

As seen in the "Ask the Organizing Expert" Column in the Lake Oswego Review and the West Linn Tidings

Organizing Your Home Office – Part 1

Question: I've decided to set up a home office. How should I organize this process?

Once considered a luxurious option, the home office is now a family necessity; and if I had my way, every new home would be built with two – one for him and one for her! But in the meantime, we have to make do with what we have. If you work from home, manage your household finances, operate a home-based business, or simply need a place to process papers, a home office will become one of the most used and important rooms in your house.

Before we get into the nitty-gritty of sorting files and paper clips, we need to ask and answer four important questions.

Question 1: How will I use a home office? Is this an office for the whole family, you and your spouse, or just you? Will you be paying bills, scheduling appointments, answering email, project planning, some of the above, or all of the above? Does your spouse have his or her own office? Do the kids have a proper place to do their homework and access the internet? Are you working from home or running a company? The answers to these questions will help ascertain the best size and location for your office. For instance, a "family" office would function best near the kitchen where it's easily accessible by everyone; a "work from home" office might be better situated away from the hubbub of everyday life. A "partners" office would need to be sizable enough to accommodate two work stations, whereas a simple "bill paying center" could be small or even portable.

Question 2: What are my home office location options? If your home came equipped with an office or den, then you're in good shape. If not, or if it's already spoken for, we need to carve out a functional space. Do you have a kitchen desk? These are fine for scheduling and sorting mail and sometimes filing, but little else. How about a spare bedroom? This is a great option for a "work from home" situation, as it probably affords you some privacy. Are you willing to convert the rarely used living room or dining room to a work space? This is a good choice if an office is absolutely essential and there is simply no other space. What about a corner of the family room? Could you spare a hall closet? I've seen amazingly creative offices custom built from small nooks like under-the-stairs storage areas.

Question 3: What furniture do I need? A desk, file drawers, cabinets for storage, shelves or bookcases, and a good chair are the basics. A credenza and comfy seating are nice extras if you have the space. A computer armoire works well in small spaces. If your budget is generous, consider investing in ergonomic furniture (see www.harrisworksystems.com) or a custom installed work center (www.closetstogo.com). Using what you have is a popular option in today's economy, or the big box office stores (www.officedepot.com) carry surprisingly attractive collections. Choose furniture built for modern technology – large grommets to manage cords and ventilated spaces to release heat. Before you wrap up your budget, include a couple good lamps and a chair mat.

Question 4: What kind of equipment do I need? It's likely you will need a computer and at least access to a printer – perhaps you have a wireless connection to one elsewhere in the house? A scanner (check out the Neat Receipts mobile scanner at www.neatco.com) and fax machine are nice to have. Will you require a new modem, router or phone line? A magnetic white board is perfect for project planning, and a charging station for your electronic goodies is a must.

Even the most organized person can have a disaster of an office, with papers, mail and files strewn about. Which is why it's so helpful to answer the above questions before embarking on this project. Sketch out a budget, and creating the office will be a cinch.

Next month I'll talk about how to organize the contents of a home office, zone by zone. We'll create file systems that really work and design routines that keep your office (and you!) clicking along. Stay tuned, and you'll have the home office of your dreams.

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