Delivering the future

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As head of distribution for North America at Amazon Robotics, Joe Mulford (MBA '24) oversees the storage and transportation of all technology and automation that goes into Amazon’s fulfillment network.

You might think working for one of the biggest companies in the world means getting used to success, but Executive MBA graduate Joe Mulford (MBA ’25), head of distribution for North America at Amazon Robotics, says it’s just the opposite.

“You have to be comfortable with failure,” says Mulford, who manages the team responsible for storing and transporting all the technology and automation that goes into Amazon’s fulfillment network, including the eight different types of robots the company uses to move products around its vast warehouses. “If something isn’t working and the numbers aren’t proving it out, programs can go away pretty quickly.”

Mulford experienced that firsthand with Scout, an autonomous delivery device that Amazon field tested for last-mile delivery. The six-wheeled autonomous robots were deployed between 2019 and 2022 to deliver products from a central drop-off point, such as a parking lot, to customers in the surrounding neighborhood. Mulford, a supply chain program manager during that time, led various aspects of the rollout.

“Customers really liked Scout, but initially, some people would see Scout traversing their sidewalks and they’d call the police or their town council with concerns,” Mulford says. “So we worked closely with local jurisdictions to confirm the appropriate regulatory clearances were in place and to educate all the stakeholders in the community about the technology. In parallel, we were working on challenges like connecting the home bases for the robots to power and deploying broadband internet to them.

“That’s the fun of Amazon,” he adds. “When you start a project like that, it’s really hard to anticipate all the things you’re going to run into. At some point, you just have to get out there and start doing it.”

Amazon ultimately ended field testing for Scout, but the experience helped Mulford transition to his current role with Amazon Robotics’ distribution network. While he doesn’t design the high-tech robots Amazon uses to move products around its warehouses, Mulford manages the people and processes involved in moving those robots end-to-end within the supply chain.

“Amazon is highly innovative in the warehousing and order fulfillment space,” says Mulford. “There are activities within the network that are performed by humans, some that can now be performed by robots, and areas where those two intersect. Robots will continue to have an increasing role in moving product safely and efficiently throughout the supply chain, unlocking more benefits to associates and customers. We’re the ones ensuring the solutions enabling those advancements are landing at the right site, at the right time, and at the right cost.”

Mulford began his career as an account analyst with AIG before shifting to supply chain management in 2012 as a senior material planner at Verizon. He joined Amazon Web Services’ Infrastructure Supply Chain & Procurement team three years later, helping the unit to convert from a direct ship model to centralized fulfillment. In 2021, following his experience with AWS, he jumped to Amazon Robotics, becoming head of distribution in 2023.

While the technical knowledge varies from job to job, Mulford says there are a few keys to success at Amazon.

“Problem solving is a huge part of it,” he says. “Understanding how you can come into an ambiguous situation and charter a path that removes as much of that ambiguity as possible is essential. Creating a project roadmap where you can anticipate problems and get ahead of them goes a long way in future stages.”

That interest in strategy is one of the things that led Mulford to pursue an MBA. After initially considering a master’s degree in supply chain management, he ultimately opted for Freeman’s Executive MBA program to give him a broader perspective on business.

“In the tech space, we’ve got a certain way of looking at things and a certain dynamic of how we operate,” Mulford says. “Other industries have different approaches that are equally valuable and excellent to learn from. That’s why an MBA was the right choice for me, and Tulane really fit the bill in terms of the industries it attracts. There was such a diverse spectrum of backgrounds in our cohort, it was fantastic to learn from them and their experiences.”

While Mulford is happy with his role at Amazon, he’s interested in pursuing an opportunity with deeper connections to the community.

“I live in the Greater New Orleans area and I’m looking to make more of an impact locally,” he says. “That’s the nice thing about Freeman. It connects you to other leaders and gives you the ability to speak the language of someone that may be in a different industry than you are. I’m definitely excited about the opportunities.”