



Photo courtesy of Hawlicek Builders

BLENDING HOME & WORK

Creating a functional and stylish environment for handling the business of daily life

AS THE WORLD OF WORK becomes increasingly mobile, thanks to the rapidly changing economy and advances in technology, many are choosing to skip the commute and work from home. Home-based businesses, telecommuting and project consulting are on the rise, making a functional home office a new essential. Even those who aren't making a career of it need a place to complete school assignments, pay bills or simply surf the Internet.

"Home offices have become an enormous part of our business," says Walt Burrell, president of California Closets in Lombard. "More and more families are working from the home, whether it be an extension of the office, a home-based business or just an area for kids to do homework and study on the computer."

FINDING SPACE

Lots of spaces can be turned into an office — a spare bedroom, a little-used closet or even a niche under the stairs.

Before picking a spot, it's best to conduct an inventory of your needs. If the office is to be a dedicated business workspace, it should be separated from the rest of the living area, as constant interruptions can be distracting. This may involve situating the room in an out-of-the-way location, like a former bedroom, a remodeled attic or a finished basement. Another solution is to close off the entry with a French door, which provides a buffer without making the room feel closed off.

Mike Campbell, operations manager for Reliable Home

AESTHETICS ARE AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT when creating a home office. Stylistic choices can range widely, from the traditional (left), with its elaborate cabinetry, to the contemporary (right), featuring a more clean, minimalist look.

Improvement in Naperville, says many of Reliable's home office projects make use of secondary space, such as a high attic over an addition, or, in the case of a second-story bedroom addition, one of the former first-floor bedrooms.

Rick Fragel, designer for LaMantia Design and Construction, which has locations in Brookfield and Downers Grove, has also noticed home offices being incorporated into master bedroom suites. "These spaces are conveniently configured so they can be accessed without disturbing adjacent bedrooms," he says.

MULTIPLE USERS

Sometimes a single office serves more than one user, as was the case with a recently completed LaMantia project — a home office and law library for husband and wife attorneys, each having their own law practices, which they operate from home and from downtown Chicago locations.

Another popular version of the home office blends the needs of parents and children, allowing for a mix of homework and office work. Fragel says these typically include an L-shaped or U-shaped cabinet configuration (base and wall cabinets) featuring two or three individual workstations.

Along those lines, Bob Hajdich, president of Imagine Development in Bloomingdale, recently converted a client's second-floor bedroom into a work/play space for elementary-age kids, with three built-in desks and chairs, file cabinets and shelves along one wall. The other portion of the room has space for a TV and toy storage. "It's definitely a room that can evolve with the family, says Hajdich. "As the kids grow older, you can lose the toys and throw a couch in there, making it more of a study. The parents could even use it themselves."

Tom Cherrington, owner of Cherrington Design in Wheaton, says that though most home office projects he works on have been strictly for business, others could be considered "multi-tasking rooms." One such room combined a spare bedroom and laundry room into a laundry center and family activity space, complete with upper and lower cabinets and work surfaces along two walls of the room.

In new homes, George Havlicek, president of Havlicek Builders in Geneva, says that in addition to a traditional office, many buyers have chosen to incorporate a small alcove or recessed room right off the kitchen as the spot for the family computer. The placement allows parents to keep an eye on the kids' online activities.

It's clear that home office space can benefit the whole family. Hajdich recently did a whole-house remodel for a family of five that included office or workspace for every member of the family. A spare bedroom became the husband's home office, while the wife wanted a desk as part of the kitchen cabinetry, including a



Photo courtesy of Wood-Mode Inc

spot for her laptop, as well as file drawers, a bookshelf and bulletin board. In the tween daughter's upstairs bedroom, one of the large double closets was turned into office that can be hidden behind closed doors, with room for a desk, chair and bookshelf. The teen boys had desks installed in their shared bedroom.

OFFICE ESSENTIALS

Before beginning to design an office space, it's important to take stock of the technological components — will you use a desktop or laptop? What peripheral equipment do you need? Also, think about the nature of your work — will you require a lot of space for filing, a spot to store samples, shelves for reference books, etc?

An ample work surface and storage are crucial, which is one reason people often select built-in cabinetry. "When it comes to office furniture, typically people want it to match the existing décor in their house," says Campbell.

Ann Stockard, designer for Hinsdale-based Normandy Builders, says that, while the cabinet style and finish are tied to personal preference, she's noticed people heading in one of two directions — painted, especially a cream hue, or stained cherry. "It's two opposite looks, either a deeply masculine feel or light and airy," she says.

Cabinetry and traditional desks are not the only choices, however. Other options include an open desk or table and mix-and-match storage. If space constraints dictate that the office be incorporated into another part of the home, such as the dining room, flexible pieces and storage that doesn't detract from the room's primary purpose are a must.

Lighting has also evolved into an important part of the office — both task and ambient lighting, including under-cabinet lighting or accent lighting behind glass doors.

An increasing number of electronic gadgets are part of today's home office, including large-screen monitors and flat-panel TVs

Photo courtesy of California Closets



ORGANIZATION IS KEY in designing a useful home office. Cabinet and drawer storage helps keep everything in its place and the desk area clear for work.

Organization leads to a more serene space, boosting productivity. These days, there are solutions for just about everything, from desk-drawer organizers to attractive charging stations for handheld electronic devices.

“Organization is key. You want everything to have its own niche,” says Cherrington.

“Clients are looking for simple lines with little clutter,” agrees Burrell, who explains that printers, scanners and fax machines are being removed from the countertop and placed in base cabinets on pull-out shelves, while CPU towers are stowed in well-ventilated cabinets off the floor.

Along with this, wire, cable and cord management has become an important issue. “People want to know what to do with all those wires,” he says. Some solutions include getting them off of the floor and attached to wire management clips underneath the

that are also used on the desktop or wall as secondary monitors.

Because of this, it’s important to consider electrical needs, as well as telephone and cable access. This may dictate where you situate your desk and equipment. More outlets may be needed; perhaps even a dedicated circuit to avoid overloading the existing electrical system.

A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING

Another consideration for the home office is the type of storage. From a design perspective, that means open versus concealed storage or a combination of the two. “A lot of people don’t want to see any clutter – they want everything behind closed doors. Others want reference books and other materials out where they can see them,” says Stockard.

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countertop. Grommets in countertops and shelves help keep wires concealed behind the desk or office system.

SENSE OF STYLE

While work surface and storage are among top considerations, there are other things to think about when putting together your home office.

“You need to consider both aesthetics and work style – we all have different ways of approaching work,” says Julia Archer, who opened her Forest Park store, @WorkDesign, last year to cater to the growing niche of home-based workers, especially those who want something a bit more creative than standard office-supply-store fare. She carries everything from paper goods and accessories to furniture and storage.

“Your work center can look cool and function great – and it doesn’t have to look corporate,” she says. She recommends mixing modern and classic style furnishings with a few vintage pieces for a more personal feel and including warm colors and unique artwork. For example, one client purchased a round table for his work surface, a sliding door cabinet for storage and a vintage armchair.

Archer advocates selecting furnishings that are flexible. For example, she says, not everyone needs the big, ergonomic office chair. “I recommend a comfortable chair that can fit into the home environment, something you could use elsewhere, if need be.”

In addition to using color and artwork to add character to the office space, wall paneling can give the room a distinctive look, says Havlicek, also president of Cabinets at Danada, which has locations in Geneva and Wheaton. The panels can be designed to match any style of home, at a variety of price points, depending on the size of the room, the type of trim, type of wood and level of detail.

For Stockard, the home office trend is nothing new – both of her parents worked out of their home. She believes that these spaces are even more relevant today. “People are customizing their homes more to fit their needs,” she explains. “The home/office line is increasingly blurred.” ■

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