

# Moving to a Hybrid Workspace

## **MaineHousing**

Management Innovation: Internal Operations

### **HFA Staff Contact**

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## Moving To A Hybrid Workspace

2020 brought about a cataclysmic shift in nearly all aspects of our life, none more so than in our working environments in which many changes were instantly forced upon us. Two years later MaineHousing has embraced this new reality and fully adopted many of those once instant changes into our employee handbook. Making hybrid work a normal part of MaineHousing's culture, while increasing productivity, employee satisfaction and work-life balance.

### Planning For Change

2019 was a year of great celebration for MaineHousing. We observed our 50th anniversary and after nearly 30 years at the same location, the agency decided to stop leasing office space and purchase a new location. The newly acquired building was gutted and redesigned with our needs and staff size in mind. Staff was charged with drastically reducing physical file space, which led to scanning, organizing, and purging on a large scale. This move would take us to a much larger building but into smaller workspaces with less storage space in a more open working environment. As with work files, staff members condensed their personal working spaces. The move was set for May of 2020 and staff dove straight into the task of downsizing.. It was a time of great change for MaineHousing, but looking back now, knowing what was just around the corner, it seems like a small change that was well-timed.

On March 16th, along with almost every other business in America, we opened to a very different world. By the end of that week, nearly all staff had transitioned to remote working. Unintentionally the deep cleaning and organization meant for the move to the new building had prepared us for the COVID changes that were dropped upon us.

During the early days of COVID in 2020 the agency decided not to re-create the wheel and followed CDC recommendations for all workplace health protocols. A skeleton crew stayed on-site, completing all needed in-person tasks, while the rest struggled to adapt to the new remote workplace. Hiring continued as normal, although at a slower pace, and interviews were moved to a remote video format.

In June of 2020 we moved to our new location and two things became clear – it was uncertain when staff would be returning to the office full time and we needed to hire more staff. The CARES Act was about to send millions of dollars to our agency and we needed more staff to help offset the already high workload. Between 2020 and 2022 our staff count rose from 163 to 192 in a brand-new building with space for 168 workstations. Staff continued to work a mix of fully in office, fully remote, and a hybrid of both so workspace shortages never became a problem. Departments simply worked among themselves to make sure desks were available for employees on the days they were going to be in the office.

Hiring continued at a frenzied pace during this time, filling positions that were added to the org chart as well as positions that became available during the great resignation. New hires were run through an onboarding orientation and then given the same choices for remote/in-office work. All through 2020 and 2021 management continued to listen to staff, adjusting policies when needed and learning on the go.

In late 2021 it became clear that we were no longer waiting for things to go back to normal. We realized that we were living within the new normal, and MaineHousing fully embraced that.

### Shifting From Workplace to Workspace

As relief money from the CARES Act was allocated, MaineHousing staff began working at a higher capacity than ever before. Even with additional hires employees were handling an expanded workload, yet deliverables were being met. There was no compelling reason to move back to an all-in-person environment when all of our tasks were being done efficiently with our

hybrid model. In addition, the organization had grown in size to the point where we could not accommodate all employees in the building at once, without reconfiguring to add roughly 30 more workstations.

MaineHousing shifted its perspective from building a workplace to fit all employees, to trusting individual employees to build a workspace that would meet their own specific needs. This plan was not going to be a one size fits all. Rather than creating a new and separate policy, remote work was incorporated into every part of the Employee Handbook with relatively few guidelines imposed. A few of these guidelines are highlighted below.

### **Desk and Work Model Options**

Three work model options are available for employees to choose from: Full-time in office, Full-time telework, Hybrid, part-time in office, part-time telework. Work model options are managed by individual departments and positions, based on their unique business needs. Not all positions are eligible for all work model options. Work model requests must be made in writing to each department's management team and are considered on a case-by-case basis, considering such things as workflow, impact on productivity, partners, and customers, and work performance of the employee. Regardless of model, departments should be covered during MaineHousing's open office hours from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. daily.

Departments were given the flexibility to choose which employees on their staff would have permanent desks vs hot desks. Once workspaces were determined, departments then decided whether an employee would keep a permanent desk. One department might need employees to be in the office four days a week, while another may only require two days a week to keep a permanent desk. Hot desks are available throughout the building with desktops or laptop ports. Hot desks are designated by a dark blue name placard and an employee can claim that space for the day by replacing it with their own name placard.

Relatively few restrictions were put in place under this new work model option. Below are details of the major restrictions.

With a hybrid work schedule:

- Employees must have a set schedule, such as Monday, Tuesday and Thursday in office, and Wednesday and Friday, telework.
- Employees may or may not be assigned a permanent workstation at the office, and can use a hot desk when on-site.

When Teleworking, employees are:

- Expected to be focused on their work, in a dedicated space. Time spent taking care of household tasks or personal business is not considered time worked.
- Expected to have established child care.
- Expected to work with their manager should technical or other difficulties arise while teleworking, such as loss of internet or loss of power, to establish alternate work arrangements or to use earned time. An alternate work arrangement may include reporting to the office, adjusting a work schedule for the day, or ensuring that the teleworker has work with them that can be accomplished without internet connectivity.
- Not permitted to delegate normally assigned duties to on-site colleagues because the employee is unable to complete the task as a result of teleworking or does not have access to the necessary equipment. They would need to report to the office.

- Expected to obtain supplies and equipment at the office. If an employee chooses to purchase supplies or equipment, out-of-pocket expenses are not reimbursed.
- Expected to be prepared to report to the office on designated days if necessitated by work requirements or management.

All employees, regardless of their working location are:

- Expected to keep their manager and colleagues up to date on schedule details by utilizing their Outlook calendar, out of office assistant and Ring Central notification systems, and change their voicemail message to reflect time away from work.
- Expected to use their webcam on video calls.
- To be reachable and responsive during their agreed upon work hours.
- To obtain prior management approval to any modifications to their work schedule. This includes last minute changes (personal appointment) or future time off.
- Dress for your day. The Dress for your Day policy allows for employees' discretion to select appropriate dress for the business of each workday. Employees are allowed to wear casual dress on workdays when they do not have public meetings. When involved in any such meetings, employees are expected to wear business attire. While dress for your day is intended to be relaxed, the expectation is that employees will nevertheless wear clothing appropriate for an office environment. Traditional business attire is always acceptable.

Middle managers and department directors were specifically trained on how to manage staff (and their expectations) remotely. The switch from in-person management to remote management was not always an easy one. In addition, a multitude of tools are being used in the new process to help connect employees and workflows no matter where they are located. RingCentral, which offers phone, meeting, messaging, and task management services has been an essential software for MaineHousing during this process.

## **Hiring**

New hires are now asked to come into the office for their onboarding process. They meet with Human Resources, Information Technology, and the building's Safety & Security Manager on their first day. Over the next few weeks, depending on their role within the organization, they meet with a variety of departments and positions whether in person or virtually. This allows employees time to settle in while learning and not have everything rushed upon them in a long orientation during their first week. Even if a new hire is going to choose a hybrid workspace they are asked to spend the first 3-6 weeks in the office. Over the past two years, an important lesson learned was that sending new hires immediately to a remote position did not set them up for success, and the majority of people hired in that way left within six months. Asking them to spend a few weeks on-site helps cement them into the organizational culture of their department and position.

## **Moving Forward**

In summary, while COVID may have forced all of us to work with new technologies in remote conditions, MaineHousing has decided to take the position that hybrid work is here to stay. Not only is it here to stay but we are building our future around a new working environment with new tools and technologies. To ensure that our plan allows us to be as flexible as possible we are working in with as much gray area as possible. Next time the world is hit with a change as big as COVID, we will be ready.

# Appendix A Workstations

Nameplate - Assigned Desk



Nameplate - Hot Desk



Hot Desk - Desktop



Hot Desk - Laptop Dock (in use)

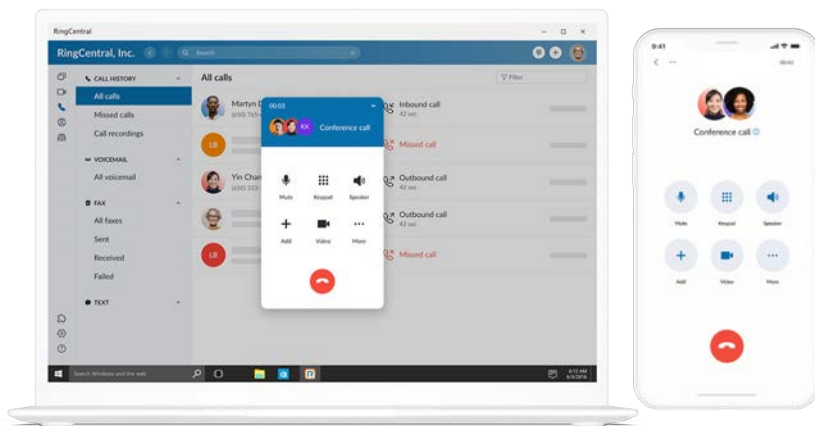
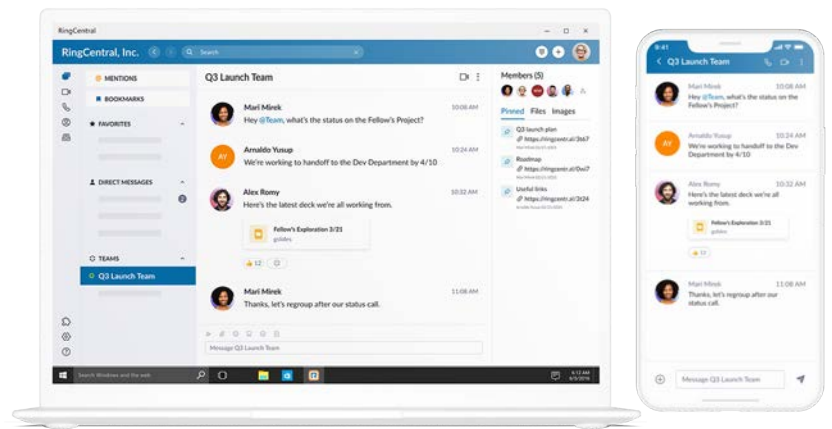


## Appendix B RingCentral Software

RingCentral MVP is the cloud based software that powers MaineHousing's phone system, however its is also seamless solution that combines messaging, video conferencing, and phone calls into one unified platform. RingCentral will work on any device where it is installed and has aided in MaineHousing's ability to move into hybrid work.

### Messaging

RingCentral gives you the ability to directly message one person or groups of people. MaineHousing as setup groups for all staff, working groups, departments and more. Attach files, images, links, etc.



### Phone

RingCentral powers our phone system, giving all employees the ability to answer and make calls from their MaineHousing phone number from any location that the software is installed whether it be a traditional phone, cell phone or computer. The end user sees only MaineHousing's info.

### Video Meetings

Use the app, software or browser add-on to conduct meetings with a full host of abilities including screenshare, chat, virtual backgrounds, etc.

