

Designing Your Home Office

By Rachel Goldstein

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So you have finally decided to work from home and set up your home office? Setting up your home office is one of the best parts of working from home. For the first time in your life, YOU get to choose your desk and where it goes. YOU get to choose the equipment and the supplies. YOU get to choose the chairs and the lamps. This is going to be fun for you. This article will explore the essentials of designing your home office ... everything from finding the space to buying the right supplies. You will be spending a lot of time in your office, lets make sure that you design it right.

FINDING THE ROOM

Sometimes it is hard to find the right room to place your home office. After all, when you bought your house you probably didn't know that you would be working from home. Look for a room in your house that has the following elements:

1. Separate from household members and distractions
2. Enough room for a desk, chair, equipment, office supplies, and space to think and move around.
3. Enough electrical outlets and power for all of your equipment
4. Phone line (s) available
5. Enough heating and cooling
6. (opt) Windows for sunlight and fresh air
7. (opt) An air vent for good ventilation

In an ideal situation, all of the above elements will be present.

If you choose a room completely separate from other rooms, "defined work space used exclusively for your business" (IRS Tax Code), you can deduct your home office. So it would be better for your pockets to choose an enclosed space of your house that isn't used for family life.

Can't find an open space for your house? Try to use your imagination before you call an architect to renovate or add on to your house. Are there any walk-in closets in your house? How about your basement? You can clean up your garage and park cars on the street. Maybe separating another room with bookshelves might do the trick. If you still can't figure out a way to make space for your home office, maybe you should consider hiring an architect or general contractor to add on to your house or to build an office in your basement or other room. This might be an easy job ... just adding a wall to make one room into two. Or you might land up spending quite a bit of money. I recommend

not getting carried away until your business is running smoothly for at least 6 months.

LAYOUT PLAN

It isn't time to go shopping yet; rather it is time to get out the graph paper, rulers, and pencils. Before we buy furniture and equipment we will need to map out our office, in other words make a layout plan. Have a family member help you measure the length and width of the room and the height and width of the doorway. On your piece of graph paper draw the room in the right proportion. Then consider all of the equipment and supplies that you will need to run your business. Here are my suggestions:

1. Chair
2. Desk
3. Filing Cabinet
4. Bookshelves
5. Telephone(s)
6. Computer
7. Fax Machine / Copier / Scanner
8. Storage Bins
9. Pens / Pencils
10. Paper
11. Binders
12. Folders
13. Staples, Binder Clips, Paper Clips
14. Envelopes
15. Media Storage Devices (Zip Disks, Floppy Discs, CDs, etc)

Think ahead, is there anything else that you might need? Now, map out on the graph paper where you want to place each of these items ... design away! Remember, you will be spending much of your time in your office, try to make it a place that you will enjoy visiting or you might dread working. For this reason, the way that you design your home office can make or break your freelance business. Keep the following in mind when designing your home office.

1. Only paint with neutral colors, or the paint will overpower your furniture and you will become distracted
2. Don't jam tons of furniture and equipment into your office unless totally necessary. Having too much clutter is one reason you might not want to visit your office.
3. If you are easily distracted, don't put your desk in front of a window.
4. Place your bookshelf, filing cabinet, and telephone at arms reach
5. Place your desk near the electrical supply and phone lines
6. Get personal and add your personal touch to everything. This will create a more inviting atmosphere for you.
7. If there is enough room, add a love seat or reading chair for you when you need a change of scene.

GO SHOPPING

Now the fun part ... shopping! Whether you decide to shop online or in a conventional store, don't forget your items list and layout plan. As you shop for items, take their measurements and draw them on your plan to make sure that they fit. A few online stores that you can look at are:

OfficeSupplies.com

OnlineOfficeSupplies.com

TotalOfficeSupply.com

Staples.com

FurnitureFind.com

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN EACH ITEM

1. Desk / Workstation - Since the invent of the computer, one small desk is no longer enough. A workstation is a more appropriate term now. Depending on what your profession is, you will need desk space for your computer, and then more desk space for administrative work. Think about what type of equipment you will need are where it will go. How much room do you have for a desk? Usually your best option is to get an "L" desk. What I mean by this is choose your favorite desk, and then choose a smaller desk that can be placed perpendicular to the main desk. The big desk is perfect for your computer equipment, and the smaller desk can be kept clear for your writing surface.

Make sure that you choose a sturdy desk that you can keep for a long time. It is better to dish out a few more bucks now then to have to replace your desk in a year. Also, find a desk that is at a height that is comfortable for you.

If you don't have enough money to buy a new desk, try visiting the Salvation Army or a used furniture store to save money. You might also try building a desk from items you already have or need. You can use a door on top of filing cabinets, bookcases, milk crates, or another item.

2. Chair - Your chair is one of the most important items in your office. If you purchase a cheap chair, you could hurt yourself or hate working in your office. Choosing a good chair reduces fatigue and other pains that occur when posture is bad for long periods of time. Buy an adjustable chair (height, armrests, back angle, and lumbar support) so you can enjoy your office and avoid pain and injuries.

3. Bookshelf - How big your bookshelf needs to be depends on how much room you have left in your office after your workstation and chair are in place. My suggestion is to install your bookshelf right behind and above your desk. This way books are always at arms reach and you saved yourself a lot of room. Purchase as big of a bookshelf as you can. You will be surprised how fast it fills up.

4. Filing Cabinets - You will want to purchase at least a four-drawer filing cabinet. It is crucial that your filing system is organized and easily available

5. Telephone - It is important to get a telephone that has a hold and speaker button. It is a good idea to get a separate line for the telephone and fax / modem.

6. Computer - The computer will most often be the most expensive piece of equipment you purchase for your office. Because of the large amount of variables involved we have devoted a whole separate article just on this topic. Briefly, however, here are a few suggestions. These are broad strokes, read the full article for specifics.

Your first decision is going to be the operating system for the computer. Unless you have a reason to choose otherwise, you are going to be looking at a Mac or a Windows machine. If you have experience on one platform you should stick with it. When you are working on your own without any kind of system support you want to use a computer you are comfortable with. All things being equal, if you are a graphic designer or desktop publisher use a Mac, anything else get a PC.

The second decision is who to buy the machine from. Keywords here are reliable, reliable, reliable. If you are buying a Mac purchase straight from Apple. If you are buying a PC make your purchase from Dell. You may be tempted to buy from a no-name or even somewhere with a good reputation because the price is mouth watering. It's your eyes that will be watering when your computer stops working at one A.M. with a looming deadline. You want good support; Dell is rated as the best over and over by all the publications that count.

Since we are on the topic of support ... buy the service contract. If you are buying a Mac, that support is three years of "Applecare". If you don't buy straight from Apple your reseller may try to convince you their private support is as good, or even better. To keep it short, **THEY ARE WRONG!** I am yet to find third party support that beats Apple's. I have always found it to be worth the money. As for Dell, purchase the three years of onsite support. If you can afford to be without your computer for a few days you can save a bit by using their mail in service, but who can afford to lose those days.

Finally we are left with the computer's configuration. This was probably your first question, but for most of you it is probably the least important. For the most part computer power is far superior to the software that can run on it right now. Since new systems are constantly brought to the fore we can't give specific numbers. The best buy for the money is usually going to be a based on the company's mid-level offering. The cheapest way to increase power in your system is by adding RAM, make sure the computer you purchase has at least 128 mb. If you are a designer that minimum is 256 mb.

I hope this article has helped you plan out and design your office. Once you have purchased all necessary items, move them on in and start your freelance business. Good Luck!

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