

Book Review: The Home Office Solution

By Ramona Creel

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Working at home offers both the best and worst of both worlds. You have the FREEDOM to get up whenever you want, wear pajamas in your office, have lunch with a friend on the spur of the moment, and put in a load of laundry between phone calls. But you can also suffer from multiple DISTRACTIONS (family, friends, personal responsibilities), a sense of isolation from the rest of the world, the lack of STRUCTURE, and a shortage of SUPPORT STAFF. It's nice to be able to work on a proposal at 3 AM when you feel inspired -- but it's not so nice when you find yourself working until 3AM nearly every night because you can't pull yourself away from work. You walk a fine line, and you may feel at times as though you are being pulled in two directions at once. And if you aren't careful, you'll get pulled right off of your tightwire and go tumbling to the ground!

But along comes Alice Bredin, with a practical and down-to-earth guide for the home-based business owner, sales person, or telecommuter. "The Home Office Solution" is part support group, part coach, part BUSINESS CONSULTANT, and part therapist. Ms. Bredin speaks from personal experience, and covers a broad range of topics that are important to people who work at home -- from making the decision to stay home to handling CHILD CARE and household responsibilities to creating BOUNDARIES around your space and time. She offers practical suggestions and anecdotes from others who have struggled with the same issues that you are facing. All in all, this is one of the most valuable guides on working at home that you will find anywhere.

STAYING ON TRACK

Whether home-based workers like to admit it -- or even recognize it -- running your business affairs from your house can take an emotional toll. "What are you talking about?" you might say, "no boss, no co-workers driving you crazy, no commute -- that sounds like heaven to me!" And in some ways it is. But, as Ms. Bredin points out, home-based workers shoulder the entire responsibility for their own PRODUCTIVITY. You no longer have a boss cracking the whip, so you must crack your own whip. In an office setting, you were forced (or you were fired!) to adhere to certain policies -- starting work by 9:00, ending no sooner than 5:00, reporting your output each month, being given concrete projects with externally-based deadlines -- and these policies provided a measure of STRUCTURE to your workday.

But as a home-based worker, you must police your own behaviors, set your own goals, and maintain your own routine. Ms. Bredin suggests that you take a hard look at your MOTIVATIONAL SOURCE -- your energy cycle, what distracts you, how you handle pressure, what incentives you offer yourself, and your ability to put off doing "fun stuff" to get the work finished. If you find problems or challenges in one or more areas, that may be where you need to develop some stricter

GUIDELINES -- some business policies and procedures for your company of one.

EMOTIONAL SURVIVAL

Home-based workers also must deal with ISOLATION. You no longer have co-workers just casually stopping by your desk for a chat. No more conversations by the water cooler or spontaneous lunches with colleagues. And no one sitting there two offices away just waiting to offer his opinions about your latest creative idea. Ms. Bredin accurately recognizes that, if you hope to maintain a connection to the outside world, you will have to build it into your routine. You will have to make a concerted effort to get INVOLVED -- with networking groups, professional associations, civic groups -- whatever it takes to get out of the house and have some contact with other people.

RUNNING THE SHOW

And finally, home-based workers face the doubly challenging task of having to be both BOSS and EMPLOYEE. Unfortunately, most of us don't make very good bosses! We are either demanding, unforgiving, slave-drivers or starry-eyed dreamers with no real direction. Ms. Bredin suggests that a good boss is one who:

- motivates and encourages you, providing positive feedback on their work
- sets clear goals and gives you the tools you need to succeed
- accepts setbacks and turns rejection or failure into a positive opportunity
- doesn't second guess you and rewards you for your successes
- helps you to constantly improve your skills, abilities, and personal worth

So, your goal, as a home-based business owner, is to learn to be a GOOD BOSS to yourself. How do you currently measure up?

MANAGING YOUR TIME AND WORKLOAD

The next major concern in working from home is learning to handle the workload. It's also important that you be aware of the risk home-based workers face for WORKAHOLISM. Most home-based workers are there because they own their own businesses. And most business owners have a tendency to allow their businesses to eat up their lives -- working evenings and weekends, turning down social engagements to get "just one more thing done," failing to take care of themselves. This kind of behavior may give you an adrenaline rush at first, but it can only lead to BURNOUT in the long-run.

Ms. Bredin suggests that the first step in combating burnout is simply to RECOGNIZE it. So many of us continue to slog along -- ignoring the clues from our bodies and loved ones that something is wrong -- assuming that this kind of behavior is normal. Well, it's not! The second step, according to Ms. Bredin, is to take action to combat the ROOT of the problem. Sure you can say, "Okay, I'll stop work at 5:00 each day." But if your plate is so full that you aren't even half done with your work at 5:00, the temptation to keep going will eventually win you over. So the real goal is to cut down the amount of work you take on, learn to say "no," and DELEGATE anything and everything that you can to someone else (a contract employee, part-time assistant, etc.) Not only will you end up with more free time for yourself, but you will be forced to focus your efforts on those activities that bring the greatest RETURN -- in terms of enjoyment or money or whatever is important to you.

INTEGRATING WORK AND PERSONAL LIFE

The most important requirement for working successfully from home is that you are able to balance your work and family lives. There is nothing more frustrating than being in a constant BATTLE between your career and your loved ones -- with the two opposing sides continually butting heads. Ms. Bredin suggests that the key to avoiding conflict lies in the setting of BOUNDARIES. You must set certain rules with your loved ones -- "I'm not to be disturbed during working hours from 8 to 2" or "When I'm in my office, I'm off-limits" or "My office is for work and not for playing." Since you are the boss, you are welcome (even encouraged) to set rules that accommodate the needs of those around you -- "I expect to be left alone to work from 8 to 2, but then I'll be free to play with my kids and help with homework for the rest of the day." That's what working from home is all about -- FLEXIBILITY. But flexibility on your own terms.

But setting boundaries isn't enough -- you actually have to STICK to them! Ms. Bredin stresses that you should do whatever is necessary to maintain your work environment. If that means choosing a space with a door (that you can shut!), making child care arrangements with a babysitter or close friend, or planning your schedule so that you can work when no one else is home, do it! The more you can focus on business during BUSINESS HOURS, the more freely you can focus on your personal life the rest of the time. This is not just your business, it is your life.

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