

# Why One Manhattan Law Firm is Returning to the Office Now

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By **Jeffrey Schwartz** | March 18, 2021 at 05:05 PM

One year ago, at the beginning of lockdown, most of us thought we would be back to normal in three weeks. When three weeks passed, we thought we would be back in two months. Then we thought the end of summer, then the turn of the year. Finally, we realized we would have to wait until the vaccine was rolling out and making a difference. Now, on the anniversary of lockdown, the country is beginning to emerge from the pandemic, and we believe it is time, with all appropriate safety measures in place, to begin reentering the workplace. Schwartz Sladkus Reich Greenberg Atlas, LLP, is hoping to lead the way by formally reopening its office.

Like most Manhattan-based firms, the 90 professionals on the SSRGA team commute to the office on mass transit from all over the region. When the pandemic hit we began operating from home, working double time in the initial days to quickly implement remote work procedures that enabled us to seamlessly service our clients. We immediately deployed communication technology, project oversight processes and leadership meetings to maintain full continuity in an environment of increasing flux and uncertainty. The courts were paralyzed; city agencies moved at a snail's pace; the real estate market was at a standstill, and people were scattered across the country, but we were able to continue advancing our projects.

While work flow proceeded smoothly, many other elements of day-to-day life required ongoing effort. It is easy to forget, but in the



early days of the pandemic there was ever-present concern over the unknown; this was exacerbated by confusing and contradictory information from government and health officials. People's lives were disrupted and many important social support structures had been suddenly eliminated. We noticed the impact right away. Just because someone is in constant email or phone communication does not mean that they feel connected. To combat this, we conducted innumerable Zoom calls with the entire staff and groups of staff with no specific purpose other than to engage socially. Firm leadership also wrote daily emails highlighting different concerns that had been raised while providing reassurance on the future in an effort to keep everyone engaged. It worked.

In many ways, the camaraderie within our firm was never greater than in the tumultuous spring of 2020. This continued throughout the summer and fall as people settled into a new work routine with greater acceptance of the new circumstances. As we know, remote work works, and it likely will continue as we move past the pandemic. However, in our experience, remote work creates numerous obstacles. New and young employees lose the ability to fully integrate with the team. Mentoring younger lawyers is complicated by distance, requiring a more formal, less natural, process. The creativity, communication and collaboration that occurs serendipitously through unscheduled office interaction disappears. A Zoom call simply cannot replace a casual conversation in the hall.

Zoom calls also cannot provide the energy that we feel while working in New York City. Commuting requires time, but it is worth the benefit of gathering with your peers and colleagues. It also places a beginning and an end on the day, even if you work when you are home. Psychologically, the work day is much more contained and productive when conducted at the office.

While certain SSRGA attorneys have worked at the office throughout the past year, the full team will now return at least two days a week. We have engaged a leading workplace consultant to facilitate the in-office logistics that will ensure a safe environment as we move to a post-pandemic world. Any team members who have special needs may continue to work remotely.

It is our belief that this is a positive move for our employees, for the firm and for New York City. We love New York City because of its vitality and the diversity of its restaurants, retailers and entertainment destinations. New York City thrives – socially and professionally – because of the people who live and work here. As we move past the one-year anniversary of the pandemic we can clearly see a light at the end of the tunnel. We are embracing the next phase of this journey, and we hope to lead the charge.

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