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‘It Was Like the Twilight Zone’: Few Return to Empty Manhattan Offices

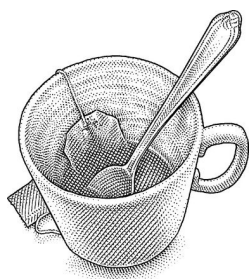
Some find the workplace more isolating than home—but you can wear shorts and blast Van Halen

By [Anne Kaded](#) | Photographs by Sarah Blesener for *The Wall Street*

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After a long stretch working from home in a one-bedroom apartment shared with her husband and three cats, Cindy Lo was excited to return to the office last month. But the Queens resident wasn’t prepared for the eerie scene that greeted her.



Waiting for you

Everyone on the 40-person staff at her Midtown Manhattan office had left on a Thursday afternoon back in March, expecting to return the next day. Four months later, Ms. Lo was the first one back at FitSmallBusiness.com, a digital business platform.

There were still mugs with tea bags on the tables, open notebooks in conference rooms, dishes growing fuzz in the kitchen and half-finished art projects from a wine and paint party.

“It was like the Twilight Zone, as if people were in the middle of doing something and got zapped by aliens,” Ms. Lo says.

The strangest aspect was the silence. The atmosphere at the open-space office, which occupies the entire 18th floor, was always busy, chatty and friendly. Now, that “happy energy” is gone, says Ms. Lo, the people operations manager for the firm, and was responsible for getting the office ready for others.

While the company can now accommodate up to 20 workers at a time in its office on a voluntary basis, few have come back. Attendance so far has peaked at three.

“It’s eerily quiet,” says Ms. Lo, who has been sending absent co-workers photos of their office “plant babies.”

It has been more than a month since nonessential workers were allowed back to the office in New York City, but so far this summer, few have returned.



Cindy Lo, the people operations manager for FitSmallBusiness.com, has been going into the firm's New York City office to prepare it for other employees.

PHOTO: CINDY LO

Bruce Mosler, chairman of global brokerage for Cushman & Wakefield, which represents many large commercial landlords and tenants, says foot traffic in Manhattan office towers is at roughly 10% of pre-Covid-19 levels.

While he expects an uptick after Labor Day, a lot depends on schools reopening, he says.

Meanwhile, empty-office syndrome appears to be self-perpetuating, as some return only to find that the workplace feels more isolating than home.



Cubicles inside an office in 7 World Trade Center in lower Manhattan.

Brooklyn publicist Emily Rose was excited when her firm announced that up to a dozen employees at a time could return to the 50-person office. "I signed up right away," she says. "Human interaction is super important."

On her first day back last month, she and two others were the only ones on the scene. She has no immediate plans to return. "If you're going into the office place, you want it to be worth it," Ms. Rose says.

At the gleaming, 52-story, 1.7-million-square-foot 7 World Trade Center in lower Manhattan last week, the soaring white marble lobby was empty but for five attendants manning the security desk.



An empty office inside 7 World Trade Center.

Security guard Danisha Turner says the days feel slow. “I hum songs in my head to make the time go by,” she says.

The busiest office in the building is likely that of Silverstein Properties, the developer that owns and manages 7 World Trade along with eight other Manhattan office towers.

Since June, it’s had a rotating schedule of 20 to 25 employees from its 80-person office staff coming in on a voluntary basis. Chief Marketing Officer Dara McQuillan says Silverstein is sending a message to tenants: If it’s safe for us, it’s safe for you.



Plants were left inside offices at 7 World Trade Center after the Covid-19 lockdown.

“We are eating the pudding that we make,” he says.

Silverstein adopted elaborate safety measures. Workers receive welcome kits with masks, sanitizer and a key fob tool for poking buttons and pulling handles. They order free lunch via an app from an approved kitchen facility and walk the floor counter-clockwise to ensure

social distancing.

Despite such measures taken by Silverstein and other employers, 7 World Trade foot traffic has fallen from 4,000-5,000 daily visitors at the start of the year to less than 200 now.

“I thought there’d be a little more by now,” says Siro Gonzalez, the developer’s vice president of operations. He hopes to see a pop in September.

Some employers are trying new tactics to make a largely empty office feel friendly. At M Moser Associates, an architecture and design firm on the 24th floor of the Woolworth Building in lower Manhattan, five to 10 employees have been coming in on a voluntary basis out of the usual 40 to 50. The firm added 30 large plants and trees to fill in the open floor plan, and rearranged furniture to create smaller enclosed spaces, says Grant Christofely, a senior workplace strategist.

Some people welcome an empty office, of course. James McGrath, founder of digital real-estate brokerage Yoreevo, says he enjoys being the only person on the third floor of the WeWork office he rents in Manhattan—even though the lights keep going out because no one’s triggering the motion detectors. He’s more productive than at home. And with no one around, it feels safe. “If it were crowded, I wouldn’t want to be here,” Mr. McGrath says.

And in Midtown, divorce lawyer Ken Jewell, the only worker on the floor at his Fifth Avenue office, has enjoyed wearing Bermuda shorts and flip flops to work while blasting favorite tunes from high school—Van Halen, Hendrix and Duran Duran.

“The office,” he says, “is the perfect haven when there’s no one there.”



Dara McQuillan works inside his office at 7 World Trade Center. Few employees have been returning to the lower Manhattan tower since pandemic restrictions have eased.

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