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Home Office Design

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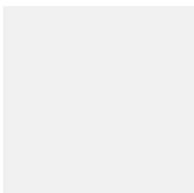
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Home Office Design

It should hardly come as a surprise: people are increasingly working from home, whether on a full- or part-time basis, while others use a home office simply as a quiet oasis from which to pay the bills and handle correspondence.



Of course, this increase is largely made possible by more and more sophisticated technology: fax machines, computers, the Internet, e-mail and whatever else may be on the horizon. And, for many home workers, how to visually integrate, as much as possible,

technology with a home furnished with antiques, for example, can pose another challenge.

Nevertheless, the two greatest needs, says Ed Koenig, president of Techline Baltimore, are for efficient storage and filing systems—the same requirements found in more traditional office environments. “We are storage experts,” he says succinctly.

Typically, says Koenig, those working from home begin the process by assembling different items without giving a great deal of thought to the overall scheme of things. “When people call me in, usually everything has been plopped together,” he says. “And today, with all the appliances and fixtures that are necessary, one can’t get by with a limited countertop or limited electrical capacity.” But, he notes, when design decisions have been finalized and materials collected, the typical home office can be installed in a day, and often less.



That “plopping together” is pretty much what happened to graphic designers Sharon and Bill Reuter, of Reuter and Associates. “Our office was always jury-rigged ... if we used the waxer in the summer, we’d blow a fuse,” says Mrs. Reuter. “Bill had put in some overhead lighting and an air conditioner, but we still roasted in the summer, and really couldn’t have clients come to the office.”



When the couple realized the “cool-looking, but efficient, studio” they needed was beyond their area of expertise, they called in Klaus Philipsen and Gabriel Kroiz of ArchPlan Inc. “We told them we were running out of space, needed more shelves, more workspace, and more cabinets to store things like paper samples,” she adds.

ArchPlan ably solved the Reuters’ needs: Kroiz built them storage cabinets, took a full-bathroom and turned it into a powder room, which increased their usable space, and upgraded their electrical capacity.



He also crafted the Reuters a dormer window to increase natural light and added a more efficient air conditioner.

“We told Klaus and Gabriel that there was probably some additional space above a dropped ceiling, but we really weren’t sure,” says Mrs. Reuter. Indeed, it turned out that there was, in fact, more space that could be exploited. Enough space beyond the ceiling that Kroiz was

able to build the two a loft from which they do their billing and accounting work.



Obviously, home offices allow workers certain opportunities for individual accommodation that are usually not available in corporate offices, where standardized desks and chairs are pretty much the rule of thumb. "A home office allows one to create an ergonomically

comfortable environment for the user," says Gary Felser, president of Owings Mills-based Saga Design. "The standard-issue desk might be fine for one person, but completely inefficient for another ... we can also customize work surfaces for each individual." Of course, says Felser, "when doing your initial planning, you have to be flexible enough to think ahead to consider your future needs, as well."



Although those seeking to better organize a home office are usually working with a limited space, the creative opportunities currently available are many, and professionals, such as Felser and Koenig, are able to fill in with practical information. Such information as how much weight

vertical cabinets or bookcases can safely hold, says Koenig.



Thinking vertically is one key to enlarging limited spaces. And for those who have visions of climbing a ladder to get to the top shelf, there is hardware designed to mechanically lower files to within

reach—particularly important to people who might be confined to wheelchairs.

Also innovative are keyboard trays, which are stored under the work surface when not in use, and can be adjusted to an individual person's frame, thus lessening the possibility of arm fatigue and related pain. "Things like this allow one to have more continuous workspace," says Koenig. "You can spread things out and not have plastic trays on the work surface."

The same effect can be achieved by placing fax machines below the work surface, although Koenig observes, it's not quite so easy to do this with scanners. "Scanners are hard to keep off a work surface, as are the computer monitor and phone," he notes. "Although

scanners can be set up on a bridge, which frees up the work surface."

Another concern uppermost in the mind of the home-office worker is storage. "Remember the 'paperless office,'" Felser asks. "It never came to be, and I don't think it ever will.

People still need to store papers and files.”

In spite of our embracing technology with all its sparse plastic and metal, Felser points to an increase in the traditional library-style office. “There is a lot of demand for more traditional cabinetry and moldings, as well as an increase in the popularity of real wood, including oak, but more and more cherry and mahogany ... particularly when it is hiding a computer or fax.”



Neither Felser nor Koenig are thrown when it comes to blending the high-tech office with a more traditionally furnished home. “We’ve done offices to blend in with French Provincial

and Early American furnishings,” says Koenig. “There are little ways to fake things ... a traditional door, traditional molding, and colors that are in other parts of the house.”



Felser has faced the same challenge by taking an antique armoire and refitting the inside to

house monitors and other equipment. “You can’t change the fact that they didn’t have faxes and telephones 300 years ago, but you can distress furniture, match finishes, and create a ‘feel’ in the office that blends in with the rest of the home,” he notes.

There are other innovations, as well. Fluorescent lighting has pretty much gone the way of the dinosaurs, at least in the home office. “We try to recommend under-counter lighting, so there are no shadows thrown on the monitor, although this tends to be more expensive,” says Felser. “And we arrange the lighting, usually halogen lights, so that the work surface is evenly lit.”

Costs for home offices vary. “If it is a typical, free-standing office, costs range from \$800 to \$2,000,” says Koenig. “And much of what drives that cost is cabinetry and filing considerations.” A custom-designed, built-in office might total somewhere up in the neighborhood of \$2,500, although Koenig crafted one such office for a realtor that rang up at \$24,000. Felser estimates that a simple office averages \$4,000 to \$5,000, while something more elaborate might run as high as \$20,000. “And we’re seeing a fair number of home offices in which there are two work stations,” he adds.

Of course, the perfect home office doesn’t have to be put together in one fell swoop, which is often a concern for those who might just be starting out. In such a case, Koenig advises beginning with a master plan, buying the best quality products one can afford, while planning to add other pieces down the road. “First, go to a studio and understand proper seating, proper heights and how everything works together,” he says. “Designing a home office is similar to designing a kitchen and the worst step one can make is to buy junk.”

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