Home Office I

by Marl

In a modern home office, with its computer and other electronic devices, you are executive, secretary, mailroom clerk, receptionist and custodian all rolled into one. You use a whole range of tools to perform all kinds of jobs. Your home office itself is not, as it's all too often called, "a tool of the trade," any more than a stadium is a baseball bat. It's an "environment"—one that should help you use your tools conveniently to get all those jobs done smoothly. That's why a good design is vital. Here are a dozen of the best tips I know—streamlined versions of guidelines covered in my new HOME OFFICE BOOK—to see that you get what you need.

A Room (Or at least a space) of your own

Good work requires concentration, so to the extent that it's possible, your home office should provide privacy, both spatial and acoustic. In many homes, this privacy can only be symbolic, and often it has to be guarded by rules and clocks rather than walls or doors. Sometimes a simple rug on the floor can mark the limits of your office. Sometimes a plant or a low table can do the trick. Sometimes an arrangement of light can suggest a separate space. But try your hardest to find a location where you'll be able to establish some barrier, even if it's only implied or psychological, between you in your work space and others outside of it.

> **The key to a good home office design is analyzing carefully what you'll be working at and what your working style is.**

Bigger is Better

You'll always need more room than you think, and you'll always fill up whatever space you've got. You'll find that your space is nibbled away by the very work you do there—not to mention the fax machine or the scanner or that wonderful new combination phone, answering machine and food processor. And remember that when you work at home, you have no central filing system, no corporate library, no supply closet down the hall, no mailroom in the basement, no maintenance staff. You handle it all. You store it all. Take it as an article of faith: in home offices, Bigger Is Better.

Avoid Bad Space

The rule of Bad Space is simple. Never establish your home office in a location—no matter how great it may be in other ways—that will often be uncomfortable. This sounds simple, but it's not, because Bad Space is invariably tempting space. It often beckons with a lot of square footage in a part of the house where no one will bother you. But Bad Space is also too cold, too hot, too damp, too bright or too dark. Usually it's a combination of several of these unattractive traits.

The key to avoiding most Bad Space is making sure that your potential office location would make reasonably comfortable living space. After all, you're going to want to spend a lot of time there.

There's another kind of Bad Space, though—the kind that looks good in every other way, but just doesn't suit your style or work habits. For example, I've got an outbuilding in my back yard. It's big and bright, a framed garden house with six

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double-hung windows. It's already wired for electricity, and it could be insulated and sheetrocked in just a couple of days. For years, I thought it would make a great office. I'd have lots of room, lots of light and lots of privacy. Then I thought more about the way I work. I often go back to the computer after supper or late at night. I realized that the thought of bundling up and traipsing 150 feet through the cold, dark drifts of a New England winter wouldn't be conducive to evening work. An unattached office might be great for people who work regular hours or live in a gentler climate, but it's not for me. In my circumstances, the outbuilding is Bad Space.

Get your priorities straight

Perfection is rare, compromises inevitable. As with virtually everything else in life, you'll probably have to make some important basic choices when you set up a home office. If you make the right ones, you're in business. If you make the wrong ones, you've got problems—and so has everybody who lives with you. Because my new office, for example, used to be the garage, we no longer have a place to put a car. To us, that's no big deal. To you, or to someone in your family, it might be.

Develop a program

Once you find the right space, the key to a good home office design is analyzing carefully what you'll be working at and what your working style is. The obvious place to start is with your body. Are you left- or right-handed? Are you tall or small? Are you disabled in any way?

Along the same lines, this is also the time to consider your work habits, the jobs you'll be doing and—generally, at least—what kinds of equipment you'll be using. For example, do you habitually spread papers around you, or do you work more neatly from files or individual documents? Do you like to get up and prowl around as you think over knotty problems? Will you be working mainly on your keyboard, or will you be doing a lot of hand work? Do you need a second work station—a drafting table, maybe, or a light table to check slides? What office equipment will you install right away and how much room will it take up? Do you expect to be buying more soon? Will you be receiving clients? If so, how many at a time?

This sort of detailed self-analysis is vital. Without it, you approach your potential home office space with only the vaguest notion of how to arrange it. With it, you've got what architects call a "program"—a list of carefully considered personal priorities that you can apply to that space to create the best possible home office for you.

Be careful about built-ins

The most obvious way to suit yourself is to build your own work surfaces or to have them built to your specifications. Careful, though. Your first home office will almost inevitably be something of a laboratory. As you work at home for a while, you'll gradually learn things about the way you go

about tasks when you're unsupported by secretaries and some of the other structures of "big" office life. If you've built everything in, it's hard to make adjustments.

In your first home office, consider staying flexible. Use the most versatile, adjustable, non-built-in furniture you can find and afford. And keep track of every drawback, every inconvenience, every niggling pain in the neck. Your time will come, and when you do build in, you'll not only get what you want, you'll get precious little that you don't.

Consider a table

The tables offered by furniture systems manufacturers aren't much different than their basic desks. But they're usually bigger and they're often adjustable. That's why I like them so much.

I've found that for my style of work a big flat surface set at keyboard height does the trick. It holds computer equipment, a printer, a phone, a lamp or two and a few file trays—with room left over for clipboards, loose files and my inevitable toss of papers. I work mainly on the keyboard, and I've found that when I need to take notes by hand (during phone calls, for example) or when I just need to break a momentary writer's block by pushing a pen for a change, scribbling on a lower than normal surface is no big problem. And with an adjustable unit, I could always raise the table up if I knew I'd be working largely by hand for a longer period.

Value adjustability

The nice thing about an adjustable table (or an adjustable anything) is that you can fiddle with the basic unit until it fits you and your style. To keep things simple when you're shopping for furniture, remember three words: Adjustable. Versatile. Modular.

Ponder them in the context of one short, imperative sentence: Suit yourself.

You won't go far wrong.

Consider moving the computer off your work space

Most computer set-ups waste precious desk space. If we're using an IBM clone or a Mac II, most of us stack our monitor on top of our CPU, with the keyboard out in front. This works all right for computing, but it hogs working room that most of us could put to much better use.

There's no reason in the world why your CPU has to sit on top of your desk, nor is there any law that says you can't stand it on edge. Consider tucking yours out of the way under your work surface, with your monitor popped up on an articulating arm. Then, whenever you want to, you can simply push the keyboard off to one side, and the desk in front of you will open up all the way to the wall. The amount of found elbowroom is astonishing.

Control glare

In the age of computers, the great enemy of comfort and efficiency is glare, which can make working in front of your monitor a true, splitting headache. Glare obscures characters under bright puddles of reflected light, and you wind up leaning forward, tensing your neck muscles and squinting to make out what you're doing. Almost everyone who's used computers at all has bobbed through this unpleasant little dance and experienced the painful result.

Put simply, you can eliminate glare by making sure that no light sources have the angle on you. With electric lights, this means either locating them where their beams won't reflect into your screen or fitting them with diffusers that soften their glow, or lenses or louvers that direct their beams in another direction. With natural light, it means taking the location of windows into account and making sure you can screen off or redirect their light when necessary.

Controlling glare is all too often ignored

in the design of a new home office. Be sure to give it careful thought. It will save you plenty of headaches.

Do a walk-though
Once you've decided on a design—or think you have—test it one more time by "walking through" your work routines. If you can actually set up your furniture or some mock-ups, fine, but I've found it almost as helpful to sit down in front of the plans I've drawn and imagine my way through this procedure. It's important, though, that you physically go through the motions of reaching, turning, and working. Is everything smooth? Are locations convenient? Do relative positions make sense? Have you covered all your needs? Lighting? Work surfaces? Filing and storage space? Bookshelves? Equipment?

If you're like me, you'll run into at least a few problems. Once, I discovered that a file cabinet tucked under my main work surface kept me from scooting far enough to my left to conveniently operate my printer. So I modified the design to move the file cabinet. The last time around, I realized that I'd certainly kick my computer if I just set it on edge under my desk, so I designed in another desk support behind which the machine could operate in safety.

Suit yourself
Designing a home office should be a healthy and liberating exercise in pleasing yourself. Function is the key to successful workspace. Style has no value except to make you feel comfortable, energetic and secure.

If you just want a few touches to soften or offset the utilitarianism of file cabinets and electronic gadgetry, you're right in the mainstream—most home-office workers don't get too fancy. But if you enjoy interior design, and can afford its cost, terrific. On the other hand, if all you care about is the biggest possible space to spread out your work in, go for it.

The point is that a home office is personal space, where every single element should be considered in the light of your comfort and convenience. Forget fashion. Forget status.

Remember, the most important thing about your home office isn't that it's at home. Or even that it's an office. The most important thing about it is that it's "yours."

Mark Alvarez is the author of THE HOME OFFICE BOOK: How To Set Up And Use An Efficient Personal Workspace In The Computer Age. *It's available for $14.95 from bookstores or direct from Goodwood Press, P.O. Box 942, Woodbury, CT 06798, USA. This article originally ran as "The Best Home Office Design Tips" in the September 1990 issue of* Home Office Computing *magazine.*

"His phone is busy, his fax is busy and his modem is busy. I'll just walk over and talk to him."