

Is Your Office in Your Home or Your Home in Your Office?

by Susan Hayman

The words "Home Office" conjure up different thoughts -- an office in the home from which a business operates, a place to open mail, pay bills and file important papers, a computer station/desk shared by members of a family and more. What purpose(s) does your home office serve and does it allow you to operate in a functional, efficient and organized manner?

When I enter a client's home office to provide an initial assessment and consultation, the most frequently voiced source of frustration is the chaos involved with business papers, personal bills, and children's activities all intertwined in one place. To me, the solution is my number one tip for organizing the home office -- Separate your personal life from your professional life. Most of us don't have the luxury of having multiple offices; however, it is amazing how much easier it can be to function in an environment where there are designated spaces for each activity or task, as well as separate filing systems, phones and e-mail addresses.

Once your "lives" are separated, act on my next tip -- Arrange your home office based on your own needs and your individual style of working. Your home office should reflect you, your personality, and how you work. Position your furniture and equipment so that they work for you. Use photographs and artwork to make your home office truly yours.

Finally, now that your home office is yours (or a portion of it is yours), use these additional organizing tips to help you transform a pile of paper, a shoebox full of receipts or paid bills, or a "TO DO" list into organized files and systems.

Organize your files (paper and computer) so that you know where to retrieve them. Determine categories

and sub-categories for your files; use hanging files for the categories and file folders for sub-categories. Keep your file tabs justified to the left or right; don't stagger them. Develop a color coding system and be creative with "naming" your files. Alphabetize and when done, make a master list of your files.

Keep those files you refer to all the time on your desk or easily accessible. Use desktop file sorters or baskets to organize your "to do" and "action" files and alleviate piles.

Assign a home for everything. It's much easier to put something away when you have a specific place for it; this includes those things you don't know what to do with or those you want to review later. For those things that don't belong in a home office, find another home in another room.

If you haven't referred to it in a year or it's outdated, it probably doesn't need to be in your home office. Purge what you can and store the remainder in banker boxes.

Open your mail over the trash can. Sort it, purge it, and if you keep it, put it in its home. File it, act on it, or toss it!

Use one calendar, planner, or PDA that meets your needs and works for you. Having all your appointments in one place avoids mistakes and saves time. Don't over-schedule yourself; give yourself a "time cushion."

Break down your "To Do" lists by personal or business and then by project or task. Categorize and organize your lists so that you are less overwhelmed and more efficient. Use action verbs such as to read, to e-mail, to phone, to review, etc.

Once you are organized, set aside 10-15 minutes daily to maintain that level of organization.

Lastly, there is no right or wrong way to organize your home office. These tips are merely tools to guide you along in your quest to create a home office that works for you! Whether you have a separate room for your home office, a corner of a room, or a kitchen countertop, you can become more efficient, regain control and reduce your stress by being organized!

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