

# As Seattle businesses welcome back Amazon, workers guess at future

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After nearly three years, Amazon workers are set to return this week at a scale the Seattle campus hasn't seen since the pandemic first sent most home.

Starting this week, employees are required to work from the office at least three days a week, a shift from the policy Amazon had in place since 2021 that allowed leaders to decide where their teams would work. The announcement rattled Seattle, as stakeholders waited to see what an Amazon return would mean for the rest of the city.

Seattle business leaders and politicians hope the move will kick-start downtown's stalled pandemic recovery, while business owners in the city's South Lake Union neighborhood hope for more foot traffic and sales, from bubble tea to dog treats to manicures.

Not all Amazon workers are sold on the idea. "If you're telling us we're doing this for culture, that's a big misstep," said one worker who asked to remain anonymous to protect their job. "Because you sort of poisoned the well already."

On Monday, the first official day of Amazon's mandate, South Lake Union was quiet but not silent. Dogs trotted around Amazon's many pup parks; people lined up in front of food trucks parked on Lenora Street; trios of Amazon employees wandered around, badges around their necks, takeout containers in hand. People in red T-shirts handed out flyers emblazoned with "Welcome Back, Amazon!" advertising \$1 lunches at nearby restaurants.

Outside the Spheres, Amazon's community banana stand sat covered in a gray tarp. A sign directed passersby to the Day One tower to grab their free snack and "Go bananas!"

"It's only going to bring ... more people back to the city," said Kieu

Hoang Jorza, who owns two [nail salons](#) and a hair salon in South Lake Union, where Amazon has its largest campus. "Amazon did such a great job building such a great neighborhood for people to walk, and that's what we've been missing for three years."

## Changing mandates

Amazon has wavered on its office mandates in the past. In October 2020, it named June 2021 as a return date but walked that deadline back three times in response to [employee](#) concerns and upticks in coronavirus cases.

Through each deadline shift, though, Amazon maintained that it wants its workers to return. In a March 2021 note to employees, leaders said they want a "return to an office-centric culture as our baseline." In June, they said "we invent best for customers when we are together in the office."

This February, CEO Andy Jassy said the company determined "we should go back to being in the office together the majority of the time." Whiteboard brainstorm sessions and elevator conversations had been lost with remote work, he said, and "riffing off one another's ideas" comes more easily in-person.

In response, more than 22,000 employees signed a petition opposing the change.

Employees "planned for a life where their employer wouldn't force them to return," the petition read, citing statements from executives that supported leaving office decisions up to individual teams. "The RTO mandate shattered their trust in Amazon's leaders."

In an internal survey from 2022, 56% of workers said they preferred to

work remotely with in-person meetings just once a month, the petition read. Only 14% of respondents supported a three-days-a-week mandate.

## **A 'lack of clarity' inside**

Some employees are concerned about finding care for children, family members and pets, said the current employee who works in South Lake Union. Others worry about their own health.

Amazon maintains that it has an internal policy for addressing disease transmission, including COVID-19, but the employee said it's not clear to them or other workers what the company plans to do if there are COVID outbreaks, the employee said.

That employee has a chronic illness that, in the past, required them to work from home. Their manager knows about their condition but they are nervous about a lack of flexibility if they can't make the in-person minimum some weeks.

"As far as I can tell, there's been no support from the company or acknowledgment that some people will be facing this," the worker said. "There's an internal lack of clarity. ... It's been very messy."

As the return date drew closer, Amazon locked people out of a virtual seating chart where employees could move their desks around on their own, the worker said. Now, employees are worried there won't be enough desks or equipment for everyone who comes back.

Amazon told workers in an internal memo viewed by The Seattle Times that some buildings wouldn't be ready for workers Monday, despite the mandate.

Amazon's offices are open to employees already but it will take some

time until each building has been "verified" to support workers, according to the memo.

In the Puget Sound, most buildings will be ready sometime in May, while one has a readiness date of June 5. But around the world some offices won't be ready until September or October.

The Seattle worker said the lack of clarity has left many of their colleagues feeling, more than ever before, "like cogs in this wheel."

Amazon spokesperson Brad Glasser said "we understand that adjusting back to the ways of working ... that we had before the pandemic will take some time."

"We'll continue to work with our employees through that adjustment, including supporting individuals with unique or more challenging circumstances," Glasser continued.

Kailey Waring, an Amazon employee who has been coming into the office since October, said she's become a go-to resource for other members of her team. They have questions about the commute, tech support, or how to find their desks or print.

Many ask if it matters when she comes in or leaves for the day. So far it hasn't, and she hopes that won't change. "Right now, the return to the office seems very like 'Let's see what happens and go from there,'" Waring said.

"I do think it's the right choice, for a number of reasons," she said. "And I know it's not the right choice for everybody. It's with mixed emotions that I say that."

With a commute from Ballard, Waring said she's paid extra close

attention to commuting options that don't require her to search for parking or fight traffic. Amazon has said it will restart a shuttle service and plans to set up a carpooling app.

Suresh Seneviratne, another Amazon employee based in Seattle, said his team is curious to see how return to office affects productivity.

"I think that's a question on everybody's mind: How do we define productivity? And how is this changing?" he said. Leadership hasn't defined any productivity metrics yet because "there are lots of emotions around the whole subject."

Seneviratne lives near South Lake Union and said he's excited to see how happy hours and team lunches bring the area "back to life."

"I think in a couple months we're all going to be like 'You know what this is actually pretty fun,'" he said.

## **'A bit of a bubble'**

Even without a mandate, Amazon's campus has already seen a return-to-office rhythm, said Wassef Haroun, co-founder of Mamnoon Restaurant Group, which operates four locations in South Lake Union and one in Capitol Hill.

Wednesdays are the busiest days, while Tuesday and Thursday are "decent," Haroun said. Monday, Friday and the weekends are, he said, "dead, completely."

For almost two years, most of the group's restaurants have closed on weekends because the customers aren't there.

Haroun said he was encouraged by Amazon's mandate, partly because if

it hadn't taken a strong stance, he didn't expect any other companies would either.

He watched a cycle of peer pressure throughout the pandemic as companies took stock of remote work, hiring and wages, and made sure "not to miss out" on competitive advantages.

At Bouquet South Lake Union, a flower and gift shop that opened in 2019, "we've been anxiously awaiting their return," owner Mary Davis said.

Amazon approached the company after visiting its shop in Columbia City and asked it to open a second location on Seventh Avenue, near the corporate campus, Davis said. The cost to do business in South Lake Union is higher but the risk was worth it to be part of Amazon's "village," she said.

Since the pandemic began, Amazon supported the gift shop, Davis said. Amazon had a social media influencer spend a day at the store and brainstorm ideas to grow Bouquet's virtual presence. It also funded a Bouquet giveaway for Amazonians.

"With how supportive Amazon has been to us as a business, it's taken a lot of the fear out" of the past few years, Davis said.

Davis recently started to see tourist traffic pick up. In the last few months, she's seen an uptick in large gatherings that prompt Amazon employees to buy gifts or flowers.

Now, Bouquet is gearing up to open seven days a week after years of a modified schedule.

Hoang Jorza, who owns three salons in the neighborhood, said her

businesses relied on government assistance like the Paycheck Protection Program to keep afloat. Once that ended and foot traffic remained slow, she started hoping Amazon workers would return.

She never considered what she would do if [remote work](#) became permanent, though, because "I always thought they were going to come back."

Hoang Jorza said Amazon asked her to set up a salon in their building across from the Spheres just before the pandemic hit because so many [employees](#) liked her other salon—Refine Nails Studio—on Dexter Avenue.

Her salon on Seventh Avenue still benefits from foot traffic as tourists stop by the Spheres and spot her salon across the street. But her hair salon, located above a Whole Foods on Westlake Avenue, hasn't seen that same benefit.

Still, Hoang Jorza said she wouldn't leave South Lake Union, largely because Amazon's security team makes her and her staff feel safe, and the company has kept the sidewalks walkable and clean.

Amazon, she said, has created a "little bit of a bubble."

Mamnoon Restaurant Group's Haroun said he still has doubts about how the return to work will play out. He credited Amazon with good communication but said there are still unknowns about the scale of the mandate and whether "morale issues" could cause the company to reverse itself.

Already, the restaurant group struggles with low demand, employee retention and raising wages, Haroun said. He hopes a predictable customer flow will materialize in the next few months. If it takes another



year to stabilize, he said, "then that's going to be really, really challenging for us."

As retail tenants in Amazon-owned buildings for some of its locations and surrounded by Amazonia at others, "we have very little control," Haroun said.

"This is a long road," he said. "If successful, that'd be great. But there are many, many ways this could fail."

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