori 00:07:40: The nature of work is changing, you know? So where they may stow, something may change in in the workplace different than this particular facility that they don't do that type of activity. They do something different. Now we're upscaling them to maintain the robots. Now we're training them to be an example of our Robotics, Mechatronics, and Traineeship program. That's part of our what we call our upscaling program under the big umbrella of what we call Amazon Career Choice. So our Career Choice looks at everything from helping employee get a high school diploma to prepaid college tuition. Prepaid college tuition. Now, I'm a proud graduate of Louisiana State University. Our Baton Rouge facility and other employees, they can get a prepaid college degree from LSU. Now if they wanna get into the tech trades, we have, again, our record Robotics, Mechatronics, and Apprenticeship program, which is approved by the U.S. Department of Labor. It's a certified program. Employees work 1,200 hours. They get certification, accredited degrees. They graduate from those program and gain higher wages of 30% plus. So the jobs are changing. The tasks are changing, but the evolution of work is changing because of some of that AI technology that's coming in. But it is—we're moving to our next pledge of \$2,000,000,000 of upscaling \$20.30 pledge that not only we trying to upscale our employees, provide them careers and and pass the jobs of the future, also in the community. So, example, is our Future Engineering program. We're going into elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. We—the future has a lot to behold that, you know, we may know, may not know, but we're investing today on what we do know.

Matt 00:09:04: We'll be right back with the Speed of Culture after a few words from our sponsors.

Because, of course, you know, just from a national perspective, there's a lot of fear right now about AI, and I think people tend to there's a lot of fear right now about AI, and I think people tend to fear what they don't understand. And I think what I try to impart on people when I

speak around the world on AI is that, yes, it's scary, but there's been technological advancements in the past. I mean, look at the internet itself. Absolutely. The internet was gonna kill small business, and here you are saying that this incredible complex is servicing 60% of which small businesses, and think about all the benefits a company like Amazon has given to the consumer. So you have to believe that with this new evolution, yes, it's gonna create some uncertainties in the near term, but over time, you know, I believe it's gonna create incredible new opportunities.

Ofori 00:09:47: The new opportunities. And I think as you as you pointed out, what people don't understand, they fear. And that's a whole variety of subjects. So, as I travel around the globe and travel to sites, I meet different employees that when I talk to them about self-service and what it means to them and how does AI look to them, I get varied responses, but I look at it as an opportunity. So I'll give you an example. I went to a site in Alabama, and I actually joined the Day One orientation. It was about 60 to 100 employees. I was happy to be traveling that day. I walked in. I wanted to, you know, welcome them to Amazon. I talked about the opportunities, and I asked them, "How many of you know about AI? How many of you play around with anything but artificial intelligence learning?" Not one person raised their hand. Now, they might not raise their hand because they were nervous. You know, they didn't know where's who's this guy, what's he gonna go with next? But I looked at it, and I said, "Let's talk about it." And I talked about self-service and their apps and what we have with our A to Z, where employees can learn about their schedule, their performance, their accolades, and their their rewards and recognitions, their swag bucks, a whole host of things that is at the touch of their tool, their if it's on their cell phone or on a tool we have at, at a kiosk, letting them know that we're gonna expose you and get you excited about this because this is gonna shape how you work, and the more you learn, it's better for you. You see, we have a leadership principle at Amazon called **Strive to be Earth's Best Employer**, and that's one of our newest leadership principles, and it talks about leaders work every day to create a safer, high-performing, inclusive, leading with empathy, where employees are having fun, are they empowered, and we're helping them build careers for inside or outside Amazon. And that is true. We want people to know that this is the future. It is now and the future, and it's part of the past whether you wanna recognize it or not, but we wanna prepare you. And even me personally, there's so much about AI I don't know. I signed up for AI boot camp, so we have team members all across operations that they're doing their own learnings, and there was a there was a young young man in our technology area who decide, his name is Alex, decided to just be a teacher of AI to everyone. And he's we're partnering here with our golden leadership development team, and he sends out a distribution list every single day with an AI tip. And he asked people, "Do you wanna join me for an AI boot camp and learn with me?" I signed up. Every day, Alex gives me six initiatives to work on and to get better at, and I'm loving it. So, you're right. What you people don't know, they fear, but once you learn to get comfortable with it, it gets better and better. But I tell you, don't be surprised. There's a lot of people who aren't afraid of it. They aren't afraid. And and I give you my one last example. I was in Shreveport. Shreveport Ship One is one of our newest, our newest, most highly technological facilities in in the world, and I remember

meeting Miss Ruby. Miss Ruby, you know, I'm I'm let me get you a picture of Miss Ruby for you. Okay? Ruby joined Amazon about a year ago. Ruby joined us from the casinos. She's about 62 years old, African-American lady, and I asked her about Ruby. It was a host of employees, and we, you know, we went online and asked them. And Ruby loves people, and I didn't know what was gonna come out of her mouth. Ruby said, "Bring it on. I love the self-service. I love AI. I use it every day. I use it for my shoppin' list. I'm learning new new recipes. I'm getting stuff from my grandkids. Inspiring! It's helping me it's helping me with my benefit selection." I'm like, "Go ahead, Ruby. Let's do this."

Matt 00:12:52: I love that. So, before the interview today, we were talking, and you told me that you played college football at LSU.

Ofori 00:12:58: In Texas.

Matt 00:12:59: And and which surprised me when you said you actually went to a warehouse with Alabama. I'm sure you had to maybe keep down the down low when you went in there.

Ofori 00:13:05: It was all SEC, baby. Exactly.

Matt 00:13:08: What are some of the commonalities between being a great player and leader on the football field and being one here at a company like Amazon?

Ofori 00:13:17: You you know what? What it has taught me even starting from seventh grade, high school, and, again, I was a proud member of the team, and what it taught me is every person has a position to play. From the trainer to the head coach to the star quarterback, star, everybody has a position to play. And if you play your position well with the ultimate goal of "We want to win together," that is there there's some beauty there in knowing that you don't just show up on Saturday night. It's the practice. It's the effort. It's the energy. It's the instantaneous feedback. So those are the things that I translate to the workplace of, make sure everybody knows their position, make sure everybody gets rapid, candid, constructive feedback, and make sure people play to their strengths because everybody isn't gonna be a defensive end. Everybody isn't gonna be a quarterback. But whatever your role is, do it well and do it for the team and do it to win, and let's do it the right way. Let's do it the right way. Let's help each other out. And when someone's failing, give them an opportunity to succeed. Tell them specifically what's going on and also data. You know? Data's all around us. Data's your stats. Let's look at the scoreboard. Right? Are we winning or we losing? What do we need to do different?

Matt 00:14:23: There's also individual stats that, while don't mean everything, certainly means something in terms of how are you producing, how are you pulling your weight, so to speak.

Ofori 00:14:31: Exactly. Exactly. But let's learn together and do something about it in clarity. That clarity of purpose and clarity of vision, clarity of role is so important. And so what I've taken from the the athletic world to the business world, this is what I've learned. My career, I worked twenty-four years in automotive industry before I joined Amazon, and I started employer relations, operations. I was an area manager and then moved into HR. I worked domestically in Michigan, Texas, Virginia; internationally in China, in Switzerland. I worked in corporate. I worked in field. Everywhere I've lived and worked in the workplace and even outside the workplace, people want five things. They wanna be treated with dignity and respect. They wanna know what their role is. They wanna know where they go for help. They wanna know how to be measured, and they wanna know what's in it for them. And we can do those things every day, and you'll I will, again, translate it from the football field to the workplace. It works.

Matt 00:15:19: So, shifting gears as we wrap up here, you had mentioned that you spent a long time in the automotive industry at places like General Motors and have obviously kinda cut your teeth, so to speak, in many different roles. And now you're in an incredible position here, at Amazon as as VP of People Experience and Technology. When you look back at your career journey, which I'm sure you never dreamed would end up where it is today.

Ofori 00:15:41: No. No.

Matt 00:15:42: What are some of the decisions that you think you made right along the way to put yourself in the position where you are right now?

Ofori 00:15:48: Yeah. I am truly blessed and fortunate, and no one gets where they are by themselves. Fantastic life partner for twenty-five years. We've been supportive of family and friends, loved ones. I'm a person of faith. I thank God. You know, Jesus has done a lot for me, so I wanna. But but then I would say there's four things that I look back on my career that I talked to other people who asked me about career and aspirations. Number one is I went to places where nobody else wanted to go. I went to jobs. You know, it's looking back, it's glamorous to say I've lived in Shanghai, China for three years, or Switzerland. But at the time, people didn't wanna go to those places, and I took them up. Two, when I got to those jobs, I was able to deliver deliver results, which completely connects to part three and four. I was able to deliver results because I was able to build relationships and work with people. I was able to build good relationships, and those relationships, people wanted to work with me again. And, again, I was fortunate, again, to have great teams and great leaders and people invested in me who took time. So I didn't know where I'd be, but I would tell you as I look back, something I did learn away, particularly when I lived in China, was about being very intentional, very intentional about your career. Similar in the workplace, we have succession planning. You know, there's gonna be a position in two years, three years. Similar in the sports, you gotta have next person up. And how do you prepare the next person up? As I look back in my career and I give advice to other people, be intentional about what you want and why. By 2010, I started my career in 1996 as an

intern. By 2010, I was living in Shanghai, China. 2010, I would begin very being very intentional about what I wanted for myself in the future for me and my family and what career steps and jobs it would take to to build a future. And so my advice is, again, take on the job that I guess, first start with the why. What is it that you want? What is it you want? Where do you wanna go? But as you understand that, be willing to take the job that nobody else wants to take. Be mobile. I've moved eight times in twenty-five years. Deliver results. Know what's expected of you and deliver it. Work hard, work well, and then fourth, work well to other people, build great relationships, and treat everybody with dignity and respect along the way.

Matt 00:17:48: That's a fantastic framework. I think one that applies almost any industry.

Ofori 00:17:51: Yeah.

Matt 00:17:52: Absolutely. So to wrap up here, Ofori, we often ask our guests if there's a saying or mantra. Yeah. That helps encapsulate their career journey. And given your background, sports, and everything to talk to them, I'm sure you have no shortage of them. Yeah. But what comes to mind first for you?

Ofori 00:18:05: Man, man, I just tell you, I'm blessed and fortunate, man. There's there's nothing special about me. I've just been rewarded with great opportunities and great leaders and great people to work with on-site, to encourage me and, work together that we learn and grow together. And I'm just so excited. I get to do that here at Amazon every day with a great team of people: business leaders, ops leaders, and PXT HR professionals, and fantastic employees. And I I get excited to see what's coming next for them, you know, to invest in people's careers and to go into cities and almost triple the minimum wage from an hourly standpoint. And, you have people get Day One benefits with vision, health care, and dental. They know that after 90 days, they can get prepaid college tuition and and invest in their own career development to take care of themselves and their families and their communities, and also bring that to the workplace to help us be successful is just a win-win all the way around. So being a summit will be blessed and fortunate, man.

Matt 00:18:54: Fantastic. Well, thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule here on Cyber Monday. At this incredible facility to talk a little bit about the great work you're doing at Amazon and your personal story. I'm wishing you a great holiday season and and, obviously, a very successful one!

Ofori 00:19:06: Wish to all the listeners. Thank you for attending. Hope I was able to share more

Matt 00:19:10: about Amazon. Nuggets here.

Ofori 00:19:11: Yeah. But on behalf of Amazon and our all our employees, we wish everyone a great holiday season!

Matt 00:19:15: Thanks for saying that.

On behalf of Suzy and Adweek team, thanks again to the great Ofori Agboka, the Vice President of People Experience and Technology at Amazon, for joining us today. Be sure to subscribe, rate, and review The Speed of Culture podcast on your favorite podcast platform. 'Til next time, see you soon, everyone. Take care. Bye-bye. The Speed of Culture is brought to you by Suzy as part of the Adweek Podcast Network and Acast creator network. You can listen, subscribe to all Adweek's podcasts by visiting adweek.com/podcast. To find out more about Suzy, head to [Suzy.com](https://suzy.com). And make sure to search for the Speed of Culture in Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or anywhere else podcasts are found. Click follow so you don't miss out on any future episodes. On behalf of the team here at Suzy, thanks for listening.