

Home Office on a Shoestring: Six Ways to Save

Love the idea of a 10-step commute? Would you rather spend money on your business – or a vacation – than pay rent to someone else? A home office may be for you. But even at home, setting up an efficient workspace takes time and money. Here's how to make the most of your investment.

1. Stay current with technology

If your computer is more than four years old, consider a new one. A speedy new computer costs hundreds of dollars, not thousands. Older computers are slow, crash-prone, and unlikely to work with new technology like high-speed Internet and wireless networks. Computer problems are time-consuming; tech support calls are expensive. Can you afford this interruption to your business? A new computer will minimize these hassles.

To get the best value, buy new, but go with a low-end computer from a brand-name company like Dell or Gateway. Check out their refurbished computers for additional savings.

2. Dial no more

Still on dial-up? High-speed Internet access (DSL or cable) is blazingly fast and frees your phone line for those important business calls. In most areas, prices start at under \$30 per month. And a virtual fax service eliminates the need for a second phone line – you can send and receive faxes by email.

3. Print for less

You probably have an inkjet printer already, but a laser printer is faster and costs less per page. Black and white laser printers can be had for \$100; color lasers can be purchased for less than \$500. Another bonus: laser printers use toner cartridges that last for thousands of pages, so you won't be replacing those

expensive inkjet cartridges every few weeks.

Limited on space? An all-in-one device allows you to print, scan, fax, and copy. Get one with a flat-bed scanner and document feeder for the most versatility.

4. Watch out for hackers

These days, computer security is a necessity. You need virus protection, a good firewall, and anti-spyware software. Virus protection runs about \$30 each year; make sure you get a new subscription when your current version expires. If you've got Windows XP, you've already got a basic firewall. Zone Alarm, at www.zonelabs.com, offers a free firewall that is better but cryptic. Most anti-virus vendors offer an inexpensive, easier-to-use firewall. Two of the best anti-spyware programs are free: Spybot S&D and Ad-Aware, both available at www.download.com.

Another security tip: don't share your computer with the kids! Anything they download could invite more viruses and spyware.

5. Save your place on the web

Got a great company name? Make sure no one else nabs it. Even if you're not ready for a website, you can buy your domain name – your website address – for less than \$10 a year at places like www.godaddy.com and www.1and1.com. For a little more money, these same sites will set up your own email address, e.g. me@mycompany.com.

6. Shop online

Use your speedy Internet connection to shop online for any other office needs. Price comparison sites like www.shopping.com and www.froogle.com help you locate deals.

They also offer feedback from other shoppers so you don't get stung by a fly-by-night company. Another terrific source of bargains is www.ebay.com, but "buyer beware" is the slogan there – read auction details carefully and check out buyer feedback before bidding.

You're in Good Company

Home-based businesses are more common than ever. According to the US Census Bureau, 4.2 million Americans had home-based businesses in 2000, and the number continues to climb. Invest in yourself and your business with an efficient home office, and watch your company prosper!

Wendy Gauntt, President of CIO Services, LLC, helps business owners use technology to boost their bottom line. As chief information officer for growing businesses, Wendy helps her clients evaluate and implement new technology that provides clear and tangible benefits. Visit her website for more ideas and information: www.cioservicesllc.com.