

Inexpensive Home Office Solutions

By Ramona Creel

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You don't have to be Fortune 500 CEO to need a functional office. But, unlike many high-ranking CEO's, you may be working out of a small office -- or your back bedroom -- and you are probably on a BUDGET. However, that doesn't mean that you have to put up with inefficient work spaces, inadequate equipment, or unreliable technological solutions. You can have everything you need to work effectively, without spending a fortune.

CONSOLIDATE YOUR EQUIPMENT

One thing that can break you -- if you aren't careful -- is trying to stay on top of all the equipment required to run an office these days. Computer, printer, scanner, copier, fax machine, postage meter -- just to name a few! However, you can save quite a bit by purchasing a MULTI-PURPOSE item -- such as a "scanner / copier / printer combo". The one drawback to this type of equipment is that when one part breaks, you are without all of the components until you get the entire piece fixed. Another way to consolidate is purchase a scanner and printer and have them do double duty as a COPIER. Simply scan your document in and send it to the printer to create a copy.

And by installing a program such as WinFax (or one of the inexpensive "shareware" type fax programs available at http://www.onlineorganizing.com/Online_Fax_Links.htm), you can also turn your scanner and computer into a FAX MACHINE. Either scan your hard copy document -- or choose the computer file you would like to fax -- and send it through your computer modem. You will receive faxes as an email attachment -- only print them if you need to, saving paper and toner. Look for other ways to use your computer to REPLACE a piece of equipment --such as using an online postage printing service (available at http://www.onlineorganizing.com/Postage_&_Mailing_Links.htm) instead of a postage meter. Not only will you spend less on equipment, but you will need less surface space to store your many technological "gadgets" -- potentially saving money on office furniture.

AVOID A SECOND PHONE LINE

Many people feel that starting a business requires installing additional phone lines. While this might be true if you have a staff or function out of a separate business office and need a multi-line system, most home-based businesses can work their way around this. These days, a lot of entrepreneurs are choosing to use their CELL PHONE as their business line -- giving them freedom from being tied to their desks. Just be sure that you choose a service with good coverage -- nothing worse than being in the middle of an important business call and losing your signal. Also check to see that you can get a signal inside of your office. I know that I work out of my condo -- and I have to walk

outside of my building for a cell phone to work. Finally, go for a calling plan that has unlimited anytime minutes -- even if it is a bit more expensive. You will save yourself money in the long run, rather than constantly going over your minutes and running up unnecessary penalty fees.

If you aren't a part of the cell phone revolution -- or aren't comfortable completely letting go of a land-line -- check to see if your local phone service offers a "ring distinction" option. With Bellsouth, it is called the "Ringmaster" plan. Basically, it allows you to have TWO phone numbers on ONE residential phone line -- no extra installation involved. Each phone number rings differently -- usually one ring for your main line and two rings for your secondary line. You will know before you pick up the phone if it's a business or personal call, and you can generally attach a different VOICE MAIL (with different messages) to each. Best of all, devices such as fax machines can distinguish between the two lines, picking one up and ignoring the other -- so this is a great solution if you do need a separate fax line. And it costs a fraction of what a second phone line would cost.

FINDING DEALS ON OFFICE FURNITURE

The biggest mistake many small entrepreneurs make is thinking that they have to spend a lot of money on expensive furniture for their office to be professional. But you actually have a number of different options:

- ASSEMBLE-IT-YOURSELF -- Melamine has come a long way! You can find durable, inexpensive, attractive, and functional furniture that comes in "kits" from nearly any office supply store.

- USED OFFICE FURNITURE STORES -- If you are looking for a particular item, either check back regularly to see if the piece you want has come in, or ask to be contacted when a new shipment arrives.

- ONLINE OFFICE FURNITURE SUPPLIERS-- Without the high overhead of a brick and mortar store, shops like the ones at http://www.onlineorganizing.com/Office_Furniture_Links.htm are a deal.

- ADS AND GARAGE SALES -- Keep an eye on the newspaper. When people move, they often choose to liquidate their own home offices and start over with new furniture.

- DISCARDS -- Look around your house. I have seen everything from card tables to steamer trunks to old doors used quite successfully as office furniture.

- CLOSEOUTS -- When you read about a business closing or moving or merging, pick up the phone. They may find it easier and more economical to replace their old furniture rather than move it.

- FURNITURE LEASING COMPANIES -- You can find great bargains on previously leased furniture. Just look for good quality companies and inspect each piece carefully for damage.

CUTTING DOWN ON SUPPLY COSTS

Finally, there is the issue of the money you spend on office supplies -- the things you need to replenish regularly to keep your company functioning. The first rule of shopping for supplies is always look for a SALE. Office supply stores like Office Depot and Office Max send out "\$10 off" coupons all the time -- wait until you get one of these in the mail before you make your next run to the store. And the end of the year -- right before the cutoff for tax deductions and prior to inventory time for the stores -- you will find a number of excellent deals on larger items and products that don't normally go on sale throughout the year. Also consider shopping ONLINE -- many stores (like the

ones at http://www.onlineorganizing.com/Office_Supply_Links.htm) offer free shipping for orders over \$50, and the lower overhead that the web offers can save you some serious money (not to mention the headache of dealing with traffic and crowds). Finally, if you have the space, try to buy in BULK. Whether you are shopping from a discount warehouse or your local office supply store, buying larger quantities can net you a tidy discount per item. Just be sure it's something you'll use large quantities of over time.

And of course, one of the best ways to cut down on your office supply expenses is to REDUCE, REUSE and RECYCLE. Reuse the second blank side of printer paper for printing rough drafts and for scrap paper. Better yet, don't print a document off of your computer unless you absolutely need a hard copy -- to save on both toner and paper. Speaking of toner, you can save tremendous amounts of money by buying recycled or refilled toner cartridges -- many companies will even give you a credit toward your next purchase when you recycle your empties. Ask yourself if you really need a fresh new manila for that temporary file, or if a used one with a new label would work. Follow the old rule of the Depression era -- use it until it completely wears out. Your wallet will thank you!

Remember that the first rule of saving money is to be creative! Good luck and have fun putting your home office together.

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Ramona Creel is a Professional Organizer and the founder of OnlineOrganizing.com -- a web-based one-stop shop offering everything that you need to get organized at home or at work. At OnlineOrganizing.com, you may get a referral to an organizer near you, shop for the latest organizing products, get tons of free tips, and even learn how to become a professional organizer or build your existing organizing business. And if you would like to read more articles about organizing your life or building your business, get a free subscription to the "Get Organized" and "Organized For A Living" newsletters. Please visit <http://www.onlineorganizing.com> or contact Ramona directly at <mailto:ramona@onlineorganizing.com> for more information.

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