

AT HOME

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HOMEWORK Retooling house and office for co

Retooling the house and office for coexistence

By Simson L. Garfinkel
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

Early last month, Trudy Neuhaus started a new job and got a much bigger office. It's decorated just the way she wants it, and it's equipped with the latest technology: a powerful laptop with a docking station, a fax machine that doubles as a photocopier, and a cordless telephone. Her new office is in the corner of the building, with one window facing the street, the other facing a small courtyard. Best of all is the commute: Instead of driving half an hour to work, she now travels less than half a minute - just the time it takes to walk down the stairs of her Chestnut Hill town house. Neuhaus has just joined the ranks of the millions of Americans who work out of their house - and she loves it.

But there's one thing missing from the house-cum-office: a living room. With only 850 square feet in the town house, divided mostly between one upstairs bedroom and one downstairs living room/dining room, Neuhaus decided that she would be happiest devoting the entire downstairs to her business pursuits.

"Actually, when I first started out I tried to keep it all in a certain section, but I felt cramped," says Neuhaus, whose new com-

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pany, Neuhaus Publishing, will help small software firms get books written about their products. "I realized that I spend a lot of time working, and I would rather feel comfortable and have things spread out and accessible. . . . So that's what I opted to do."

Neuhaus put her big desk with the computer and telephone near her panoramic window, so she can glance away from her screen and out into the courtyard. To her far left, against the other side of her room, sits another table with her fax machine and a few files. Behind her are two modern wood-and-steel bookshelves. The only vestiges of the living room - two comfortable chairs and a coffee table - are far away from her, next to the kitchen.

Because she lives alone, Neuhaus can rearrange furniture however she pleases. Others who work out of their homes and who live with a partner or children say that the key to successfully commingling their home and work lives is, in effect, to keep them separate.

"If there are other people in the house, I recommend having a room that is not public space," says Daniel Dern, a computer specialist who writes and gives lectures about the Internet and information technology. "You control what's there," says Dern, who adds that having his own space prevents his partner or her daughter from borrowing his office supplies or moving around the books and magazines with which he is working.

There is another advantage to a separate room: It confines the mess



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / BARRY CHIN

Trudy Neuhaus operates her business from her Chestnut Hill home.

to one area of the house. "My office is an inspiration for other people who are concerned that they are slob," jokes Dern. Thankfully, he says, he can leave the room and close the door, leaving his office mess at work.

Such a plan is easily extended if two people work from the same house. That's the case for Janice Brown, who runs her public relations firm out of her house while her husband operates a speech-writing business from their Newton home. Their solution: two offices, a local area network and five telephone lines. "We each have a data line, we each have a business line and there's a home line," she says. One of the big advan-

tages of having a separate business phone, she says, is that she can turn it "off" when she doesn't want to be interrupted by business calls - for example, when she's sleeping.

Having enough telephone lines is just one part of the technology puzzle to having a successful home office in the 1990s. Another, says Brown, is voice mail, which she purchases from the phone company. "It sounds professional," says Brown, whose voice mail system lets her callers leave a message when she's making a call.

The most expensive piece of equipment in the modern home office is the computer, of course. Most home office workers advise against buying the cheapest machine avail-

able: Instead, buy a system that is powerful enough to handle next year's needs in addition to this year's. For Neuhaus, that meant getting a powerful laptop with an external screen, keyboard and a docking station. Because everything is on her laptop, there is never the danger of leaving anything at home when she travels.

Another important part of the computer is the fax/modem - and an on-line service, such as CompuServe or America Online, to let the home office worker exchange electronic mail with clients.

Then there is the printer. All of the home workers interviewed for this article have laser printers. While these printers are more expensive than inkjet devices, they print much faster and deliver a more professional-looking product. The home workers also decided not to go with the new generation of all-in-one devices, such as the Hewlett-Packard OfficeJet, which combine the functions of a printer, fax and copier. Reason: Although the devices can save space, they are not as flexible as having separate components.

Most important, people setting up a home office should not be hesitant to spend money on good ergonomics. Money invested on a big screen can save you lost productivity from eyestrain and headaches. Dern tells new home workers to buy themselves a good office chair with back support. "A good chair will cost a lot more than you would like," he says. "You only get one spinal column."

How to get your home office started

- Get a separate phone line for your business. That way, when the phone rings after hours, you will know whether it is a business call or a personal call. You can use your "personal" line for outgoing calls, leaving your "business" line free to receive incoming ones.

- Although practically any computer these days that's equipped with a modem can send or receive faxes, using your computer as your fax machine means that you can't ever turn it off. For this reason, most home office workers recommend that you buy a separate, low-cost fax machine for receiving faxes. Using your computer to send a fax, on the other hand, works just fine.

- Get an account with FedEx, Airborne Express or another overnight delivery service. You'll get better prices and better service.

- If you can bill your phone calls to your clients, you will find them easier to track if you sign up for "accounting codes" from your long-distance provider. Sprint, for example, offers a feature called "invalidated accounting codes" for \$5 a month. With the service, you dial a two-digit code after dialing each long-distance phone number; Sprint then gives you a separate itemized bill for each two-digit code.

- Don't try to do it all. You can save time and money by hiring an accountant, a travel agent and other professionals. Build a network of people to help you get your job done.

- Learn how to make chores take five minutes instead of an hour. Instead of running out to the store to buy office supplies, have them delivered. Your time is worth more than the delivery charges. Besides, buying from a catalog will frequently

save you money.

- Be sure to get adequate insurance. Besides health insurance, you'll probably want a special business policy with special endorsement for your computer equipment. If you can, sign up for disability insurance as well. For the self-employed home worker it's one of the most expensive policies you can get, but it is well

worth it if you become too sick to work.

- Be sure to back up your computer on a regular basis, and store copies of the tapes with a trusted friend. You don't want a fire to both destroy your house and ruin your business.

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