

Space Planning Critical as Home Offices Come of Age

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In the early '80s, John Naisbitt, author of "Megatrends", heralded the advent of the "electronic cottage". These "cottages" are home-based businesses in which the computer is an integral part of their operation. While there is no mass conversion by corporate America to telecommuting (so that the staff can work via computer miles away from the office), electronic technology has become fundamental to the existence of professional and entrepreneurial endeavors that operate out of a residence.

The rise of the home-based business may be a reflection of the need for a "high touch" environment in the high tech world, or an act of defiance to the dauntingly lengthy commute. Moreover, as the "baby boomers" reach parenting age, an increasing number of professionals will opt to work at home in place of the office.

The home office has always existed, albeit modestly, in the guise of a study or library as just somewhere to catch up with the mountainous pile of paperwork. Today, it has become a conference, administrative and production facility.

Increasingly, professionals who elect to pursue their careers from their residences recognize that their workplace should be a reflection of themselves and their work. In instances where there is public interaction, it is essential to create "public" spaces that project an image of professionalism. Someone in financial services will want the company to look well established, while an advertising firm will want to appear "creative". Some may want to achieve the desired result with a "power look", while others may want to have a casual and contemporary setting.

A large number of home businesses are service based. Well-designed displays of the company's products help to bring focus to the subject and double as a unique way to accent the space. While whimsical, eclectic interiors work well in some cases, visual chaos and clutter tend to detract from a business-like atmosphere. Whether intended or not, the interiors are often viewed by outsiders as an indicator of the caliber and nature of the company's products and services.

As more and more sophisticated professionals join the ranks, there is an increasing awareness that the home office is a microcosm of its corporate counterpart. Problems caused by haphazard

planning, inadequate lighting, uncomfortable seating and poorly designed work stations will have the same effect in both situations. The workplace in a house will be equally affected by work efficiency, productivity and ergonomics (defined as the promotion of a harmonious relationship between man and machine by applying biological and engineering data).

Space planning is doubly critical here as every inch of space has to be made to count. However, before seeking the advice of a professional space planner or designer, one should study his or her work habits and operational procedures, make a diary of the different work functions and study it in order to get some insight into how the office can be planned.

To remain competitive in the marketplace, significant capital investments are often made on office equipment and furniture. One finds a plethora of electronic products that were practically non-existent in the home office half a dozen years ago. Today, instead of contending with a single typewriter, one must plan space for the computer keyboard, terminal, monitor, mouse or tablet, modem, scanner and printer.

The facsimile (FAX) machine has joined the photocopier as an indispensable fixture of the office. The ensuing tangle of wires and cables, often looking more like Medusa's hair than office equipment, is a safety hazard and requires that wire management issues be addressed. The electronic products result in the need

for longer and deeper work tops which, in turn, directly impact furniture dimensions and arrangement as well as storage options.

The type and configuration of furniture often depend on the kind of work performed and the amount of space available. Occasionally, a customized piece may be the best answer in areas with limited space and complex requirements.

Storage now has to address electromagnetic media as well as paper-work, files, office supplies and other trade-specific reference materials. Although built-ins are highly effective solutions, it should be noted that whatever one gains in space is countered by a loss of flexibility.

The changing social and economic landscape of our times has caused legions to embrace the idea of the home office. Professional consultants and entrepreneurs alike are incorporating work space into their residences and leaving their own imprint in the business world.

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