

# Alternative Workplace Strategies

## **MassHousing**

Management Innovation: Internal Operations

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Financial service institutions and government entities, particularly Housing Finance Agencies, are not by their nature trendsetters in remote work scenarios. For many years, that seemed like the kind of thing that was more common at tech-start-ups – or companies like Google and Facebook. HFAs have generally followed a more traditional path. Because we are least in part government entities – we typically have all of our employees in an office on a 9:00 – 5:00 schedule, five days a week. Maybe we didn't think we *could* change. Or maybe there wasn't any reason to.

And then there was a global pandemic.

To say the pandemic has changed us is an understatement. It has changed everything about how we live and work. One of the most unexpected changes may be the shifting attitudes from employees about working from home – and perhaps as importantly, their employers' shifting views about this.

At MassHousing – the sudden upheaval from a fully in-person work environment to a fully remote work environment was accomplished within a week. It was obviously a necessity at first, but over time it gave way to a new way of thinking about how we work. And where.

As spring turned to summer in 2020, MassHousing decided that the way we have always worked may not be the only effective way we can operate. We had a taste – like everyone – of how employees could work in a remote environment and this planted the seeds for something much bigger.

For all its challenges, the pandemic presented an opportunity for MassHousing to change our culture so that it is more technology-based than it has ever been. This has required us to take *advantage* of technology – both in terms of software – but also in terms of our internal information systems.

MassHousing wanted to be methodical in the planning for this change which meant hiring a consultant with a broader world view to help guide us through the planning process. As part of the conversation about eventually returning to the office, there was more to consider. A consultant helped us think about our goals more globally and understand best practices. In July of 2020, the Agency put out an RFP and conducted interviews for a firm to help the Agency drive this business transformation. In September, MassHousing selected Ernst and Young (EY) to develop a long-term workplace strategy that would continue to support its people and deliver on its organizational mission while maintaining all of the best things about its current culture.

The goals of this effort were:

- to enable MassHousing people to work both effectively and efficiently regardless of work location;
- to identify process improvement areas for MassHousing to increase efficiencies while adopting new “ways of working”; and,
- to understand potential cost-saving opportunities for reduced real estate needs.

At the same time MassHousing was beginning this process, we knew that we needed to address the practical aspects of our migration to a more technology-based workforce. This started with a large-scale

distribution of new laptops to every Agency employee. The reason for this was two-fold – first it was to ensure that all Agency employees had suitable devices for connectivity for remote work but as importantly to ensure that all Agency employees had laptops that were secure with updated software to guarantee the highest level of cybersecurity that we could. With each employee having the same laptop – IT staff can ensure that security updates and patches are maintained and updated over time on a routinized schedule.

In addition to the laptop, the Agency provided each employee with a monitor, a keyboard and mouse and a docking station. A one-time stipend was also paid out to each employee to help them to purchase additional items to improve their remote work environment.

In the fall, after EY was brought on board, an internal team at MassHousing worked with the consultant to survey employees and then use the results of that survey to help guide the Agency's work. After completing the survey EY worked quickly to evaluate and aggregate employee responses.

Survey results and analysis helped MassHousing refine the idea to pursue a hybrid working model, comprised of both on-site and off-site work. Specifically, MassHousing's new hybrid working model revolves around three space usage profiles of employees – identified as Mobile, Flex, and Resident. In general, an employee's job classification and job requirements drive the assignment of their position into one of these three categories.

Mobile employees will make up 46% of MassHousing's workforce. These employees will be in the office 0-1 day/week, at least once a month. A Mobile employee rarely works in the office, occasionally comes in for meetings, and does not have an assigned workspace. Rather, these employees take advantage of "hoteling" workspaces where they will "reserve" their space in the office – based on availability.

Flex employees will make up 48% of the workforce. These employees will be in the office 2-3 days per week and will have dedicated workspaces available for the days they will be in the office. As the needs for social distancing during COVID continue – their schedules each week are fixed in terms of days in the office versus days that are remote. Generally speaking, all Executive Team members and Human Resources personnel will have designated/assigned offices or cubicles.

Resident employees will make up 6% of the workforce. These employees are in the office 4-5 days per week. These employees work primarily in MassHousing's offices with assigned and dedicated cubicles/offices with guaranteed availability.

It is important to note that the classification for each job is determined based on the position itself and not the person doing the job. The point is that for this culture change to be durable – it had to be about the larger Agency, not arbitrary decisions about which employee wants to work remotely exclusively versus one who wants to work exclusively in the office.

For these changes to make sense – they had to be about the function of each position, its relation to other positions and a determination of the business needs that drove its designation. This is critical to a large-scale change – because over time – we want these designations to have meaning no matter who is in the job. A system that is predictable and reliable will help us to post jobs in the future – and to identify in the

job description whether the position is mobile, flex or resident. We hope that this will also increase diversity among our team because it expands the applicant pool beyond what is available in a limited geographic area. It could also mean increased diversity of people who are differently abled and who may seek positions that are largely remote.

The first phase of our new hybrid work plan is scheduled now for July 6, 2021 with full implementation tentatively scheduled for the fall. Plans are already in place for this as employees have been notified by their managers of their designations and our Administration Division is already hard at work on the practical tasks involved in identifying “early adopters”. These “early adopters” are employees at MassHousing who have volunteered to move into a hybrid work schedule by as early as July. Each phase of the new plan will be tested by our “early adopters” who will help us work out the details and smooth out any challenges that arise before all employees begin their new schedules.

What MassHousing has undertaken with its work over the last year is not just a “tele-work policy.” It’s much more than that. It’s a culture change that asks, “how do we do our jobs differently?” This distinction is important because it is what will help our Agency keep its focus on our mission and on the people whom we serve – no matter the challenges that we may face.

During the course of the pandemic, one of things we are all learning, whether we like it or not, is that we need to think more about resiliency. What makes us resilient? What best positions our agency to be resilient? And what will this mean for us over time? In part – the answer to this question is a flexible work structure that isn’t tied to a physical location. The pandemic wasn’t something anyone could have anticipated – but there are much more mundane issues that could impact an Agency’s productivity at any time. Expecting the unexpected – and preparing for it now – will be our new mantra. MassHousing is positioned to serve our client base and support our employees regardless of the challenges of a pandemic, or a flood or a fire.

Our mission statement directs us to “confront the housing challenges of the Commonwealth to improve the lives of its people.” With our new Alternative Work Strategies plan, these challenges won’t affect productivity and will mean that we are always prepared to do just that.