Organization vital in limited space of home offices

by Natalie J.S. Hadley

If your monthly receipts have mixed with your mother's recipes and your computer has taken the place of the kids' Nintendo, you may need to take a deep breath and take the plunge — clean and organize your home office.

While home-based business owners tend to have the entrepreneurial skills to turn an unusual idea into a thriving enterprise, many lack the organizational skills that in a "traditional" office setting would fall to a secretary or clerical worker.

But as Kathryn Bechen, owner of Organized with Ease, says, "In a home-based business you're the janitor and the CEO."

Whether you're preparing to start a home-based business or floundering in a chaotic sea of paper, taking the time to organize your office can increase productivity — and your bottom line. Bechen said that in a corporate environment, things such as space, furniture and supplies have already been decided.

"More companies are asking employees to telecommute, but they don't give them the tools or skills to work from home," she said. "They come from a corporate setting where they had equipment, a secretary and all the conveniences."

New home-office denizens should take the time to select the right place in the house for their workspace.

"Think through where you want to put your office when you start, because anytime you have to move, it's disruptive," Bechen said. "It's better to plan for success than for failure. Pick a space bigger than you think you'll need, even if you don't buy filing cabinets or bookcases to fill it."

Plan room for your business to grow, said Jan Limpach, owner of Organizing Plus. "Right now a small desk with a PC may be adequate, but as your client base grows, you'll probably have to get file cabinets, a printer, shelves and other items," she said.

Limpach recommends setting up the home office outside the normal flow of traffic through the house. "You need to have an office where you can shut the door and get away from distractions," she said.

Pipi Peterson, owner of Organized to Last, suggests measuring the space and the furniture you have or plan to purchase for the office. On a piece of grid paper, mark of the room space and use cutouts of furniture that you can rearrange on the grid to fit. "Include on the grid any phone jacks, outlets, windows or vents, anything that can't be moved," she said.

Consider what furniture will be needed to accommodate machines, supplies and record storage, Peterson said. "If you order furniture from a store, keep in mind that the doors of your home may not be large enough to accommodate business furniture," she said.

When horizontal expansion isn't possible in a home office, think vertical, Peterson said. "You can get organizers made to go under printers and fax machines," she said.

Bechen in her home office ... "In a home-based business you're the janitor and the CEO."

"You can hang wall shelves. If you have a foot of space above the top of your books, you're wasting space. Hang grid racks on the walls or the back of doors. Use portable carts for hanging files that you can push out of the way at the end of the day. Crate files are good for taking things in the car."

A key problem for home-based businesses can be separating business time and materials from family time and materials.

"You have to have self-discipline," Peterson said. "When you separate home and work, you have to do it physically and mentally. You shouldn't locate your business in a kitchen or other area with a lot of activity or distractions. If the view is distracting, hang some curtains or blinds."

Ideally, Peterson said, the office should not serve double duty as a guest room or den. "Some people don't have that luxury," she said. "If you can't have a room just for your office, separate things that are for the business. Put them on a different side of the room

Continued on next page.

Organization vital for home offices

Continued from preceding page.

or in different colors."

Limpach suggests not mixing home duties with work during business hours.

"Do one thing at a time," she said. "If you work regular 9 to 5 hours, at 5 you're off work. Turn the answering machine on and do your errands."

Limpach suggests home workers listen to their biological clock. If you're a night person, don't set the goal of being dressed and in the office by 7 a.m.

Get separate items such as tape, scissors, letter opener, stapler and calculator for the business and resist "borrowing" them for family use. "The office should be self-sufficient so you don't have to go get things, which is always a good excuse for not working," Peterson said.

Bechen said she labels objects intended for the office. Supplies should be kept close at hand, and keep an inventory that can be checked before shopping. "If you do intermingle office and home items, you have to be careful you don't become unproductive running around looking for things," she said.

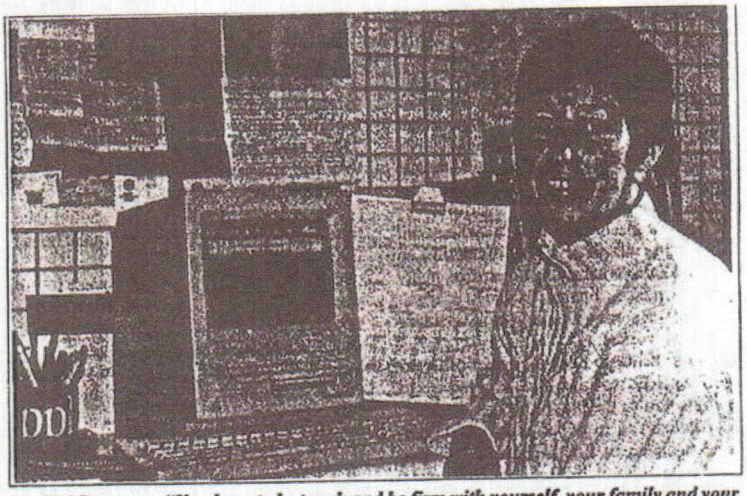
To help her mental separation, Peterson plays classical music only during business hours. A radio station is preferable, she said, so you don't have to get up to change tapes or CDs.

"It's a mind-set," she said of the distinction between home and office. "You have to block out personal things. If you think of something personal that needs done, jot it down and do it later. Make your family and friends aware that this is a business. If you take yourself seriously, so do others."

Office furnishings should be ergonomically correct, Peterson said. "Lighting shouldn't be hard on the eyes or a chair hard on the back," she said. "Your office should be a pleasant place to be or you won't want to go in. While it needs to be away from the activity in the house, it should be easy to get to and not too far away, or you won't want to go."

Furniture need not be expensive or complicated. Peterson suggests a "no brainer" office workspace that consists of a piece of kitchen countertop across two two-drawer file cabinets. In a small space, a drop leaf desk may be an alternative. "It forces you to clean your desk before you can fold it up," Peterson said.

Scheduling plays a large part in keeping a home-based business organized. "Schedule a phone time when you can return all your calls at one sitting," Limpach said. "You can get overwhelmed if you think you have to take every call."



Pipi Peterson... "You have to be tough and be firm with yourself, your family and your friends."

Peterson suggests planning a day's work the night before. "Make a list of tasks to do and calls to make," she said. "Make sure you have the supplies there to accomplish them."

Scheduling breaks can ease the isolation experienced by most home-based business owners, Peterson said. "When you work in a small space with no traffic, you get kind of loony," she said. "You may need to call a friend or watch 10 minutes of TV so you know you're not alone in the world. Otherwise you'll be looking for excuses to leave."

All three organizers suggest using an answering machine or caller identification to screen calls. "If you do answer the phone, tell nonbusiness callers you'll call them back," Peterson said. "You have to be tough and be firm with yourself, your family and your friends."

An answering machine can portray a professional image even at times when the house is in chaos, Limpach said. "If you answer the phone with dogs, kids or the washing machine going in the background, it's not very professional," she said. "If you can afford it, get two phone lines so you have a designated business line that kids aren't answering."

Peterson suggested purchasing combination phone-answering or fax-copier machines to save space. Bechen suggests making the higher investment in a laptop computer and printer versus a regular-sized system. "You can get laptop or notebook models with the same memory as desktop models, and you can take it with you when you call on clients," she said. "Buy the smallest everything — fax, copier, computer — so you can use every inch of available space."

Paperwork can become time consuming for any business, but with no one to delegate filing to, a home-based business can soon become overwhelming. "Set aside enough time for filing," Limpach said. "Devise a file system and have an index or directory so you can look up where something might be found."

Limpach suggests keeping a paper clip holder on the desk, but she recommends not using paper clips in files. "Paper clips tend to pick up things ahead or behind of them, and you may lose a page, so staple things before you file them," she said.

Use highlighters to emphasize important passages in papers and articles so you don't have to reread them to figure out why you kept them, Limpach said. She also recommends cutting magazine subscriptions to the minimum to reduce the "to read" pile. "You can usually look things up on the library computer or check out a book on a subject," she said.

If junk mail is clogging your box, there's an address you can write to to get your name off those lists, Limpach said. Bechen suggests going through the mail every day to prevent a pileup.