

10 Tips for Setting Up Your First Home Office

Making Your Home-based Office Space Functional and Efficient

From Shannon Belew, former About.com Guide

Working from home offers many advantages - from the flexibility of setting your own schedule to saving time and gas money by virtually eliminating your daily commute. However, being successful in a home office requires creating an office space that promotes efficiency in a non-traditional work environment. Consider the following tips to help define a professional working space for your new business.

1. Make a List of Your Critical Home Office Needs

Before claiming a corner in one of your rooms and calling it an office, make a detailed list of your most basic needs for a home office. This is called your "critical needs" list. It should include items you must have for your office, such as a desk, computer, fax machine, telephone, and so on. If you are a graphic artist, for example, you may need both a small desk for your computer and a larger table or work space for your artwork. If you are a consultant, however, you may need additional space for several locking, fire-proof file cabinets and possibly a space for clients to meet with you. When making your list of critical needs, it is important to think about all the ways in which you plan to use the home office.

2. Choose a Dedicated Area for Your Home Office Space

Once you have made your critical needs list, you have a better idea of how much room you actually need for an office. With that in mind, you can now choose a dedicated area of your home for office space. Ideally, the office should be in a quiet area with some level of privacy. This is especially important if you share the house with a spouse, children or even a roommate. For example, a spare room with a door may be best because it can help filter noise from the rest of the house. Or, if you will be meeting with clients in your home office, it may be more efficient to choose a room near the front entrance of the house.

3. Get Creative: Balance Workspace and Storage Requirements

Often, a home office has a limited amount of space and can feel cramped even with only a chair and desk in the room. However, maintaining a professional office is dependent upon good organization. That means planning a space that has plenty of room for both storage (files, supplies, etc) and an ample area to spread out and work. You may have to get creative. For example, build your own desk that uses file cabinets as the base with wood or a laminate countertop for the top. You may also have to store files in another room. Keep in mind, the general rule of thumb is that any files or supplies that you use frequently should be easily accessible. Again, the goal is to create an organized office space that meets all of your basic needs.

4. Brighten Your Home Office with Proper Lighting

When possible, choose a space for your office that allows plenty of natural light. This provides a good foundation for a bright working space that can then be enhanced with more direct lighting. If your office lets in little or no outside lighting, the access lighting becomes even more important. Start by providing general, overhead lights that fill most of the work area. Next, consider adding task lighting, or desk lamps and floor lamps that can give concentrated lighting to your specific work area. Finally, regardless of the type of lighting available, make sure that your computer screen is positioned so that it prevents a glare from occurring. The object is to create balanced lighting that minimizes eye strain.

5. Use a Dedicated Phone for Your Home Business

One of the many benefits of working from home is having reduced overhead. However, the initial savings from sharing a phone line with your home and business can ultimately cost you. A home phone is less professional and may allow clients to question the legitimacy of the business. One of the common pitfalls of using a home phone is having to share voice mail that uses a message from both family and business. It confuses customers. Likewise, when sharing a phone, you risk having a child or other family member answer the phone, giving the impression that you are not running a real business. It is best to use a dedicated phone line for your home office. Of course, this can include using a cell phone, or a VoIP (Internet-based) phone.

6. Invest in the Right Home Office Equipment

Getting started in your home office by using the right equipment is essential; and phones are not the only must-have pieces of equipment. Unfortunately, it can be tempting to skimp on key equipment and splurge on unnecessary items, such as office decor. Money should be spent on a good desk with proper work space; a comfortable chair that can provide back support; computers with efficient memory and performance; a fast Internet connection; and any other specialized equipment, tools or software that is key for performance in your area of expertise.

7. Separate the Professional from the Personal

When working from home, it is important to keep your personal life from spilling over into your business life (and vice versa). Setting up a business bank account is the first step in helping you avoid mixing personal expenses with your business expenses. To further reduce confusion, try to store personal checks, records and even mail in a room separate from your office. Fully segmenting these two parts of your lives may also help at tax time. Tax deductions related to home offices are increasingly scrutinized, and the more you can prove that the office is a completely separate and dedicated area, the better in terms of meeting IRS definitions of a home office.

8. Utilize Formal Processes and Procedures in Your Home Office

There is no need to write a formal employee handbook or publish a list of office rules, but determining a formal system of operations for your home office is useful. This includes everything from standardizing record-keeping and paying invoices to logging time with customers and mileage for business trips. Keeping a few formal procedures in place for standard business functions will ensure your office stays organized; and that information is available where and when you need it most.

9. Establish Office Hours

Flexibility is a key benefit of working for yourself in a home office. Yet, it still requires that you put in a fair amount of time. Setting a typical schedule for working in your office will help you stay focused. Perhaps even more important, keeping standard office hours (for the most part) also

helps your clients know when you are available and can be reached. After all, you may do much of your creative work in the middle of the night, but your clients are more than likely keeping more traditional hours and need access to you within that timeframe. Setting office hours can also help minimize distractions and unannounced calls or drop-in visits from well-meaning friends and family.

10. Keep Time: Hang a Clock in Your Home Office

Once your office hours are set, don't forget to hang a clock on a wall or place one on your desk - anywhere it is clearly visible. While this may seem laughable (or obvious) the truth is that when working from home, it is easy to forget about time. Before you know it, you have worked a 14-hour day, for the third day in a row. Even though your work is at home, there still comes a time when you have it to call it a day and shut your door to the office.

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