

Setting Up Your Home Office

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With the growing popularity of telecommuting, many more people are working at home. Whether you work from home on a daily basis or you just want a quiet place to work on occasion, you need to know how to design a home office. Careful planning is the key to having a flexible, efficient and multipurpose setup. After all, the quality of your work may depend on it. Lowe's is happy to provide this information as a service to you.

Choosing an Area for Your Office

Think about the following when searching for an area to suit your needs:

- How much time will you spend in the office? Full-time businesses require a dedicated office area designed for comfort and function.
- What type of work will you be doing? An interior designer, for example, needs a lot of flat work area to spread plans and books out. On the other hand, a web designer needs much less desk space.
- Will the office center around the computer system? Equip the area to handle a computer desk or table.
- Will customers or vendors be visiting you? If so, you need a door with direct access to the outside to avoid taking visitors on an unsolicited tour of your home.
- How much privacy will you need? Less outside disturbance equals more productivity.
- Can the area be closed off by doors, screens or even a curtain that can be tied back? Being able to close off your office from other parts of the house helps to separate your business from your personal life.

Now that you have a basic understanding of the kind of area you need — where do you find it?

- A large, empty walk-in closet or a spare bedroom is an ideal place for an office that does not receive visitors on a regular basis.
- An attic office offers possibilities. Renovations and improvements (such as adding skylights, electrical outlets, etc.) will be necessary to accommodate an office in an attic. Check with your local building inspector on any restrictions associated with moving living quarters up to the attic.
- The basement holds many possibilities, especially if privacy is an important factor. Unfinished basements will require some renovation. Possible problems are humidity and mildew that can wreak havoc on computer equipment, documents and furniture. Use a dehumidifier and pick flooring that will repel moisture, such as stone or tile, to help with these problems.
- Your bedroom is a possibility since it is essentially unused during the day, but working late at night and sharing the bedroom with another person may not be ideal. Also, being confronted with your work first thing may not be appealing. Consider purchasing a desk that can be closed up when your work is finished for the day or place a decorative screen in front of the area.
- The corner of a large family room can accommodate an office — as long as you do not mind a little clutter. Filing cabinets and desks can easily be painted or purchased to blend with your family room.
- Many people already use their kitchen as the family business office. It is suitable for paying bills, but due to high traffic, establishing a professional office in a kitchen may not be a good idea. If you have eliminated all other options and must use the kitchen, establish ground rules concerning office hours and privacy to control some of the traffic.

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Selecting Storage

Storage space is essential for the home office. Keep the following in mind when planning your storage needs:

- Filing cabinets, shelves and boxes are logical choices for storage needs. Invest in a fireproof storage safe for your important documents.
- Use an extra closet as a supply and storage room.
- Build floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and place rarely used items on the hard-to-reach shelves. Keep a step stool or ladder handy.
- Do not overlook existing storage options. Shoe boxes are great for storing computer disks and note cards. Jars can be used to store small office supplies, such as paper clips and rubber bands.

Lighting Your Home Office

Pay careful attention to the lighting in your office. Poor lighting can cause headaches, double vision and fatigue. When planning your office lighting, remember:

- The home office needs a good general light source. If you spend eight hours a day in your office, you will want light that is long-lasting and energy-efficient. A smart choice would be to use color-improved warm fluorescents in the ceiling fixture. Warm fluorescents reduce the bluish cast associated with fluorescent lighting. Halogen bulbs are also cost-effective and render colors well.
- Light the wall behind the computer to reduce eyestrain. Place light sources beside or above (never in front of) the terminal. The light needs to be at least the height of the monitor. To avoid glare, position the computer screen away from windows or other light sources. If that is not possible, use blinds or curtains to control the light.
- A desk lamp with adjustable arms and a three-way bulb may prove practical because you can position the light where you need it and you can adjust the level of the light to suit the particular task. Place the lamp to your left if you are right-handed and to your right if you are left-handed. Usually you will want the bulbs in the task lighting for desk work or reading to be about three times brighter than bulbs in the rest of the room.
- If your home office includes a comfortable chair for reading, use a floor lamp with a three-way bulb to provide an appropriate level of light.

Getting the Right Office Equipment

Having dedicated office equipment is crucial, especially if you have other family members that need to use the computer. It may be tempting to think that you can simply use the family computer for your business. However, sharing a computer for business and personal use can be risky. Just imagine how frustrated you would be if your seven-year old accidentally deleted some files or if a virus contained in a personal e-mail ruined some account information.

Keep the following in mind when selecting your office equipment:

- A good computer and a quality printer are a must. You will also need a backup system. Few clients will be understanding if you lose their information because you did not back it up.
- Having plenty of electrical outlets is vital. Purchase multi-outlet surge protectors to add outlets, but do not overload your electrical system. An electrical circuit should not carry more than 15 amps at a time. To determine how many amps your equipment can draw, consult the specifications in the owner's manuals. If the power usage is listed in watts (W) or volt-amps (VA), take that number and divide it by 120 to get the approximate number of amps it requires. If you decide to install new electrical receptacles, add a few extra for future expansion. It is more cost effective to do all electrical work at one time.
- Dedicated phone lines are crucial for a home office. Your work may require you to use the phone, the Internet, and fax machine all at the same time (requiring three separate phone lines). Overestimate the number of jacks you will need for future growth.

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Getting the Right Office Equipment (cont.)

- A voice mail system or answering machine is critical for catching missed calls. Consult your local phone company on voice mail and/or phone system setup and rates.
- A cordless phone provides mobility while in the office. A headset is a good idea if you will frequently be using the computer and the phone simultaneously. Both items increase comfort and reduce fatigue.
- Depending on your type of work, you may need a fax machine. Think about whether e-mail can serve the same purpose for you, or investigate buying software that gives your computer the ability to send and receive faxes. If you need to send or receive a large number of documents that cannot be sent electronically, you will need a separate stand-alone fax machine. A fax machine can also be used as a copier for small jobs.
- Since many home offices are limited in space, manufacturers have responded with machines that combine several functions, such as printing, scanning, faxing, and copying. Take into account the cost, performance and space required when comparing one of these devices to several separate pieces of equipment.

Good Idea: Before you buy a copier, check on using a local copier service. A copier can take up space that may be needed for another piece of frequently-used equipment. After you calculate the price of maintenance, paper and toner (plus the initial cost of the copier), you may find it is more cost effective to use a copier service.

Protecting Your Equipment from Power Surges

Since power surges can be the death of electrical equipment, protecting your home office equipment is imperative. Surges not only pass through electrical circuits but also phone lines, cable and satellite hookups.

Multi-outlet surge suppressors are preferable to power or utility outlet strips. They are used for centrally located pieces of equipment and vary in dependability and cost. Any pieces of equipment that are interconnected must be connected to a surge protector. Otherwise, a surge can pass through one unit to all the others. The best way to protect your office equipment and the rest of the electrical items in your home is to have a surge suppressor installed at the electrical service entrance. Ask an electrician about suppressors that allow you to connect phone and cable lines as well.



Finding the Right Furniture

Buying furniture that is comfortable, multi-use and mobile can make your office a pleasant place to work. The amount of furniture depends entirely upon your work area and needs. When you are ready to choose your furniture:

- Sketch a layout of the room with width and length measurements.
- Use the measurements to help you choose furniture that will fit into your available space. Do not forget to make room for storage. If you are tight on space, look for furniture that can serve two purposes, such as providing storage and a work surface. Also furniture that can be rolled out of the way when not in use can be handy in tight quarters.
- Basic standards for work surfaces are 25" to 30" deep and at least 24" to 29" high to allow for plenty of legroom.
- An all-purpose desk will take up the least amount of room and provide storage space for a printer, monitor, and CPU tower.
- For maximum comfort, an adjustable keyboard tray that is 23" to 28" high can be attached to most desks. Make sure the tray is large enough for a mouse to fit on the same level beside the keyboard.

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Finding the Right Furniture (cont.)

Choosing a chair is one of the most important decisions you will make when choosing furniture. If the majority of your time is spent sitting, make a wise investment in a comfortable chair that provides good support. The wrong chair can cause backaches, fatigue, and neckaches. Here are a few things to look for:

- The chair back and seat should be adjustable for height and tilt so your feet easily touch the floor.
- The chair seat needs to be wide enough for comfort.
- A balanced swivel wheel base allows more mobility.
- A curved seat cushion and good lumbar support relieves pressure from thighs and back.
- Adjustable-height armrests make working on the computer more comfortable.

Arranging Your Work Area

When you have gathered your equipment, furniture and supplies, arrange them to their best advantage.

- Try to place your desk so that you can see the entryway to avoid being startled by visitors.
- Organize the equipment and supplies associated with daily tasks. Taking orders over the phone? Place the phone, order forms, and a calculator in close proximity.
- To help present the image of an organized and competent business person, design your work area to prevent clutter from building up on your desk. Keep a trash can close at hand.
- Use cord organizers and zip ties to keep cords out of the way and untangled.

Good Idea: Place the phone on the opposite side of your writing hand. Writing utensils should be on the same side of the desk as your writing hand to avoid having to reach across your body when on the phone.