

Popular Threads on Solosez

Home Offices

In a couple of weeks, I will be presenting a program on home offices for the Lawyering and Parenting committee of the Westchester Women's Bar Association. Anyone have any pearls of wisdom you think I should share?

Lisa Solomon, New York

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Get a mailbox with a physical address.

Jonathan G. Stein, Elk Grove, California

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Is this for safety reasons only, or are there other reasons?

Lisa Solomon

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First, it's a safety issue. I don't want anyone knowing where my family is. Second, if it is public, clients may show up at all hours of the day. They seem to assume that because it is your home, you are available. Third, at least where I am, it would require a variance from the city.

Jonathan G. Stein, Elk Grove, California

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I'm sure that you know all of these anyway, but my advice would be (1) don't answer phones w/crying babies or barking dogs in the background (there is probably room for a difference of opinion on nursing babies!) and (2) have an actual designated office space, i.e., a space where you keep your papers, computers, etc...

I also like Jon's tip about no home address, at least on pleadings. Maybe it dates back to my days when I did court appointed work, but it makes me nervous having my home address out there. But I know several regulatory attorneys who have always used a home address.

Carolyn Elefant

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With older children, they are warned that if the door to the office is closed, they are not to come in unless there is blood or fire involved.. And even then they can call me on the office line from the home phone.

I deal with the location issue by maintaining a public address (1050 Main)



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for meeting clients and for the phone book. My arrangement with the attorneys who own the property is that I can use their conference room to meet clients and in return I refer to them any real estate closings that come my way.

I've yet to have a client show up at my home without an appointment & I only rarely see people here - provided I already know them and am comfortable with them. In addition, my "home" office is actually an "in-law" apartment attached to the house (with a full kitchen & bath), so I have no excuse to enter the main section to eat or answer the call of nature!

Although my letterhead and email signature *PROMINENTLY* display the *MAILING" address, there is inevitably a few pieces of mail delivered to the Main Street address every day. Usually the ones w/checks in them... go figure..

Patricia M. Joyce, East Greenwich, Rhode Island

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I have both a home office and a staffed office office. I spend more time at the home office. Here are some pros and cons:

Good Points About Home:

You can wear whatever you want to work. Your dry cleaning/laundry bill is less because you don't dress up so much. If you want to wait until afternoon to take your shower and/or shave, it's OK. The commute is really short. You don't waste time in traffic (this is a biggie for me because one way to the office office is about 45 minutes). You save gas and wear and tear on your car. During most of the day, you don't get a lot of phone calls and caller id helps you weed out the junk. You can get a lot done because you can concentrate for large chunks of time. If you need to take a catnap to clear your head, no one is there to snicker at you. You can take a break to work outside if you want to or run a local errand as necessary.

Bad Points About Home:

The dogs are always wanting in or out. The cat sometimes "helps" you work. Unenlightened attorneys can't conceive of working at home and figure you're sick, dogging it, or whatever. If you have younger kids, when they hit the door, the noise level goes up and the phone starts ringing. The phone starts ringing off the hook about 5:00 anyway when I guess the telemarketers figure people are beginning to get home from work. Some people worry about self-discipline when it comes to working at home. This isn't a problem for me as I am perpetually over committed. Sometimes SWMBO forgets that you actually work at home and thinks you are available for all sorts of errands although in fairness most of them SWMBO would have to do herself if I didn't so I don't mind. There is no one at home but you to keep the files up. If you are messy, this can be a problem.

Words of advice:

Never give clients your home telno. Use a cellphone. Never give clients your home address (not that anyone's home address is hard to find anymore, but every little bit helps). A fast Internet connection is indispensable. A dedicated fax line is helpful. "GoToMyPC" and like programs never have worked for me. Instead, I transport files from home to office and back by uploading them to secure online storage. Remember, if you take the physical file home, it isn't at the office anymore, and vice versa. Sometimes the file winds up in one place when you need it at another place.

JV (working from home this a.m., then to the office office for noon and 1:00 p.m. appointments)

Jimmy Verner, Dallas, Texas

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Separate everything into business and personal categories -- bank accounts, space, schedules, time, etc. In theory, I have bright lines separating them, but the nice thing about solo and home practice is that you can move them as and whenever you need to.

-- I have a separate business address and a separate business phone number. -- I don't give out home address for both security and convenience. -- Most people don't know that I have a home office. - I never have clients come to my office. - The procrastinators who haven't timely mailed documents back, or callers who want to hire me on a rush-rush basis, or for whatever reason have something they think is urgent enough for face-to-face delivery right this minute meet me at the post office when I'm picking up the mail or at 5:00 when I'm taking the mail. Drop-ins are disruptive and at times a security risk (like when a respondent in an order of protection case just drops by to whine about the order).

-- I have a separate office, not just a space set aside in the rest of the house. - It's easier for tax purposes, - it blocks the unprofessional washing machine noises, - and walking through its door is a mental separation from washing machine mentality to lawyer even if I don't close the door.

-- I have specific schedules -- business and personal. -- Within the office schedule, - I have specific times set aside for recurring tasks, e.g., I download and send e-mails before 9:00 a.m. I have a set time for lunch. I have a set quitting time so I can get the evening mail to the post office. (Yes, I sometimes come back to the office to do clean-up work, such as making sure my client's file is ready for tomorrow's hearing, or to finish a project that's so close to being finished I just can't stand to put it away undone.) - I don't answer the office phone after regular business hours.

- I found that I need to educate people about what it means to have a home office. It does not mean I'm available, it means I'm working. When friends call on the office phone to chat or to talk about nonlegal matters, I ask if I can call them back after 5:00 or if they prefer to call me back. When they ask if they can call me tomorrow morning, I say sure, I'm available before 9:00 or after 5:00. That sometimes sets their wheels turning -- if I work at home why am I unavailable after 9:00 a.m.? - I

don't schedule appointments after regular business hours unless I can fit it in on the way to a social engagement (e.g., I met a client last Friday at 5:00 while Ron met up with friends, then we went to our social stuff). - I usually don't do personal things during office hours. I can usually do them before 9:00 a.m. or during a coffee break.

-- You don't have someone across the hall with whom you can meet on a regular basis, a kind of "staffing" to discuss what's going on. If something happens to you, your family might notice that you're on the floor, but the court, your clients, your opposing counsel will be clueless. It's important to have a clearly identifiable and findable manual for your Assisting Attorney to come into the office, find the manual, follow your protocol, contact your clients, OCs, and court clerks. That's the theory. Don't do as I do, do as I theorize.

-- The wonderful thing about SOHO is that you can flex your schedule annually, seasonally, daily if you want. - But one thing I had to learn is set and maintain protocols. Protocols help me remember all the steps to a thing. Just because something comes up suddenly doesn't mean it's an emergency or that I have to drop everything to handle it. When a case concludes, or when I fire or am fired, I like to do the file closing on a Friday afternoon. I close Fridays at noon (in theory) and spend the next five hours on office admin -- catch-up filing, QuickBooks, etc. It's undistracted time to write the go through the client's file, get it ready for mailing and storage, do a final accounting, write the closing letter, etc. - And an important thing I learned as an undergrad is "don't take your client's problems home." I called on that as a lawyer by first physically separating office from personal, which made easier the mental separation.

Carolyn Stevens, Lolo, Montana

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<http://www.abanet.org/genpractice/solo/win99rose.html>

" Ten Rules for Staying Sane and Professional at Home"

jennifer rose, Morelia, Mexico

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I have been working from a home office for several years, and in two different homes. Doing so is the best kept secret out there. But I can see that it is not for everybody. If someone is not a self-starter, or disciplined in their work habits, they will probably not succeed by working at home. There can be many distractions that can consume your entire day if you let them.

Physical needs: -a physically separate location. A spare bedroom, or basement, or better yet, a detached working space such as a converted mother in law quarters. I have always used a spare bedroom, with a locking door. -separate office phone, fax, and Internet connections. I have three phone lines into the house, one for the family and two for the office. The office lines are only physically located within the office. That way nobody else can inadvertently answer the office phone. But a cordless

phone allows me to answer that phone anywhere in the house. And nobody else touches it. -a quiet environment. In my first home office I was physically removed from the higher traffic areas and most of the family noise. In my current arrangement, most of the family commotion seems to be aimed directly at my office door. I soundproofed my door and successfully eliminated all but the most raucous distractions. And on the rare occasions when it gets that loud, the offenders know to expect an unwelcome visit from Dad.

Procedural needs: -the rest of the family has been taught that when the office door is closed I am unavailable. This was a difficult feat to accomplish but was absolutely necessary. I still lock the door out of habit, and it occasionally prevents some forgetful child from walking in during the middle of an important phone call. I simply don't wish to have to explain embarrassing background noise to clients, colleagues, or worse, judges. -keep regular office hours. Do not be in the habit of answering your phone early or late. If you do, or make a call outside of business hours, make sure that it was either prearranged, or the party on the other end knows you are working outside of your regular business hours. I let people know what my hours are, but welcome them to leave a voicemail messages during off hours if they choose. The office phone does not disturb the rest of the house. If it did, I would simply turn the ringer off at the end of the day. -do not meet anyone at the home office. Period. I meet clients where it is convenient for them. At home, at work, at a restaurant or coffee shop, whatever works for them. And I try to make those appointments fit around other unavoidable travels. I readily agree to depositions at the office of opposing counsel. When necessary, I have a colleague's conference room available to me.

Major advantages: -overhead -dress code -commute -office politics -flexible hours -fewer distractions (during the school year, during the school day)

Major disadvantages: -isolation -more distractions (during school holidays)

In my early days as a lawyer I worked for big firms and thought that was truly the only way to be a "real lawyer." What a silly idea! All of my clients know that I work from home. I explain my circumstances to them during my initial telephone conversation. If it bothers them sufficiently they have ample opportunity to take their business elsewhere. I have never had anyone (that I know of) choose not to hire me because I worked from my home. But because of the silly preconceived notions about solos and home offices that I myself use to have, I do not advertise that fact to colleagues or courts. Yet, on several occasions I have had big firm lawyers and judges express surprise to learn that I worked from a home office. Apparently, the quality of the work product caused them to simply assume that I worked in a "real office." And twice I have had "officed" colleagues discreetly question me about transitioning to a home office.

Admittedly, there are days when I wish I had some place else to go to do my work. But those are rare. And when that happens I treat myself to lunch somewhere out of the house, or drive over to the courthouse to do some legal research in their library. I always return with a better

appreciation of my circumstances.

Gil Shuga, Mesa, Arizona

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This prompts a related point. Do not give most clients your mobile phone number. Invariably, the ones who call me are the "non-client" supposed friends who want free advice.

Norman Solberg, Osaka, Japan

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