

Balancing Work and Life from a Home Office

By Barbara Findlay Schenck

With increases in freelance work, self-employment, and virtual work teams, home offices have become more popular than ever. Today, nearly 14 million offices are situated in U.S. homes, with another half million opening annually-and countless others filling floor space in homes around the world.

Is a home office right for you?

Before hanging an "open for business" sign in a room of your house, consider the following questions:

- Do you have an area in your home that offers the space and privacy required for a home office?
- Do you have the self-discipline to avoid the distractions of pets, kids, household chores, and other home activities?
- Will you be able to leave work behind and resume your personal life at the close of each day, even though your office is just steps from your living space?
- Is your home located in a neighborhood where zoning allows for home offices?

Finding a place for your business

Home offices located in the corners of kitchens and family rooms often get off to a bad start from which they never quite recover. Instead, follow these tips as you stake claim to a space away from home noise and traffic:

- Select a space separated by a door. This will allow you to close out distractions and shield your business from the hubbub of household activity.
- Situate your office in a place you'll be happy spending time. For example, you'll need a room with ample space for your business and all its equipment. Ideally, the room should have at least one window and a door to the outside.
- Avoid setting up your office in a place where household members gather.
- If you locate your office in the corner of a bedroom or living room, separate the space with a bank of plants, a decorative screen, or another type of room divider. This will isolate the area and create a sense of privacy.

If you don't have the luxury of a separate home office space, you're not alone. Many home businesses start in available nooks and crannies because extra rooms simply aren't available. This is when false walls come in handy. Installing a false wall or room divider is an effective way to create a space designated for the exclusive use of your business. Not only will it help your business mindset, it may allow you to deduct office expenses on your tax return. And the benefits work both ways. By separating your office from your living space, it stays out of sight-and hopefully out of mind-during after-business hours.

Setting up your workplace

As you design your home office, consider the following tips:

Decent lighting is a must. Lighting not only affects your vision, it can affect your mood. If your office is dark, paint it a light color and bring in as much artificial light as possible—on your desk and overhead.

Get a desk that fits your needs. Do you need a large writing area? Does your desk need to accommodate a laptop or monitor and keyboard? Do you accumulate files and need drawer space? Consider your needs and then shop for furniture that matches form with function.

Invest in a good, ergonomic chair. Even if you're only sitting in it a few hours a day, it's worth the extra money. Consider purchasing a second chair for use by clients, suppliers, or associates.

Stock up. Supply your office with everything from paper clips and pens to ink cartridges and USB flash drives. That way, you won't need to start a search every time a supply need arises.

Making your home office work

Setting up a proper office is only half of the equation. You also need to know when to step out of the office and away from work. Consider these tips to achieve a better work-life balance:

- Commit to a set work schedule so that your business doesn't overtake your life. When the workday is over, close the door or pull the screen across your workspace. This allows you to put the work behind you as you re-enter your home life.
- Commit to getting out of the office on a regular basis. Schedule lunch meetings, set appointments with customers, enroll in professional seminars, and join community and business groups that pull you out of your home office and into the outside world.

Barbara Findlay Schenck is a business and marketing strategist. She is the author of *Small Business Marketing For Dummies* and co-author of *Business Plans Kit For Dummies* and *Branding For Dummies*.