



IN SIGHT

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LIFE WITH A HOME OFFICE

Home-based legal practice is growing rapidly, due in part to new lifestyle choices and in part due to downsizing. Technology allows lawyers to operate without costly overhead or commuting.

Home-based practice isn't for every lawyer, client, or type of case. Many lawyers like the stimulation of working on a team; and large, complex cases often require a law firm setting, with support staff, just to handle the paperwork. Many lawyers do not want to practice criminal law out of their homes, whereas a home-based office often works well for lawyers whose practices focus on small businesses, community development, domestic relations, probate, or educational law.

For many lawyers, happiness in a home office depends on their vision of home and work. Home is usually seen as a place of nurture and refuge, while the workplace is essentially perceived as a place of productivity and performance. Moving your office to your home brings these two zones together and potentially into conflict. The home-based lawyer must take care to ensure that each area is preserved or enhanced, not diminished, by the presence of the other. While physical differentiation of the space to structure a work zone within the home is one important way to accomplish this goal, the biggest task is psychological.

Before launching a home-based legal practice, here are a few things to consider:

Professional Experience. Lawyers just out of school should probably practice with more experienced lawyers for a few years before going it alone.

Professional Contacts. A network of contacts is better than a big telephone directory ad.

Space. A home office must have adequate working, meeting, and storage space. Children must be kept away from your computer and case files.

Computer Literacy. A home-based practitioner must be able to create and edit documents without assistance, conduct legal research online or on CD-ROM, and manage a modem for easy transfer of documents so materials don't always have to be printed and faxed.

Start-Up Capital. Although it costs less to set up an office at home than in rented space, furniture, filing cabinets, supplies, and equipment are necessary. Basic equipment includes a computer; research, word processing, and billing software; a business phone line with voice mail; a copier; and a fax machine.

Support Services. Home practitioners must consider who will handle the secretarial needs, filing work, and investigative requirements.

Child Care. If small children are at home, either a full-time babysitter in the home or at least a couple of days of child care a week are necessary. Working very late at night or very early in the morning are additional options.

Legal Research. Home-based lawyers don't have big law firm libraries down the hall. They must determine what type of research is necessary for their areas of practice, whether an online service is affordable, whether the necessary information is available on CD-ROM, and whether a law library is close enough to use.

Schedule. Home-based practitioners need to assess how many hours a week they hope to work and how many of those are billable.

Isolation. Some lawyers can work happily without other lawyers around to discuss ideas; others can't. Regardless, everyone needs to maintain the professional contacts that are vital to a successful prac-

tice. Good places to do this are through bar association committees, part-time lawyers' networks, and other professional associations.

Security. Some home-based lawyers do not list their addresses in the telephone book.

Billing. Because of lower overhead, home-based lawyers often charge less than others with similar experience and qualifications. Billing and collection procedures must be considered. Some home-based lawyers reduce the hassle of bill collection by asking for retainers up front.

Image. The lawyer's personal appearance and the appearance of the home-office demonstrate the lawyer's style. When choosing a style, the lawyer should also consider client expectations.

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