



*American Express is permitted to have up to 10% of its 7,000 New York City employees return to the office but so far, only about 1% have returned.*

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## American Express reopens on-site foodservice with increased grab and go, robots and apps

*Business and industry right-sizes dining operations for phased reopenings.*

Food Management Staff | Oct 12, 2020

In early September, American Express employees at the New York City office were able to return to work during the coronavirus pandemic. Based on local transmission rates, the company is inviting a small number of colleagues back in a phased approach.

“We did not want to invite everyone back at once,” says says Jason Deville, director of hospitality and workplace services, Americas. “We are returning slowly, in phases and over time. This enables us to limit the number of colleagues working in the office at any one time — a key focus of our physical distancing and safety standards.”

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To give these employees a safe and convenient place for breakfast and lunch, the company has 38 Express, its micro market, open on one of the floors. “It’s the only dining service that we have available to those colleagues at the moment,” says Deville. Typically, employees can dine at the on-site cafeteria, complete with 15 food stations. As part of phase one reopening, they’ve increased the market’s assortment. “We’ve expanded the variety and focused more on upscale types of offerings,” he says. “It’s essentially sandwiches, salads, and

hummus bowls—basically anything that can be pre-packaged for grab and go. We also offer hot breakfast items via a heated cabinet.”



Jason Deville, director of hospitality and workplace services, says AMEX likely won't bring back its catering operations for meetings until a later date.

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Although staff maintains the operation, replenishing supplies and cleaning throughout the day, the micro market is unmanned. “There's no cashier. Employees just pay via self-checkout,” Deville says. “There's actually a salad-making robot that will produce custom salads on demand.” Sally the Robot, a sort of futuristic salad bar, provides customizable salads, bowls and snacks via a refrigerated and enclosed case. “You pick what ingredients you want in your salad, press the buttons on the screen, and it'll build your salad there on the spot, and then dispenses it like a vending machine,” explains Deville.

Sally the Robot was installed before COVID-19 and any concern about social distancing as a way to offer custom salads in a location that is only sporadically used. As the company looks to reopen its offices with a new focus on social distancing, foodservice robots may become more widely used. “We're looking at this as a more viable option in the future for sure,” says Deville. “We're talking to a couple of other companies that do robotic pizza chefs. One of our vendors offers other solutions like grain bowls as well as customized yogurt or parfait bowls. There's also coffee-making robots. These are fully automatic coffee machines where the wand is actually steaming the milk if you want a latte, for example. I was not a true believer until I actually tasted the coffee, and it's phenomenal.”

When American Express moves to future phases of reopening, Deville says portions of the company cafeteria will likely reopen, but the service model will be different. “Pre-COVID, we already had a dining app where

colleagues could preorder and prepay for food,” he says. Going forward, there will also be kiosks in the cafeteria in place of cashiers. Employees will use the app or kiosks to order and pay for food and can choose to have it delivered to their floor or pick it up themselves from the cafeteria.

Inviting future employees back to the office will depend on the local market’s positivity rate and decline of positivity rates over time. With that parameter met, senior leadership will consider whether the next stage of reopening is appropriate.

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