

Setting up for success

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No regrets ... Janna Fikh turned part of her house into an office, cutting travel time. *Photo: Steven Siewert*

Get the basics right when establishing a home office and your enterprise stands a better chance of being efficient and profitable, writes Dan Warne.

Client phone calls long after business hours, waiting around for couriers to arrive and dealing with technical problems are some of the key frustrations experienced by home-office workers.

But working from home does not need to be frustrating. A host of gadgets, services and strategies are on offer to help your business run smoothly and professionally.

Choosing a PC

One of your first key investments when moving from the corporate world to a home office is likely to be a computer. The experts suggest thinking portable.

The editor of *APC* magazine, Tony Sarno, advises against buying a desktop computer for a home office as a default choice.

"A thin and light laptop can make working while you're out and about much easier," he says.

Connecting to work computers is also easier than it used to be, thanks to free services such as TeamViewer and LogMeIn, which allow you to control the screen from home.

Solving tech problems

One of the things you will probably miss most is free access to an IT department. However, there are affordable ways of fixing computer problems. Companies such as Gizmo will send a technician for a flat fee of \$129 to \$189, depending on the type of problem, with a "no fix, no fee" guarantee.

Broadband ISP iiNet offers business customers free tech support for their computers - and not just for internet problems.

Network-attached storage units make backing up critical files much easier than it used to be. The hard-drive unit plugs into your modem/router and allows your computers to be automatically and continuously backed up over wi-fi.

This can be coupled with an online back-up service such as Dropbox, which provides a secondary, off-site back-up and has the bonus of giving you access to all your files via a smartphone, iPad or other computer.

Staying connected

Home-based accountant Janna Fikh suggests having a separate phone number for the business, to avoid becoming "over-contactable". Clients call at all hours, expecting to be able to leave a voicemail message.

It is cheap to get a second phone line using internet telephony. Internode's NodePhone service costs \$5 a month and includes a business phone number that is separate from your home phone. (Late-night voicemails are sent to your email as an audio attachment.) And many cordless phones can be set up not to ring during certain hours.

Rather than buying a fax machine, a multifunction printer with an in-built scanner is better as it enables documents to be emailed, which is less costly and more convenient.

However, for occasional faxes, email-to-fax services are inexpensive. UTBox charges \$60 a year and allows faxes to be both sent by email and received as PDFs.

For internet access when you are out of the office, most current-model phones, including the iPhone 4 and any handsets based on Android 2.2 or 2.3, have a tethering feature for your laptop to use the phone's internet.

Your workspace

Although it is tempting when working at home to hit the sofa and stretch out with a laptop, ergonomist Mark Dohrmann recommends buying a good-quality office chair.

"The best sort are the standard clerical-type office chairs, not the large, high-backed reclining types, which some people mistakenly think are guaranteed to be comfortable," he says. "Lots of chairs on sale are labelled as 'ergonomic' but they're not. Ask if the chair conforms to Australian Standard AS/NZS 4438 for height-adjustable swivel chairs." Dohrmann has an easy-to-read, nine-point checklist for setting up a home office that will save your eyes, ears, joints and sanity. You can read the checklist at j.mp/markdohrmann.

Other tips

A freelance writer who works from home, Adam Turner, says his favourite tip is to rent a serviced mailbox from a provider such as Mail Boxes Etc.

"If you're going to work at home, you need to think about what you're missing out on by not being in an office. Depending on the nature of your work, it's likely that the mail room is one of the things you'll miss the most.

"Couriers are unreliable at the best of times and you don't want to spend your days sitting by the front door, especially if you've got errands to run or kids to pick up. A serviced mailbox means you're not held hostage by couriers. Instead, you can collect your mail whenever it suits you."

Accountant balances books, work and life

Accountant Janna Fikh has been working from home for the past two years in Lindfield on the north shore.

Before that, she worked for six years as an accountant for larger firms, where she felt she was unable to give clients the attention they deserved.

Fikh made a modest investment in partitioning part of her house as a home office with a separate door and paving the garden for client parking.

"This was financially smarter than purchasing or renting an office elsewhere," she says.

"Having a home office decreases my travelling time substantially as most clients come to me and I can control the hours I work."

Her biggest challenges have been stopping work invading the rest of the house ("I've recently prevented this by allocating specific time each day for administrative and filing tasks") and managing family expectations about her availability during work hours.

She says the best advice she was given was to "not give up at the first sign of trouble, to stay calm and find an alternative way or solution".

Her biggest mistake? "Being too available for clients isn't a great precedent to set," she says.

But Fikh says she doesn't have a single regret about setting up her home business.

"I am lucky to have both clients and contractors who are extremely knowledgeable and helpful people from various backgrounds and industries," she says.

"Having a home office keeps my costs competitive for my clients. I'm also more productive ... and it's easier to balance work and personal life."