

Organize your home office to fit individual needs

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The idea of taking work home used to evoke images of a stressed-out workaholic who couldn't leave the office behind.

But in today's age of telecommunication, when going into the office isn't always necessary or convenient, home is where many of us are working. This means finding space in one's house, apartment or condo where you can be productive with little distraction.

Interior design and organization experts say it's easy to transform a room or area of the home into an efficient workspace. With the plethora of trendy, colorful organizational accessories and specialized furniture, the home office also can look fabulous.

"There's a lot of ways to personalize your space and add color, whether it's storage, knickknacks or your furniture," said interior designer Ivette Lemons, owner of Cadtek Design in Grayslake. "Your budget may be small, but you can do a lot of things with it. You don't have to have a home office that's custom-built with a lot of wood cabinets."

Location, location, location ... and furniture

The first item to assess before setting up a home office is location. Do you have a spare room that can become an office? If not, is there a low-traffic area of the dining room or living room? Armoire-style cabinets that allow a computer and keyboard to be hidden are perfect for rooms that double as both living spaces and offices, Lemons said.

Finished basements and guest bedrooms also offer some unused space for an office and don't require the desk and equipment to be hidden. Whichever space you choose should have access to power outlets and phone jacks, or the ability to have those installed.

A definite "don't" Lemons said, is putting the office in the busiest part of the house.

"You want to try to carve a niche in a room that's not very much used," she said.

"The family room is probably one of the worst spots you can use to set up your home office. It's one of the most used spaces by the family."

Melissa Perlman, spokeswoman for Office Depot, said the work space should motivate a person and promote productivity. In 2003, the company started offering a line of furniture specifically for small business owners and people working from home. The collection includes desks, armoires and other pieces in a variety of stylish designs and textures, from glass to decorative wood.

"What we've been seeing for years is there's a merging of work and life," Perlman said. "Work doesn't only happen at the office, work comes home with people. It's important that we translate that into our product assortment."

Organization 101

Although being organized is crucial in a corporate workplace, it's even more important at home. There, you run the risk of having the cable bill or the kids' report cards mixed right in with the day's workload. Professional organizer Monica Friel,



Interior designer Ivette Lemons works in the office of her home as her children, Madison, 5, and Dylan, 3, color and draw. Lemons has run her business, Cadtek Design, out of her home for more than four years. Interior design and organization experts say it's easy to transform a room or area of the home into an efficient workspace. (Sandy Bressner photo)

president of Chaos to Order in Chicago, said it's imperative to strike that balance between work and home life. Everything should have a place, she said.

"You have to be careful how your filing system is set up when you have a home office," Friel said. "Your personal things and your business-related things can get intermingled. That can make things difficult and cause a lot of problems."

Friel recommends not letting the mail and other paperwork pile everywhere. Can't get to the mail just yet? Place it inside a pencil drawer in your desk so it's at least out of the way. But remember this is just a holding zone. Never allow items remain in the drawer longer than a day or two.

As for the filing system, Friel said to remember that filing is for current projects, not old tax forms and expired insurance policies.

"People tend to think of their filing system as a purgatory between the top of the desk and the garbage can," she said. "They don't think of the filing system as something they're using. Whatever is current now should be in their filing systems."

As for all those old documents, Friel suggests going through them at least twice a year and shredding anything that's no longer needed. Documents that are worth keeping can be stored in a banker's box or other container.

And being organized at the home office doesn't have to be boring. Hip magnetic tack boards and magnetic strips, as well as fun multi-colored sorting trays and storage boxes, can make the process fun.

"It all depends on how much you're willing to have in front of you," Lemons said. "That's why you have these different options."

Pitter patter of little feet

For moms and dads, being able to work from home can sometimes mean spending more time with the kids. Occasionally though, the little ones can be a distraction. Friel, who's worked from home for 17 years said she hires a baby-sitter if she has to be completely focused on something. She also suggests keeping the kids engaged during important projects with a movie or puzzle.

But if working from home sounds like too much, well, work, think again. Once a space is carved out and organized, the home office can have big benefits. Lemons said she's run her business out of her home for about five years.

"I completely treasure the fact that I can work out of my home and be there and know what the ins and outs are of my family," Lemons said. "It's definitely a plus."

Home office success tips:

- If you don't have the luxury of establishing your office in a separate room, select an area of the house that has the least traffic and as few distractions as possible.
- Sketch out the proposed space before doing anything else. Take measurements to determine if the furniture and equipment you visualize in your immediate work area will actually fit there.
- If square footage is limited, consider purchasing a wraparound style desk, with attached credenza or cabinets that can utilize the corner of a room and also serve to physically define your office territory.
- Take stock of the physical environment before setting up. Is there sufficient light and ventilation? Can you reach your files, manuals or frequently used materials easily?
- Make a list of the technology you will be using. Check to be sure the available electrical outlets and phone jacks will support your computer, printer, and the myriad other peripheral devices you may need. Consider hiring a contractor to review any electrical concerns or increase capacity.
- Make sure the chair you use in your workspace is both comfortable and ergonomically correct. Productivity can plummet and health issues arise when you make do with the extra kitchen chair instead of one that is designed to provide proper support and is set at the correct height for desktop work.
- Create an environment for yourself that is as attractive and efficient as possible. Don't skimp when it comes to considering painting, new carpet, office furniture, lighting elements and even artwork for the walls.

Source: Ivette Lemons, owner of Cadtek Design in Grayslake

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