

[Flatiron pingpong studio startup serves up 24/7 access](#)

PingPod recently raised \$10 million to expand its autonomous retail business

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by [RYAN DEFFENBAUGH](#)

Silberman says PingPod locations can turn a profit quickly thanks to limited labor costs

Over the pop and thwack of bouncing pingpong balls on the Lower East Side, David Silberman noted that table tennis is wildly popular in New York. "But for so many, there is nowhere to play."

After all, pingpong tables are most associated with basements and garages—not the one-bedroom apartments many New Yorkers call home. Silberman is a co-founder and the chief financial officer of Flatiron District startup PingPod, which hopes to make the sport more accessible by opening 24-hour, autonomous table tennis studios. The company in March raised a \$10 million venture capital investment round led by Sequoia Heritage to expand its tech-enabled pingpong model throughout New York and to more cities.

The first PingPod opened on the corner of Allen and Hester Streets at the start of 2020, and the company now has launched locations near Penn Station on West 37th Street and in Williamsburg and Astoria, with one opening soon on the Upper East Side.

Other than a cleaning crew in the morning, there are no employees at the locations. Pingpong players book a time slot online for between \$15 and \$40 per hour, use their phone to unlock the door and play with paddles and balls provided on-site (though many players bring their own paddles). In the studios, high-definition cameras serve as security, in place of actual employees, but they also record each game and can send an instant replay to players' phones. A good rally may also make a good [Instagram](#) post, giving free advertising to PingPod.

The founding team has a championship pingpong pedigree. Chief Product Officer Ernesto Ebuena is a six-time Philippine National Table Tennis champion and in 2016 was ranked the top player in the U.S.

Ebuena oversees a team of coaches that offer private lessons and programming for children. Silberman and CEO Max Kogler have a background in finance. Kogler also previously served as chief operating officer for Super Soccer Stars, a youth development program.

Going autonomous

With almost no labor costs, PingPod locations, which are all owned and managed by the company, can quickly turn profitable, Silberman said. Revenue is limited somewhat by the lack of food and bar revenue that similar recreational businesses can rake in, but he countered that PingPod's locations are cheaper to launch and require less space.

The firm is part of a growing sector that is using technology to launch autonomous retail and

entertainment businesses. The most prominent are the cashierless Amazon Go stores. One block north of PingPod's Lower East Side location is a Sharks Pool Club, which offers autonomous billiards rooms. There are two other Sharks Pool Clubs in Manhattan and two in Brooklyn.

Ben Borton, an early investor in PingPod, said he views the company as a tech-driven way to find new uses for the types of brick-and-mortar retail spaces challenged by the shift to online shopping.

"I can't go on Amazon and play a game of pingpong," Borton said. "So this seems like a really smart repurposing of these [vacant retail] spaces."

The honor system

There are challenges to the model. Landlords must be convinced that it is safe to leave ground-floor storefronts without any supervision. There are occasional parties who stay past their time and the always-present threat of theft. But Silberman said the honor system has mostly worked. The studio's security cameras are monitored, and there is an intercom for security staff to communicate with customers who stray from the guidelines. With the funding round, PingPod is focused on opening locations in New York and along the East Coast. Its first Philadelphia location opened in February. The firm is also investing in expanding its technology, including AI sensors that will automatically keep score and offer feedback on the efficiency of shots.

"So many people just think of this as a parlor game—the pingpong table is for fraternities and beer pong," Silberman said. "We're trying to disassociate that a little bit. This is an Olympic sport. You break a sweat, and it's fitness."

But, he added, PingPod also recognizes the sport's main draw.

"I always felt like wherever there's a pingpong table," Silberman said, "there's fun happening."