

Home Office Essentials for Realtors®

by Michael Antoniak

A career in real estate has always blurred the distinction between professional and private life. Even before the home office concept gained widespread acceptance, many real estate professionals spent part of their day making calls, reviewing contracts, and scheduling appointments from their home.

Today, working from home can be a much more productive and profitable experience. A home office can serve as your primary workplace when you're not showing houses or a practical convenience away from the office, allowing you to complete work as needed in comfortable surroundings.

More than a desk, chair, or file cabinets, though, it's equipment that transforms a spare bedroom or walk-in closet into a workspace. And with the right mix of technology, you can create a home office on any budget.

What are the essentials? First, a way to make and receive phone calls. If you don't use your cell phone as your home office connection, you need a business phone number with a dedicated line. Consider a standard desk phone with features such as caller ID, call forwarding, and call waiting.

If you like to multitask, opt for a liberating headset phone or one of the new cordless models. Full-featured business phones make sense only when there's more than one home office worker or you need multiple lines.

Every office needs a way to capture missed calls. A simple answering machine or integrated phone and answering machine are your cheapest options. But the convenience of a voice mail account, which picks up when you're on the line and allows for unlimited messages, may be worth the ongoing monthly expense, which is usually under \$10.

The next consideration is a computer system. The big decision here is whether to invest in a desktop or notebook system as your primary PC. Desktop systems are still the best buy at any price, but a notebook may be the better investment for greater mobility.

Don't forget that you'll need to generate documents that clients can sign and that you can file. So you'll need to print from your computer, make copies, send and receive faxes, and scan photos. You can buy separate pieces of equipment or a multifunction machine. Multifunction machines are a perfect solution where space is limited. They range in price from around \$100 to about \$1,000 for laser-based units.

What you require, beyond these basics, may be more a matter of personal style than productive necessity. But once your communication, computer, and document needs are covered, you'll be ready for business . . . at home.

Files to go

Unless your home office is your primary workspace or you carry your notebook PC everywhere, you'll need some solution for moving files between your home and brokerage offices.

Try e-mail: Send files back and forth as e-mail attachments. Just keep track of which is the latest version and where you saved it last. If you expect to move large files, photos, and graphics, you'll want a broadband connection.

Save to disk(s): Copy work files to floppy disks, CD-ROM, DVD, or flash media, such as Compact Flash. A floppy disk's capacity may be limited to only a couple of files; flash media such as Compact Flash cards can hold 16MB of data or more; CD-ROMs can hold hundreds of megabytes of information; and DVDs store several gigabytes. Of course, the practical value of these solutions depends on having the compatible drive or reader.

Add hardware: Today, you can also swap and move files with a number of hardware solutions. The most compact may be the new key-sized USB flash drives (memory is retained whether or not the media loses power) that offer at minimum 16MB of storage. They plug directly into a computer's USB port and function just like an auxiliary drive. There's also an abundance of high-capacity external hard drives available, with 20GB drives now selling for less than \$200.

Software, security make the difference

How well your computer serves as a hub of meaningful activity depends on what software you've loaded and the precautions you take. At the very least, you need:

An office suite. Expect to use word processing, graphics, database, presentation, and desktop publishing software. You can buy basic productivity software as separate applications or as a suite, such as Microsoft Office.

A contact manager. It organizes client records and helps manage your daily schedule. It may be included with your office suite or purchased as a dedicated application, such as ACT! or Top Producer.

Web tools. An e-mail application and a Web browser get you up and running on the Internet. If these were included with your computer, check the Netscape or Internet Explorer Web sites to make sure you're running the latest version. The later the version, the better your online experience.

Support software and drivers. For smooth performance, install and use the software, such as data synchronization utilities, and drivers that come with your peripherals. When you use the included software, vendors automatically notify you about updates.

Security. Don't wait to find out how devastating a computer virus or crash can be. Protect yourself with antivirus software, such as Norton AntiVirus. Also consider a utility suite,

such as Norton Systems Works. Utility suites help run your system more efficiently by freeing up space, cleaning up fragmented data, and diagnosing and repairing disk problems. No matter what other tools you use, your best security is regularly backing up data on an auxiliary drive or removable media.

FACTOID

Nearly 78 percent of REALTORS® maintain a home office.
—2003 REALTOR® Magazine survey, MRI, Custom Division