

SETTING UP A HOME OFFICE

**By
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Many of us have or want to have home offices. We have or will set up such facilities for a variety of reasons. Some of those reasons include:

- (1) We want a home office to function as an adjunct to our law offices, giving us a place to work at home where we can function with reasonable efficiency.
- (2) We don't want to have to go to the office every time that we want to do some work.
- (3) We can spend time at home where family interaction increases, while still doing the work that we need to get done.
- (4) The home office provides a sanctuary where we can get some peace and quiet when the kids (and their friends) make too much noise.

Some of us will choose to run our practices partially or even entirely out of a home office. More and more self employed or solo practice attorneys have chosen to work out of their homes rather than incur the expense of setting up and maintaining an office. Many attorneys have worked out arrangements with their law firm or employer enabling them to work at home part or even most of the time.

Sometimes as attorneys get older their perspective changes and they want to reduce the amount of work that they do, but not stop working altogether, such a reduced work situation can work well out of a home office, saving the expense of rent for a more formal office.

Occasionally we get the opportunity to rebuild or set up a new home office, simply because we decide to move.

This article will provide some ideas and guidance to you respecting setting up a home office. It will focus on planning for and implementing the creation of a functional home office.

You can establish a home office in any one of a number of environments. If you have sufficient land available to you, you can create a stand-alone building to function as your office. If not, you can convert a garage or an

extra bedroom or den into a home office. In a smaller living area, you can even set yourself up in a part of a room.

You should consider whether you will have people visiting you at the office; and, if so, how many and how often. If you will have a lot of people visiting your office, you would be best off with a separate building or, at least, a separate entrance to a ground floor location in your home for the office area. In that event, you should check with local zoning and building authorities as the increased traffic and changed use may run afoul of current requirements and you may need to seek a variance for a non-permitted use of your residential property to stay in compliance with the law. You may also need to have additional off-street parking available.

If you won't have people visiting your office or will only have occasional visitors, you will not likely have a problem with the zoning, but if you will have any clients coming to your home office, you should check that out. You should also check with your insurance broker to ensure that you have appropriate coverage. Adding home-office coverage to your homeowner's policy should not prove too expensive (I pay about \$100 a year for mine).

If you do not plan on having clients come to your home office, you do not need to concern yourself as much about a professional appearance to the office and you can make it as comfortable and casual as suits your needs and tastes. If you will have clients coming, then the same considerations apply as would apply to any office environment.

Home offices come in all sorts of sizes, shapes and configurations. Sometimes they occupy a portion of another room, such as a den or a bedroom, other times they occupy a room by themselves (and those rooms come in different sizes) occasionally, they occupy a converted garage or even a completely separate structure.

Once you know where you will put your home office and the size of the office, you can look at furnishing and equipping the office. Furnishings will reflect a combination of your personal taste and needs. Some of you may choose to visit an antique shop and acquire an antique roll top desk and antique bookcases; others may choose more contemporary furniture. What ever you choose, be sure that it accommodates your needs. The last time I built a home office, I moved in my roll top desk from my previous home office and hired a carpenter to build a work table to hold my office

equipment and bookcases and cabinets to hold office supplies, reference books and computer program manuals. The cost of that construction proved quite reasonable when compared to buying decent quality furniture elsewhere and gave me the opportunity to have exactly what I wanted. Another possibility is to go to a modular installation such as you can order from a variety of office supply and furnishings dealers. Reliable Home Office (www.reliablehomeoffice.com) is a good example of a place to look for and obtain such modular furniture and build an office.

Before you install all of your furniture, do an inventory of electrical outlets and phone jacks. Decide if you (1) have a sufficient number of each; and (2) if the current location of outlets and jacks matches up to your plans for the setup of your office furniture. You will find it easier to bring in an electrician or telephone technician to relocate a jack or outlet or to add additional jacks or outlets prior to the installation of all of your furniture. While many people buy extension cords and run them around rooms to change the location of a connection or to create additional outlets, having an electrician add additional wired outlets and/or circuits, if necessary, works better and generally presents less risk of fire or injury.

Speaking of installations, you will most likely want high-speed Internet access, so you should arrange for the delivery of those services, installation and connection prior to outfitting your office. The cost of DSL or cable broadband service has dropped significantly in the last year or two. You can obtain it for quite reasonable costs now. Having such service gives you immediate access to email and to the comprehensive online libraries available through providers such as Lexis and Westlaw as well as access to all the other facilities of the Internet.

To make your home office fully functional, you will want office equipment comparable in function to the equipment in your office. The basic equipment list includes: telephone, computer, printer, copier, fax machine and scanner. Ideally, you will get a telephone that has a built-in answering machine. Wireless phones add convenience at a reasonable cost. You have the choice of getting a separate fax machine, copier, printer and scanner or purchasing good quality and reasonably priced multi-purpose machines combining some or all of those functions into a single unit. The quality of the multi-purpose machines has significantly increased in recent years and such devices have evolved into reliable equipment fully functional for the type of use typical of most home office operations. Most of the multi-

function devices print through an ink-jet technology. You can find good multi-function devices from manufacturers such as Canon, Epson and HP in the range of \$200-\$500. You can find some laser printer multi-function devices as well, although at a higher price. Depending upon the amount and type of printing you do, you may wish to consider getting a relatively inexpensive laser printer as well. You can find laser printers for as little as \$100 these days. Buying the multi-function printer/scanner/copier/fax machine has the advantage of saving considerable space in your office as the multi-function devices generally have a footprint smaller than any two of those devices placed next to each other.

You will need a computer as well. The power available in laptop computers has dramatically increased and they now offer functional equivalence to desktop units. If you wish, you can counter any differences in size and functionality of keyboards, pointing devices and screens through the use of external monitors, keyboards and pointing devices. Prices on laptop and desktop computers have dropped. Desktop units generally remain less expensive than laptop computers (especially if you add in the cost of external monitors and keyboards). On the other hand, the laptop's portability offers significant flexibility that a desktop cannot.

Decisions about whether to use a laptop or a desktop computer will reflect individual preferences and needs. You will, however probably want to get a computer with **at least** the following specifications:

Monitor: LCD/XGA or SXGA resolution/15"+

CPU: (Windows) Pentium 4 or equivalent [2.0 GHz] or Pentium Mobile (for laptops) [1.5 GHz+]; Macintosh G5 desktop or G4 laptop [both 1.0 GHz +].

Hard Disk: 40 Gb+ (more is better)

RAM: 512 Mb + (more is better)

Optical Drive: CD R/W, DVD or CD R/W, DVD R/W

Communications: Fast Ethernet/56k Baud Modem/802.11g Wireless.

Connections: USB 2.0 and/or FireWire (both if possible).

Operating Systems: Windows- XP Professional; Mac OSX Version 10.3

You can find desktop computers and monitors meeting these specifications in the range of \$900-1500. Laptops meeting these specifications should cost between \$1000 and \$2000. You can pay less and get close to the recommended specifications or more and get additional bells and whistles.

If you intend to spend a lot of time working in your office, spend the money to get yourself a good ergonomic desk chair. My personal favorite is the Herman Miller Aeron chair, which now costs around \$750 (you can pay more or less depending on what features you choose and where you purchase it) (www.hermanmiller.com). If that seems pricey, then note that it was around \$1000 when I bought mine some five years ago. My five plus year-old Aeron (my regular office desk chair) has received heavy use in the last five years and remains in excellent condition.

You also need to consider the software you will acquire for your computer. At the most basic level, you will want software compatibility with your office so that you can work effectively at home. That means that you should use pretty much the same programs in both places. Check the software licenses; in some cases the license will allow you to install the program on a second computer at home. In other cases, you will have to buy another copy to comply with copyright and license restrictions.

Beyond these basics, personal tastes might induce you to augment the office with a few additional items such as a stereo (consider getting an iPod and speaker system) and a television set and DVD player. While you can create TV functionality on your computer and also use it as a DVD player, in the long run, you will find it easier and better to have separate units. If you have the space and really want to make the home office a “retreat”, consider adding a comfortable reading chair (preferably one with massage functions).

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