

# organize your home office



Forbes Office Furniture sells a variety of classic traditional furniture pieces. European columns add extra style.

# for personal and financial gain

By Adriane M. Weinberg

Differences in home offices are as extreme as the ways to organize them. It may be an elaborate space in which to operate a multimillion-dollar business. Or it may be a residential home office relegated to a corner of a spare room that serves quadruple duty; it's also the guest/scrapbooking/gift-wrapping room. Sometimes referred to as SOHO (small office/home office), most fall somewhere between the two. For the purpose of this article, an office is defined as a home-based business office.

What is meant by an organized office? This is my definition: An organized office is a work-friendly, efficiently arranged space with proper furniture, equipment, tools, supplies and systems to maximize productivity.

Whew, that's a mouthful!

Organization of a home office is complex. For optimal functionality, it requires a high degree of customization. For example, filing systems, both paper and electronic, must be set up according to how the individual relates to the information being stored and retrieved. Also, it's important to use products that work well for you. No matter how popular, if there is something about a product you don't like, you won't use it. This is one reason why so many choices are available. Whether or not you work with a professional organizer, care must be taken to set up everything so you can function effectively in your office.

The many aspects of what could and should be addressed cannot fit

within the scope of one article. Following are guidelines and tips as well as things that you may have never considered.

**1** The space should be arranged for productivity and defined, so it contains only items that support its function. The office must feel comfortable. If it doesn't, you won't want to work there, will likely be distracted and waste time on non-work-related activities. An uncomfortable feeling can cause a love/hate struggle with your office.

There are many reasons why a space may not work. Three easy examples are poor lighting, uncomfortable chair and frequently used equipment that is too far away. Add lights, replace the chair and move the equipment nearby.

Do whatever is necessary, even if it means moving the office to another room. If you rarely or never use the dining room for entertaining and would prefer that your second-floor office be downstairs, remove the oval table, six chairs and sideboard. Move your office there. Stop referring to it as the dining room. Call it your home office. Ask yourself: Is it more important to have dining space for 14 people twice a year or to generate income?

The furniture must meet your needs. A "U" or "L" shaped desk is more functional than a traditional desk, but a traditional desk is better than a table with no storage. For accessibility, items should be stored in appropriate places. As a general rule, keep things used daily or weekly

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within arm's reach in, on or near the desk. Items used less often should be in the office, but farther away, and, if space is an issue, things used rarely should be in a storage area. For example, keep a small amount of office supplies in desk drawers, larger quantities in the credenza or office closet and bulk supplies in a household storage area.

**Tip:** Whether right- or left-handed, keep your desk clear in the direction you write so you have work space according to your natural flow.

**2** Clutter management is key. Basically, clutter is anything that is not useful or enjoyable. Countless hours are wasted searching for things buried in clutter. Many misplaced items are permanently forgotten. To eliminate clutter, review each item and decide which ones to keep, designate and maintain permanent homes for those items, return things that belong elsewhere in the house and donate, recycle, shred or toss the rest.

**Tip:** To prevent clutter buildup, put things away immediately after use for instant retrieval next time. Don't allow yourself to say, "I'll just put it over here for now." "For now" tends to become permanent placement.

**3** Paper management is a challenge even for the highly organized. The paperless society sounded good in theory. In reality, don't we have more paper than ever before? To stay on top of it, process mail every day; recycle, shred or toss junk mail, and act on, sort or file the rest. Sort active papers using stackable in/out trays, desktop file sorters or hanging files in desk drawers. Store active files in desk draw-

ers and reference files in file cabinets in the office. If space is limited, store archived material in bankers boxes or file cabinets elsewhere in the house, such as basement storage as long as it's dry. Stay current with reading material. If you subscribe to more publications than you can manage, cancel some.

**Tip:** Resist the urge, no matter how strong, to put papers aside to think about later. Whenever possible, make quick decisions and process the paperwork.

**4** Time management is much more challenging when working at home because of ever present temptations to do personal activities during work time and vice versa. Set clear boundaries between work and personal time. For example, don't allow lingering

chats with friends when working and let voice mail answer business calls during family time. Learning how to use time to your advantage will allow more of it to be spent on what's important to you.

**Tip:** Use your natural body rhythms to your advantage. Do your most demanding work during peak energy cycles and routine tasks during slump periods.

**5** Task management requires advance planning. Record tasks on paper or electronically to eliminate trying to remember everything. Sans recording,

things invariably are forgotten. Base daily to-do lists on your master list, calendar and tickler file.

**Tip:** In the late afternoon or evening when the day's events are fresh in mind, plan your next day's to-do list. Your list will be on your desk the next morning so you immediately can start achieving your goals.

**6** Technology has changed how some information is stored.

Electronic files should be set up similarly to paper files. For easy filing and retrieval, use folders, folders within folders and folders within those folders. For example, create a folder labeled with your company's name. Within that folder, create subfolders for all major business categories, and then create subfolders within them. For example, create XYZ Company

folder. If you write many proposals, create a subfolder labeled Proposals. If you regularly submit proposals to certain companies, create subfolders labeled by each company name. If you write proposals for different services for those companies, create subfolders labeled by type of service.

Documents created electronically usually mean paper copies are unnecessary. Print copies only if you need to snail mail, take them with you or complete a paper file.

Frequent backing up of data is essential. To determine frequency, ask yourself this simple question, "How much data am I willing to lose?" In addition to backups kept in your office, off-site storage should be part of your disaster plan. My off-site backups are in a safe deposit box. A friend of mine worked for a New York law firm located at the World Trade Center on 9/11. Mercifully he arrived late to work that morning. Because the firm had off-site data storage and a branch office in New Jersey, it was right back in business.

**Tip:** Think about how you refer to information and be consistent when labeling paper and electronic files. For example, if you occasionally speak to the public, label your folder Presentations, Seminars, Workshops or Public Speaking so all related documents can be found quickly in one place. If you speak often, label your main folder Public Speaking or Presentations and use subfolders for types of presentations such as Seminars, Workshops and Conferences.

**7** E-mail is much more manageable by using folders. Create folders by person, group, activity, etc. For example, I have an An Organized Approach (AOA) folder. Within AOA are major category subfolders including "clients." Within "clients" are subfolders for some clients, in order by last name, where e-mailed information related to their projects is stored.

**Tip:** Check e-mail messages a maximum of four times a day (early morning, late morning, early afternoon and before the end of the day) unless your business demands otherwise. When work requires concentration, turn off your e-mail program.

Running a household is similar to operating a small business. For a residential home office, adapt the aforementioned guidelines.

Disorganization costs money and time which negatively impacts your bottom-line results and also increases stress. According to the New York Times, the average disorganized executive loses 1 hour per day, a statistic that applies to any disorganized person. Many people think losing two or more hours a day is more realistic. If your annual salary is \$100,000, one wasted hour per day costs more than \$12,000 per year, every year! And that doesn't include the many direct and indirect costs, such as losing a hot prospect's contact information because time was not taken to properly record it. The hidden costs are incalculable.

Getting your business office organized is an investment that pays for itself. Finding just one prospect's phone number can result in a very profitable sale. Prompt return phone calls can keep customers from turning to your more organized competitors. Would you like to strengthen your bottom line?



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Forbes Office Furniture offers transitional furniture that has plenty of storage for active project files.