Forty million people now work at home regularly. As we enter the 21st century, this number is likely to increase as traditional office settings will be less necessary in certain professions. People who use home offices are those who 1) have their own home-based businesses; 2) are telecommuters, performing work at home and sending the finished products to a supervisor; or 3) bring work home.

Home offices are not a new phenomenon. Writers, for example, have historically worked in home offices. Other professionals such as lawyers, consultants, teachers, and accountants often do at least part of their work at home. Homes traditionally also have been incubators of new businesses.

Technological advances now are allowing a broader range of society to use home offices. The technology of computers permits people to begin a task on a home computer and complete it on an office computer. [This ease and speed of this process is much greater than in the days of typewriters.] Modems and the Internet allow people to transfer information from one computer to another without leaving their homes.

as well as to access information previously available only in person. Although electronic mail and video teleconferencing have not yet made human interaction in the workplace obsolete, technology has made the home office more feasible for a wider range of workers when face-to-face interaction is not essential.

The home office has advantages as well as disadvantages. An advantage is that working in the home generally allows for a more flexible use of time. This can enable a worker to solve other scheduling problems, such as taking a child to school or day care. It can also enable a worker to use his or her most productive hours, because not everyone performs best between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Working at home can allow a person to have better concentration and fewer distractions—there are no co-workers and may be fewer interruptions. Working at home also reduces costs and can be more efficient. Food can be prepared for less expense in the home, transportation costs are reduced, and clothing costs can be minimized.

As a result of saving all this time, energy, and money, the employee may also reap benefits in his or her family life. The home office also can be more economical for the employer, because a smaller on-site workforce requires less space and lower maintenance costs.

Disadvantages to working at home sometimes stem from the lack of on-site supervision. With no superior, or even other peers around, distractions such as the television, telephone, or even household chores may become a problem. Employers may also worry about performance efficiency, and such a gap in supervision could cause estrangement in employer-employee relations. Another disadvantage may be that the worker may feel trapped or suffocated if all his or her life activities occur in the same one oder two rooms.

As in the more traditional office, the physical design is critical to the success of the home office. The design will vary depending on the nature of the work, the availability of space, and individual requirements. Where the home office is located and what type of space is allocated for it are two important decisions that will determine its efficiency. Workers should understand their specific needs and design their offices to maximize their resources.
Key Issues

Home offices can be diverse in design to suit individual needs and tastes, but there are key issues that are relevant to a variety of offices. When planning the specific components of your office, keep each of these issues in mind:

1) Public/private separation. This refers to physical space as well as to aspects of your life. It is important to have a distinction between work space and leisure space. Combining the two (for example, in your bedroom) can lead to problems, including lack of concentration and mental suffocation. It also may not be appropriate to share your personal space with employees or clients. In addition, it is important to distinguish between public and private times in your life. You will need to adhere to a schedule so that family and friends understand that you are not available when you are working. Using a home office may provide flexibility, but it is still a “home office,” and both parts of that phrase are integral.

2) Work/distraction. For most people, working at home is a way of avoiding distractions and interruptions found in the office. But distractions (cleaning, sleeping, washing dishes, watching television, etc.) can creep into a worker’s regimen at home as well. When designing your home office, consider potential distractions; for example, it may not be best to situate your main work site in the same space as your favorite leisure activity.

3) Environmental conditions. Light, heat, air conditioning, and other environmental quality concerns are handled by the employer in a traditional office. Deficiencies in these will affect your work at home and it is important to design a safe environment conducive to high-quality work. For example, working in an unrenovated basement may be delightful during the summer, but come winter that same unrenovated basement may be too cold.
2) Support area(s)
This is the space where you may receive visitors or clients, conduct meetings, and hold conferences. In home offices, these areas may be separate from the primary work space or they may be part of the same area. It is important to plan for such support spaces when designing your office.

3) Storage area(s)
This is where you will store the materials required to run your specific business. Remember to consider your needs for security and fire safety when planning the storage area. Active storage will include records and supplies as well as goods that may be produced as part of your business. Records and supplies will need to be stored nearby, requiring appropriate storage containers and furniture. Goods may be stored in a remote location, but some will need to be nearby. Inactive storage will include records that you do not use daily, and equipment and supplies bought in quantity. These may need to be stored remotely if space is limited in the home office.

Specific design requirements

When designing your home office, consider general issues such as separating public and private space, and providing ample work space. Also consider specific details before designing your office, because when a problem arises later it may be difficult to redo your entire design. When planning your office, be sure to take the following into account:

- Support space (adequate space and access for visitors, clients, employees)
- Good environmental conditions (natural light, air, heat, cooling)
- Lighting (general and task lighting)
- Storage space (appropriate space for the variety of materials to be stored)
- Electrical power (enough outlets and power to handle the required equipment)
- Access for visitors and/or employees
- Communications power (enough phone jacks and lines to handle-telephone, fax machine, and modem)
- Aesthetically attractive space
- Personal needs (any personal concerns that enhance your or employees' work performance)

And workstations should meet the ergonomic needs of the workers and the task.

Location of the home office

Some people may be fortunate to be able to build an addition to their house for a home office. This new space can be built to the specific requirements of the user. Most people, however, will have to use existing space with minor adjustments or renovated space in an existing home. Therefore, a home office is usually one that is created from a definite and finite set of pre-arranged spaces, which were likely meant for other uses. One of the most important decisions you will make is where to locate the office in your home. Consider the following two examples when making a decision about sites for your home office.

Basement. Advantages: large open space, private and quiet, possible separate entrance, and access to heat and electricity. Disadvantages: lack of natural light, unfinished space, poor environmental conditions, and potential access problems for employees and clients (stairs).

Bedroom. Advantages: large room, quiet, good environmental conditions, heat and electricity available, privacy, toilet nearby, and finished space. Disadvantages: shared with other uses (sources of distraction), may be shared with another person, and may be inappropriate to bring clients to private areas of the home.

Telecommuters

Telecommuters are persons who work in home offices for employers located elsewhere. The computer and modem have made it possible for people to "commute" electronically by telephone lines. Telecommuting arrangements can be formal (company has an explicit policy) or informal (individual agreement between employee and employer). When the office is in the worker's home, does the employer have any responsibility for that space? While each situation may be negotiated somewhat differently, it is generally agreed that employers have some responsibility for the home office of telecommuters. If the company has a formal telecommuting policy, responsibility for the set-up of the home office will be included in the policy statement. Since the health and comfort of the employee will influence his or her productivity, it is in the employer's best interest to provide a safe, comfortable work setting.

Employers often provide the basic office furniture and equipment, including computer, printer, fax machine, telephone, desk, chair, task light, and consumable supplies. Other equipment and furniture may be supplied depending on the specific job requirements. An employer may provide all of this directly or give the employees a budget to purchase the furniture and equipment. Some employees may like this option so that they can have some control over the style and color of furniture. Nevertheless, the employer still has the responsibility to be sure that the employee is working with furniture and equipment that is appropriate and safe (ergonomic concerns).
Conclusion

The home office is an increasingly feasible alternative to traditional office settings. Home offices offer certain advantages. Work can be done more efficiently, and space can be used more effectively, which addresses a valuable economic concern as well as a societal one in an overcrowded and potentially resource-depleted environment. In addition, locating more workers in home offices can help decrease traffic congestion and associated air pollution. But there are also disadvantages to working at home. The incentive to produce may not be as great, and the resources for planning and implementing an effective home office design may be lacking. The potential also exists for workers to become isolated, which can have consequences for personal well-being and for cohesiveness among workers.

This bulletin presents some of the general issues concerning home office design as well as some specific concerns. Remember, it is important to keep your office neat, efficient, well-planned, organized, comfortable, and attractive. It is also important to understand your specific and individual business needs so you can provide yourself with the best and most effective home office setting.

References and Resources


Tax issues for home businesses

IRS publication #587, or call 1-800-829-1040.

Other issues in this series which may interest people designing home offices are "Preventing Carpal Tunnel Syndrome in Computer Users," vol. 1, #4, and "Lighting in the Workplace," vol 1, #5.

Web sites

- Telecommuting Advisory Council—http://www.telecommute.org/what.html
- Herman Miller—http://www.hermanmiller.com
- Steelcase—http://www.steelcase.com
- Cornell University International Workplace Studies Program—http://www.iwsp.human.cornell.edu

For additional information on this and other topics in this series contact

Lorraine E. Maxwell, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Design and
Environmental Analysis
Martha Van Rensselaer Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York 14853-4401
E-mail: lem3@cornell.edu

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Copies of this publication can be obtained by contacting the Cornell University Media and Technology Services Resource Center, 7 Cornell Business and Technology Park, Ithaca, NY 14850. Phone: 607-255-2080; FAX: 607-255-9948; or e-mail: Dist_Center@ecf.cornell.edu.