

MOVING OFFICE INTO HOME – ADVICE?

I've been wrestling with a bunch of career options lately - Biglaw? Hire an Associate? Downsize? Move into the basement? - and the more I think about what I want to be doing and not doing, and the more I look at the numbers, the more it looks like staying on my own and moving the office into the basement is the right move. My wife and I are in the process of selling our house and "downsizing" now that our kids are theoretically out of the house, and the place we're looking at has the perfect setup for a home office.

So, if we pull the trigger and go down this path (sorry for the mixed metaphor), what do I need to be thinking about, logistically, practically, psychologically, etc? I've already decided that if we do this we're going to keep a "storefront" open so we have a receptionist and a conference room.

Looking for some sage advice from those of you who are doing this. Thanks!!

Don't let yourself go into the kitchen refrigerator more than you got into a vending machine or lunch counter.

Don't work longer hours than when you had to commute back home (i.e., catch a train).

Keep active in bar association activities.

Work as if you were in an office for which you pay rent (i.e., work)

Lynne R. Ostfeld, Illinois

Make sure you have a door you can close when it's time to leave work. Otherwise it's too tempting to go be at work all the time or to run into the office to answer the ringing phone after-hours.

Also having that door can help keep kids/pets/spouse/spouse's kids/spouse's pets/spouse's kid's pets/spouse's pet's kids...out of the office when you don't want the distraction.

Disclaimer: Don't presently have a kid, a pet, a spouse or a license to practice law. Working on that though. The spouse part, not the law, pet or kid part.

Ben M. Schorr, Hawaii

Disclaimer: Don't presently have a kid, a pet, a spouse or a license to practice law. Working on that though. The spouse part, not the law, pet or kid part.

Make sure you can close the door (mentally and physically) on your office.

Don't put it in your kitchen or you'll burn out. Turn off the ringer on your office phone on weekends. Your family deserves your time.

Go paperless. Get a Fujitsu ScanSnap. Put it within arm's reach on your desk. Put a shredder next to it. Scan, name the file, and shred the original with few exceptions.

Make the office a welcoming place and arrange it accordingly. I face the window out to the backyard and pool. I chose light colored furniture so it didn't seem so stuffy. I painted the walls a calming blue. I like being in here. Seriously.

If you have trouble staying focused, get dressed as if you're going to the office. I can work just as well in my flannel PJs as I can in a suit, but I've heard that others have this trouble, especially if they're transitioning from an office to home.

If you have animals, make sure you know where the mute button is on the phone so you can press it when they go flying out of the room barking their heads off at the stupid neighbor's cat that sits on the back wall and taunts the dogs. (or is that just me?)

You won't have clients meeting you at home, so designate days for client meetings (out of the office) and days you spend entirely at the office. I learned that one the hard way. Mondays are non-negotiable in-office days for me. So are most Fridays. I'm beginning to need another day, probably Thursday. I find that staying in the office Monday allows me to get back into work mode from the weekend, get my gameplan together for the week, and not feel rushed. Of course, I don't have a storefront and my virtual office charges me to use their conference room. Until and unless I start charging for consultations, I meet everyone at Starbucks or at their offices.

Download Pandora. Pay the extra \$36/year so you can listen to it all the time. I have Melody Gardot days but most Mondays need some Flo-Rida and a little Prince to get me going.

Good luck!

Gina Madsen, Nevada

I work from an actual office because the home office thing got old for

me after a year. But here are my top five practical suggestions:

1, Get a Post Office Box. They are inexpensive and will save you agita. When I worked from home, we got a PO Box to cut down on the amount of junk mail and solicitations at the house. Believe it or not, salespeople will come TO YOUR DOOR if they have your address. I put my PO Box on all of my order forms (except, clearly, office supplies) and bills. In addition to cutting down on the sales calls, it helped keep my business life separate from my home life (to the extent possible).

2, Get a second phone line. If you're planning on using a real landline, the IRS will not allow you deduct even a pro-rated portion of your home telephone expenses. You can deduct the cost of a second line.

3, If you're planning on setting up shop before you sell your house, don't claim the home office deduction. If you claim the home office deduction, it will affect how much capital gain you can exclude at sale.

4, I'm not sure what the rules are in Portland but many jurisdictions (such as Philly) require you to have a business license even if you work out of your home. You are also required to pay in some jurisdictions (also Philly) occupancy tax on the percentage of space you use for business. Check your local regulations on this - sometimes, those add up.

5, If you're going to have clients visit you at your home, talk to your insurance company about a rider. They are not expensive and many existing home insurance policies will not cover home offices (damages or third party claims) without one.

Kelly Phillips Erb, Pennsylvania

Also, check your zoning. Many communities will not allow home offices unless the property is zoned for them.

Consider whether your client base are the kind of people you want at your house. We've had numerous discussions over the years concerning the risks which may be attendant with domestic relations and criminal clients knowing where you live -- especially the former, if the soon-to-be ex-spouse is violent.

Sasha Golden, Massachusetts

A few tips I've compiled over the years:

1. Be certain running a home office is legal. Call your local county clerk and any other local governmental agency/home owner's association/co-op board for approvals
2. Office space - sturdy desk, good chair, proper lighting and file cabinet with lock. A separate room is best, but if space is tight - use a bookshelf and section off a work area. You should not be able to see your work surface from any part of your home living area.
3. Office equipment - desktop telephone, desktop computer, printer/scanner/copier/fax, smart phone and external hard drive.
4. Office technology - secure connection to the internet and method to securely transfer files and information with each client, up to date anti-virus software and definitions, licensed software - word processing, e-mail, financial, any specialty software based on service offering, website domain; unified messaging account; off site back up; remote access tech.
5. Ground rules or established times for when you are literally "at work." Make sure these ground rules are known and respected by all who share your living space. (This one is the toughest!)

Warmest,

Andrea Cannavina, Not an attorney

Most importantly, your home office should have an entrance separate from your home. Do you really want clients walking through your home? Kinda personal, particularly if you don't know them well.

Greg Zbylut, Illinois

Make sure you don't mind being alone a good part of the day.

Kurt Valentine, Missouri

Thanks for all the great insight. My wife/boss/paralegal and I have talked

through much of what has been said here and we've incorporated these thoughts into our home search. We're locked into an office lease for the next couple years, so this isn't something that's going to happen overnight in any event, but we wanted to give ourselves time to plan and find the right space and location. A couple things we've definitely decided are that we're keeping our PO Box, and we're not having clients to the house except for purely social functions. We'll have a virtual office for meetings, depositions, etc. The nice thing about living in the 21st century is that a great deal of client work is done via phone and internet already anyway.

Jeremy Vermilyea, Oregon

I used to feel lonely. Seriously. I almost went and got a job because I missed all the interaction of a normal day in a law office. Then I found Solosez! 😊

Then came twitter...

Warmest,

Andrea Cannavina, Not an attorney

I'd like to second #1. Make sure you don't run afoul of local zoning laws. I can operate my practice from home, but cannot have clients here, hang signage, etc.

Karen M. Holman, Virginia

I'd get a corporate identity program so that you have a reception area and conference room time and a mail drop. I think pretty quickly you will tire of clients coming to the house. When I started my solo practice I was going to see people in the house. My neighbor referred her sister who was going through a divorce. A few days later my neighbor mentioned that the husband was mad at me and was planning on driving by my house with his shotgun. So much for letting clients know my home address or meeting me there.

With a corporate identity program you can still do the work at home when you aren't meeting anyone, but you can also present a professional appearance.

David Rubin, Missouri

"If you have animals, make sure you know where the mute button is on the

phone so you can press it when they go flying out of the room barking their heads off at the stupid neighbor's cat that sits on the back wall and taunts the dogs. (or is that just me?)"

It's not just you... I'm still working out the kinks on this one.

Ben Greiving, Colorado

I too work out of home (the address below is my official mailing address and I often meet clients in a conference room there for \$25 per hour). I think the home office is GREAT. The reason I say that is because with the DRASTICALLY lower overhead that comes with having a home office, you don't have to do as much work each month as you otherwise would. Don't read that the wrong way; I'm not saying "Hurray, I get to be lazy!" Quite the opposite, I'm saying that with a lower caseload, I have that much more time to really research tough issues in cases, provide my clients with a higher level of service, etc. This, in turn, provides me with a higher overall level of work satisfaction. And just as a practical tip, just because you have a home office doesn't mean you ALWAYS have to work there. If your house, apartment or whatever is driving you insane, go work at the coffee shop for a few hours (or maybe even the whole day). Good luck and feel free to e-mail me directly anytime if you ever want to shoot the breeze about this. It's definitely an interesting topic to me.

Regards,

Brandon Zurvalec, Pennsylvania

Another good place to work if you just have to get out for the day is your local law library.

Stephanie Hill, Minnesota

"Go paperless. Get a Fujitsu ScanSnap. Put it within arm's reach on your desk. Put a shredder next to it. Scan, name the file, and shred the original with few exceptions."

DO THIS! Do not put the scanner out of reach or somewhere you have to "get it out" even if that seems super simple. Make a place for it so you get your mail, throw out the junk, and stick the rest in the scanner right then and there. My shredder was awesome when it sat on the wastebasket next to my desk. When it broke, I was in trouble.

Dealing with the accumulation of paperwork is much harder and much more likely to be a problem in a home office -- that has been my experience.

Also -- tax people can explain this better - -but my understanding is the clearer demarcated the home office area, the better because then you can claim a home office and deduct expenses like a % of your mortgage.

-- Amy Kleinpeter, California

Consider taking part or all of your practice online. That makes it even easier to work from home. I have run a solo, web-based, virtual law office for going on four years now from my home office. I can access my clients and my backend law office wherever I access the Internet so I have a little netbook and a regular computer in my office and just migrate around my house depending on where my two children are playing or where there is the least noise at any time of the day. It's not for everyone, but it works for me. I was worried about feeling isolated at first, but quickly found some great online mentors and the wonderful colleagues here on Solosez and on my bar association's listservs and forums.

Best of luck to you.

Stephanie Kimbro, North Carolina

I'm currently dealing with frustrations of working from a home office (I think it's just a phase). My number one complaint is interruptions. I live in a "walking neighborhood", and with that comes solicitors and others ringing the doorbell, sometimes weekly. That, of course, gets the dog barking, the cats scattering, and my concentration shot. I need (and suggest for you) a good way to reduce background noise when on the phone. In the bigger picture, I sometimes wish I lived further out of town in a more remote subdivision.

Julie S. Mills, Ohio

Julie, Simply post a plaque on your door that says: No Solicitors - Violators Will Be Shot.

Gina Madsen

My wife came into my home office just the other night while I was working. Don't you get lonely working here all by yourself?

Not at all. I have soothing blue walls (like Gina), my own bathroom, a nice view out of my window, and everything just the way I like it. Being somewhat of an introvert, networking used to be a challenge for me. Now, having all the time I need to myself, I find myself much more willing to go out and meet people. I can be much friendlier and more personable during the time I do spend with people, either at court or while meeting with clients at my official office (my wife's office).

I am here when our 15-year-old son gets home from school. I am here when there is a delivery or a repairman needs to come to the house. I am here when our two kids home from college for the holidays want to grab a quick movie. And my wife is happy because the house is clean when she gets home.

In other words, the home office works for me.

Jamison Koehler, Washington, D.C.

My wife/paralegal/boss and I haven't yet decided for certain which direction we're going, owing to an offer from a BigLaw firm, 2 1/2 years left on our existing office lease, a current house that hasn't sold, and two barely teenagers who should be gone by now but aren't. But as we sort through all of these things we will definitely be taking your lessons to heart. Thanks much!!
