

# Building the Perfect Home Office



# Get vertical, kill those wires, add a monitor.

**Caralee Adams** on smart ways to make your personal workspace work for you.

If your idea of setting up a home office means putting an old card table from the attic in a guest room, you are not alone. We often piece together a home office without much planning, and as a result throw our hands in the air and conclude – mistakenly – that we can't work at home.

Instead, experts advise, think through your needs. Consider hiring a professional designer, and invest in good equipment to make your home office work for you.

Neal Zimmerman, architect and author of *Taunton's Home Workspace Idea Book* (Taunton, 2002), says the best home offices are well-organized, consider both work and home activities, and have a personality. "If it has a positive spirit about it, you'll feel good about working there and you will be more productive," he says.

## Striking a balance

The growing demand for home offices has been fueled by the explosion of technology, which has made it easier to work from home, either as a career or an add-on. Builders have caught on, and new homes in the past decade commonly include an office.

The trick with a home office is to make it functional, yet cozy; private, yet flexible.

John Patrick wanted the office in his new Ridgefield, Conn., home to be high-tech, but look clean. The former vice president of Internet technology at IBM, who now works as a consultant, loaded the office with the latest technology, but you wouldn't know it. "When you walk into the room, it looks like a living room. You don't see any wires," he says.

Cables were snaked through chases created within the walls and furniture. Since Patrick regularly changes equipment, he also wanted an easy way to connect and disconnect cables, so he had channels built below the back of his desk, accessible by removing panels on the work surface.

Today, home office furniture is softer and more stylish. People are adding overstuffed chairs and accessorizing, as they spend more time in their home offices, says Stephen Saint-Onge, a home and style designer who has appeared on the

TLC television show *While You Were Out*.

"It's all about creating an environment that is comfortable, inviting and soothing – that's the advantage of a home office," he says.

## Getting started

So, with all the choices out there, where do you start? Think hard about how you are going to use your space. Do you need quiet or can you work in a central location? Do you need room to see clients? What kind of technology will you use?

In most homes, space is at a premium. Home offices can be in a spare bedroom, the attic, the basement – even a hallway or closet. For some, the kitchen or an unused formal dining room is best. And with wireless computers your home office can be mobile – any comfy corner of the house. As you plan your setup, consider that technology is changing so rapidly

that you need to have a flexible design to accommodate upgraded equipment later.

If the space you choose will serve dual purposes, such as an office and family room – subdivide the room with sliding glass panels, for instance, available through IKEA. To keep the peace, consider guidelines for the family about the hours you will use the space and when it is available to others. For instance, a den could be an office until mid-afternoon then the kids could have access until early evening. A hotel-style "Do Not Disturb" sign can help.

## Squeezing the most out of your space

Next, make a plan to maximize your space. "At the very least, get everything off the floor," says Zimmerman. Think vertically: Have shelves mounted on the wall and use built-in cabinets. Mount a

## One Man's Guide:

### John Patrick describes his ideal office tools

1. **Linksys USB 2.0 Hub:** With seven ports to plug in keyboard, label printer, Apple iPod mini docking station, a USB key, DVD burner, etc.
2. **Apple iPod or iPod mini:** A necessity on the road or keep it on the desk in a dock (connected to the USB hub).
3. **Zebra thermal printer:** To print from stamps.com or FedEx/USPS mailing labels.
4. **Canon scanner:** Allows eFax.com to send and receive faxes, eliminating a fax machine.
5. **Radio Shack switch for telephone/music:** Velcro it under the desk and in one position the switch allows iTunes to play, in another position it activates a headset to make phone calls.
6. **Dual monitors:** Allows email, web browser, instant messaging and other applications visible at once.
7. **Opera web browser:** Provides multiple tabs and with one mouse click it loads favorite websites.
8. **USB memory key:** Keep it in USB port to share files with others.
9. **Packet8.net Voice Over IP:** For doing business without cost of long distance.
10. **DVD burner by LiteOn:** Can copy 4.7 gigabytes of data onto each DVD.





wall phone to open up desk space. You can also hide printers and fax machines in closets or drawers (which has the added benefit of muffling the noise). Run computer cables through grommets, openings in the work surface to hide wires.

Some steps are important regardless of budget: First, get rid of the clutter. Then, think about what you use on a daily basis and store spare materials elsewhere. Rearrange the furniture you have for a new look and paint the room to add a splash of personality, urges Saint-Onge. Accessorize with artwork, family photos, throw pillows. Finally, find light bulbs to cast light on your work area, as well as decorative lights, such as sconces, to create a warm atmosphere.

Matthew MacKoul, an attorney in North Redding, Mass., says the lighting and movable furniture in his recently constructed home office help make the most of the small office he and his physician wife, Judy, use in the evenings. Track lighting suspends from the cathedral ceiling to focus on certain areas, and under-cabinet lighting offers deflected light. When the MacKouls' three kids squeeze in to do homework, the family stretches beyond two workstations with an oval island that can be rolled out for extra workspace.

### Equipment

Technology is driving much of the home office craze and office technology is an incredible value now, says Rafe Needleman, an editor at CNET (cnet.com), a website

that reviews personal technology products. Beyond a computer (Needleman urges at least 512 megabytes of RAM and a 120GB hard disk), you'll need a good back-up system like the LaCie d2 Hard Drive Extreme to protect your files. You might also consider networking your computers at home so you can access information from a variety of monitors.

Want a television in your office, but don't want more bulky equipment? Philips has a MiraVision Mirror TV that mounts on the wall. It's a mirror when off, a TV when on. "It's a great solution to bring in technology and not take away from the hominess," says Saint-Onge.

### A healthy environment

In an office, your employer is responsible for a healthy environment, including ergonomic furniture. When you're in charge, don't overlook this aspect. A good office chair is a must-have. "I spend more time in my chair than in my bed," says Patrick, who paid \$1,000 for an adjustable chair with lumbar support. "It's definitely worth the investment."

Beyond chairs, there are loads of devices to make life in your home office more comfortable, such as ergonomic equipment by Humanscale of New York. To fend off carpal tunnel syndrome, look at adjustable keyboard trays and a good mouse, such as Humanscale's Whale Mouse. Also, keep your monitor slightly below eye level to avoid neck and shoulder strain and invest in a page holder to keep

your work directly in front of you. If you spend several hours a day at your computer, be kind to your eyes with a glare filter to reduce screen glare. A monitor arm allows you to position your monitor closer and gives you more workspace.

And Saint-Onge notes that good air quality is key. Consider an air purifier; some even have the capability to bring in soothing scents such as lavender or more uplifting ones such as citrus.

### Open to change

Realize, too, that your needs may change – and a home office can be detached from your actual home.

About 10 years ago, architect Don Leighton-Burwell started working from a spare bedroom of his Austin, Texas, home. After hiring another employee, he moved to a larger bedroom. Then, three years ago, he built a 22-by-22 detached, two-car garage with a 484-square-foot office above.

The office is perfect with an abundance of natural light, plenty of storage room, a conference area for clients, a bathroom and a U-shaped desk that he says feels like being at "command central," where he can spin his chair from the computer to the desk. Working in the house, Leighton-Burwell says he always felt he was at the office.

These days, though, "at the end of the day when I lock up my office, I have the ability to mentally switch off my work life," he says. "It's the right distance – a 20-second commute across the backyard." **W**