

## Home Office Essentials

*Tips and tools for the work-at-home parent*

By Michael L. O'Brien

If you are weighing life as a work-at-home parent, chew over eP's home office plan.

### Find the Right Spot

Brenda McGivern, a CPA in Stoughton, MA and mother to a toddler, started her home-based business 3 years ago out of a converted spare bedroom. The cozy space worked well short-term, but McGivern found herself volunteering to meet clients at their offices rather than inviting them back home. When McGivern's husband joined her firm a year later, the couple transformed their basement into a home office.

The firm quickly reaped the benefits of the new space. "Our clients can now come to us, which saves us a lot of time commuting," McGivern says. "It can also be very beneficial for your clients to see where you work. The technology you use and your level of organization are good indicators of the quality of work you produce. A professional, well-run office will lend credibility to your business."

### Dig In

Once you choose the space for your home office, focus on comfort. A wrap-around workstation offers elbowroom and easy access to your PC, phone and supplies. Chairs with lumbar support can save you from an aching back; find one at an office supply store or furniture dealer.

Keep paper clips and scissors out of reach from little hands. Get locking file cabinets, drawers, a safe and a key-operated door to your room. A crosscut shredder can prevent dumpster divers from stealing your identity (or your clients') off sensitive documents. Make sure you have enough lighting for using a PC and reading, and avoid glare with appropriate window shades.

### Be a Pro

Use business checking and credit card

accounts and order letterhead and business cards. You can obtain 250 free cards through VistaPrint.com from 30 pre-formatted designs. The catch: VistaPrint.com puts its ad on your card's backside. If you schedule home-based client meetings, confine toys to a few hideaway areas or clean up often.

Manage your phone. "When you have a business in your home, you still need to give your clients value," says Shawna Schuh, a certified speaking professional and author of *How to Nail Voice Mail*. "An extra phone line isn't just a necessity; it's simply good business."

If another line cannot work for you, Schuh offers tips to work-at-home parents with small children for answering the phone and choosing voicemail greetings: "Making sure that the phone is only answered by an adult is vital so a potential client feels [his or her] message will get through," she says. She also encourages people to answer professionally: "For example, 'Hi, You've reached (name of business). This is (name of person).'"

Work-at-home parents should consider a cell phone as the primary business phone. "Using a cellular as that extra phone is smart and portable and easy," Schuh says.

### Buy Goods and Gadgets

Businesses cannot afford PC meltdowns: the best PC bets are new or refurbished models from Dell, Gateway or local dealers with generous warranties that can promise set-up help and attentive service. Buy enough memory to get you well beyond your start-up phase, and password protect your computer to thwart PC-savvy kids and the babysitter.

Consider Hewlett-Packard's affordable and space-saving "all-in-one" line for your color printing, copying, faxing and scanning needs. If the Internet is a regular stop, broadband offers superior speed and

reliability. Comcast can save you \$25 per month by bundling cable, Internet and phone.

To defend against PC hackers, consider Zone Alarm Pro firewall software, which includes pop-up ad blocking. Next, add McAfee or Norton's virus protection. Breaking up is hard to do, but backing up is easy when you save to a CD-RW or Zip drive using software such as StompSoft's BackUp MyPC. Alternatively, back up your computer online with Backup.com.

To track profits from your fledgling operation, purchase inexpensive, yet powerful accounting software: Intuit's QuickBooks or Quicken Home and Business.

Buy office supplies online: Staples.com offers free delivery on most orders over \$50. Effortlessly locate important data from email, documents and viewed web pages with English software. Going mobile? RIM's Blackberry and T-Mobile Sidekick are first-rate wireless handheld choices that keep you connected. Check your email, go online and check off your to-do list on the run. ☺

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