

When It's Time For A Home Office

So, you're tired of clearing your papers off the dining room table every time someone wants to eat (how dare they!). And you're still recovering from the business call you were forced to take that time your 5-year-old pressed the phone into your hand just as you stepped from the shower (it's amazing how professional one can sound while wrapped in a towel and dripping wet).

Sounds like it's time for a home office.

Ideally, you'll have a spare room to turn into office space - preferably one with a locking door. An extra bedroom, the basement, or attic can all serve this purpose. If you don't have room for a dedicated office, take a look around your house to see where you can carve yourself some space. A closet, bedroom corner, hallway alcove or even the area under a stairway can all be converted fairly easily for this purpose. Use bookcases, filing cabinets, plants, screens, even lighting to define your work space. It's essential that you remain committed to your space as office space. Without this psychological distinction between home and work, the two areas of your life may slide into one another, causing you to lose focus, and thus, productivity.

Choose furnishings that are ergonomically correct, and which fit in with the decor of the rest of your home. Lighting should come from three sources: natural, ambient and direct. Give yourself enough storage space to keep your work area uncluttered. You may want to store your supplies in another part of the house, keeping just a week's worth in your office. And schedule a weekly or biweekly cleanup where you go through your papers and files and either throw away or stow away anything that is not essential to the daily operation of your business.

Almost every business requires a computer system. Don't skimp. You want something with enough speed and memory capacity to last into the future. A good-quality inkjet, or preferably, a laser printer is also essential. Investigate the all-in-one printer, fax, copier and scanners. These may save you money as well as precious office space. I also recommend a computer backup system, which will protect the contents of your hard drive in the event of a power failure. An uninterruptable power source supply is also a must for the home office. This will keep your computer running during a power outage until you're able to safely shut it down.

Another essential component of the home office is telecommunications, meaning telephone, fax and Internet access. An account through an Internet service provider or online service shouldn't cost more than \$20 per month and it will give you the ability to send and receive e-mail.

You'll probably want more than one phone line, three if you're using one line for a fax and modem hookup. It's wise to invest in a business line, which allows you to list your business name and number in the phone book and with directory assistance. To keep costs down, use that line for incoming calls only. If you don't want the expense of a business line, but can do without a repeat of the shower scene, order "distinct ring" service from your phone company. This is a separate phone number which rings into your home line, but sounds different from your normal ring. This alerts you and family members to incoming business calls. If you're dishing up dinner or washing the dog, you'll know to let your answering machine, or better yet, your electronic voice mail system, grab the call. If you're in the shower, hopefully your 5-year-old will know to do the same.

You may also want to order "call answering" from your phone company. It's just a few dollars a month and sounds more professional than an answering machine, and which won't break down while you're on vacation.

A home office can either improve productivity, or harm it. You may find yourself doing paperwork at 2 a.m. when you should be sleeping, or flipping to General Hospital at 3 p.m. when you should be working. It's helpful to treat your home office as you would an outside office, complete with "starting" and "quitting" times. This will help you stay focused, organized, and productive. And your family will appreciate having their dining room table back.

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