

UK Express - Observations

Since becoming a self-employed driver for UK Express in October 2016, and becoming a part of the Amazon Logistics operation – these are my observations on the day-to-day operation from an ‘on-the-ground’ perspective.

Starting

When you apply for a job with UK Express, you initially attend a (very brief) interview where you are given the basic information about what the job entails, what you would earn, days you must work etc.

You are told from the outset that you must work a minimum of 5 days a week, but can work longer if you want to.

If you pass the basic assessment, you then must attend another day when you must take a drink and drugs test, which if you fail then you’re out. Also, there's a DBS check.

And providing you pass all of this, you then arrange a start date.

It’s that simple.

To start, you first must collect a van.

I had to get myself from Taunton (where I live) to Amazon’s Avonmouth depot in Bristol to pick up a van which I had been advised would be brand new.

What I received was a 2-year-old Renault van that looked like it was 10 years old. It was filthy on the outside and the inside, with scratches, dents and torn seats etc. This is not what was discussed or promised at the original interview.

I didn’t have to sign anything – I was just given the keys and told to take a few photographs to record its condition. I had only driven it a few miles and the van began to fall apart. The whole front air dam was coming away. To say I was not impressed is an understatement.

These vans are clearly not professionally checked in any way, and this doesn't showcase Amazon or UK Express very favourably in my book. I could easily have been stopped by the Police or had an accident.

I had to stop at a garage and use duck-tape to hold everything together.

I was then allocated a brand-new van, but had to go to Avonmouth (again) to collect it.

Day One

My overriding impressions from my first week with UK Express was one of complete 'organised chaos'.

From a driver / operational perspective, it truly is chaotic.

First and foremost, so much time is wasted by people asking questions about anything and everything such that it is abundantly clear that the one most important element that's missing is a detailed '**Procedures Manual**'.

This should cover the five key areas which is:

1. Van usage
2. Administration procedures
3. Daily operations
4. Deliveries, and
5. The 'Rabbit' functionality - How to use, do's and don'ts etc.

Van Usage

Regarding van usage. You're given a key and that's it.

There should be detailed instructions regarding:

- what the driver is responsible for, and
- what UK Express are responsible for.

There are clearly no checks made on vans before they're passed from driver to driver.

- Who should the checks be done by from the UK Express side? A qualified mechanic presumably.
- Are the vans legally and mechanically roadworthy? Currently any driver taking over the van has no idea.
- Unless a new driver is lucky enough to be given a new van, the one he receives could be anything up to three years old and would typically be filthy inside and out.
- A new driver isn't even asked to sign anything! He does know anything about the van or how it is insured for example. He is expected to take the vehicle 'on trust' and that all is well with it.

And then, there are other fundamental questions that need answering:

- What should the driver do in emergencies?
- What should he do if he is involved in an accident?
- What should he do if the van breaks down, has a puncture, or has a windscreen break?
- What if the van needs a service, needs new tyres etc. Where should the driver go to have this done?
- And so on and so forth!

There is nothing written down anywhere about anything, and nothing is given to the driver to give him some guidance on all the above.

The overall impression is that you're given the van and expected to start working as soon possible.

This is an outrageous (let alone dangerous) scenario. And the fact that a company like UK Express allows this to happen is extremely unprofessional.

Administration Procedures

UK Express operate a driver 'Portal' system whereby each driver can go online and review their own invoices and other details about their 'employment' with the company.

Invoices are made out daily by UK Express, because regardless of how many days you work during the week, you are charged every day for van hire / usage / insurance etc (£20 + VAT a day) and an admin charge (£2 + VAT per day).

You must accrue £1,500 in your account before you can start to draw any money out. (This can take at least 3 weeks to accrue from when you start). This £1,500 is kept back by the company as their insurance in case you damage the van, receive parking tickets etc. You are supposed to get this money back when you leave.

Daily Operations

At every Amazon depot, there can be any number of logistics companies operating on Amazon's behalf.

At Exeter, and then Plymouth where I was based, other logistics companies included RED, AHC and LINK for example.

Each depot operates in 'waves' from early morning, and depending on which logistics company you work for will depend on what 'wave' you're on. Normally three 'waves' operate at 7am, 8am and 9am. More often than not, these 'waves' are delayed for any number of reasons - but typically because the distribution system got screwed up overnight. Sometimes, your 'wave' can be anything from 30 minutes to 2 hours late – which in turn puts even more pressure on delivery drivers when they eventually get out on the road.

When you arrive, the first problem greets you – and it's the same at probably every depot around the country. There could be anything up to a hundred white vans clogging up local roads, pavements etc waiting for their signal to go into the depot to load up. As the depots are typically located on industrial estates, this is causing more and more problems for Amazon as other local companies are up in arms about the total congestion all around the Amazon site.

And when you have other companies around that have their own traffic to deal with, including HGV's etc, then you can begin to see how Amazon doesn't have many friendly neighbours around its depots.

I have even overhead depot managers saying that they will get closed down if nothing is done to resolve the problem. It is chaotic.

When you finally get inside the depot, you 'clock on' by getting your 'rabbit' and logging on to the system. The 'rabbit' is the (mobile phone lookalike) device that contains the delivery schedule and route that you're assigned to. It also has a built-in navigation system to guide you around your route and where all the deliveries are.

Your operations supervisor will then give you a printed route manifest which details all the bags and boxes that you must locate to load onto your van (in the right order) in preparation for your day.

Drivers must be really careful here because if you miss any bags or boxes, then you may be fined. So, you must take the time to ensure that you have got everything that you are responsible for.

So, regardless of whether drivers get into the depot on time, load and get away on time, or whether they're 1, 2 or 3 hours late through no fault of their own, they will still be expected to deliver their whole load.

Very often, depending on what their route is, the driver may well have to travel anything up to an hour or more to their location before they even start. So, if their first actual delivery isn't until nearly midday, you can begin to see why the pressure is on!

When a driver first starts, their first week is supposed to be a 65% load, then week two with an 85% load, and then from week three onwards it is a 100% load.

And a 100% load can be anywhere between 150 deliveries, increasing to anything up to 200 deliveries leading up to Christmas.

What is clear is that some drivers work very long hours indeed. Many work 7 days a week, with no time off at all. Probably 80% of drivers are from former eastern European countries – Romanian, Polish, Bulgarian etc. Some will tell you that a day's pay in the UK, is the same as a month's pay back in their own country, and that's why they do it.

Deliveries

Before any new driver can start on his own, he must go on a 'Ride Along' with a current driver who is supposed to show them the ropes of what's involved.

Some of these 'Ride Along' can be ok, but many aren't because many of the drivers are Romanian, or Polish or another foreign nationality and their English is not very good. So, it normally ends up with you just having to 'learn on the job'.

The Amazon routing schedule works based on drivers doing 20 deliveries an hour, which for 150 deliveries equates to 1 drop every 3 minutes! That is hard going for the next 7.5 hours!

The reality is very different! If a driver is going from street to street, just dropping at residential properties that are well signed, then it's not too bad – particularly once a driver gets to know a route, providing of course that he (or she) is always assigned that same route.

The problem is that the Amazon routing system makes no allowance for properties that may be hard to find, or the sat nav has taken you to the wrong place, or a commercial business on a small industrial estate is hard to find - let alone traffic conditions, roadworks etc.

One of the biggest problems is finding flats. These are often located down back streets, down back alleys, or in apartment blocks with an entry door that you cannot get access into etc.

One flat might take a driver 15-20 minutes to find, which throws the schedule completely out. And in one hour a driver could find he has only made three drops. Then the pressure is on!

Some drivers are still delivering at 9pm at night – and the policy is not to deliver any later than that.

But if you've had problems during the day, then you know that you must take undelivered parcels back to the depot – which if you do, then you will probably be 'docked' money for not completing all your deliveries.

One major problem is that customers ordering from Amazon, do not specify where they want the order to be delivered, even though they know that they could well be out at work during the day. So, the driver is then supposed to find a safe place to leave the delivery, ideally with a neighbour, because he doesn't know how valuable the package may be.

Drivers can then spend 10 -15 minutes trying to find a neighbour who will take in the parcel – which is why more and more drivers will just leave it on the doorstep or behind a wheelie bin for example, and this primarily because they just do not have the time to find a friendly neighbour who will take the parcel.

'Rabbit' Functionality

With regard to the 'rabbit', Amazon's delivery device – everything depends on what any driver manages to pick up on their 'ride along' day, after that they're left to it and it's "work it out as you go along".

You have no proper training with the device, and there are no instructions that come with it.

Many of the things you can do with the device, particularly if you need to change your itinerary around, cancel drops, report missing parcels, what to do if the navigation fails etc, are not easily understood.

If all its functionality was documented, this would make it so much easier for new drivers.

Summary

So much time and effort could be saved if everything was written down and properly explained. In other words, a **'Procedures Manual'**.

This in turn would ensure that new drivers coming on board, would have a 'manual' to refer to which should answer 97% of their questions, on just about everything!

However, the fundamental problem for the Amazon logistics operation is still unanswered.

Amazon (clearly) has contracted with the various logistics companies to ensure that all its parcels are delivered every day.

In turn, each logistics company presumably incurs financial penalties for any undelivered parcels – or 'failed routes' in delivery parlance.

In turn, each logistics company therefore puts more and more pressure on drivers to make all the deliveries, every day – regardless!

'Shit rolls downhill' as they say!

The pressure is on, all the way down the supply chain – which is why you end up with drivers racing from drop to drop, breaking speed limits, having no breaks and some working and driving crazy hours just to get all the parcels delivered.

Something must break – and it will at some point. Amazon's growth is just fuelling problems down the supply chain which need to be rectified.

Because in the worst-case scenario - a driver will crash, either because he's too tired or a van may be unroadworthy, and someone may be killed - and just because a parcel needs to be delivered!

The service in its current state is unsustainable and will break if nothing is done.

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