

TECHNOFEATURE

Practice management and technology articles written by experts.

July 14, 2009

TECHNOFEATURE: TOP TEN TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL HOME OFFICE PRACTICE By Grace Lidia Suarez, <mailto:gracesuarez@mac.com> (This article is a TechnoLawyer Exclusive.)

SYNOPSIS

Working at home eliminates your commute. But apart from that obvious advantage, what other benefits does it provide? What about downsides? As with any endeavor, good advice from an experienced and knowledgeable source can help make the move to a home office successful. In this TechnoFeature, San Francisco attorney Grace Suarez draws from eight years in her home office to provide ten terrific tips. Don't set up shop in your house before reading this article. This article contains 1,404 words.

INTRODUCTION

Working at home solves many problems facing attorneys today. It eliminates rent and makes it easier to carry out other roles as parents, caregivers, and homemakers. On the other hand, working at home also has pitfalls.

Below you'll find ten tips for establishing a successful home office practice.

1. SET UP A REAL OFFICE

Nobody in your family, including yourself, will take you seriously if you don't have a real office in your home. You will find it impossible to concentrate if you have to sweep your papers off the dining room table every evening or if your brief has crayon drawings on the back.

One of my coaching clients worked out of her son's bedroom. Sure, he was away at college, but she had not taken over his room. She was still looking at his punk rock posters and working at his desk. We first focused on getting her a real office. Her productivity and self-esteem soared as a result.

Try to get a whole room. Your son who is in college doesn't need his own bedroom at home. If you don't have a separate room you can take over, create an office in a closet. Check out home office ideas on the Internet, especially the Lifehacker blog: <http://lifehacker.com/search/home%20office/>

2. SET BOUNDARIES FOR YOURSELF, CLIENTS, AND FAMILY

One of the benefits of working at home is that you can work when it suits you, subject to the needs of your family. If you really do your best work at 2:00 a.m. (actually, most people don't), you can work then. But that flexibility is one of the risks too, especially if clients find out that you're always available.

Of course, in the age of the BlackBerry, some clients already expect their attorneys to be available 24/7/365.

Make it clear to your clients that you will answer their communications within 24 hours on weekdays, unless you are on vacation. Clients who can't live with that rule will cause trouble: you don't want them.

Family members may quickly slide into asking for favors such as errands or pickups. Don't do anything you were not doing when you worked in an office. If you can run an errand for someone on your errand-running day, fine. Otherwise, they will just have to do what they did before you worked at home.

Respect yourself. Just because you work at home doesn't mean you have to turn into a pajama-wearing slob. Dress up, even if just a little. Put on some make-up.

Stick to a schedule: set a number of billing hours to complete each day, or a certain amount of time to work without taking a break. I use a computer-based timer to force myself to work on projects that do not naturally attract me.

3. FIND A FREE PLACE TO MEET CLIENTS

Unless you have a home office with a separate entrance and the proper zoning, you do not want to receive clients at home. Even then, if you practice divorce or criminal law, you may not really want your clients to know where your family lives. A home office space, no matter how beautifully outfitted, just isn't professional enough.

There are plenty of quiet, private places to meet. The federal courthouse in San Francisco, for example, has a beautiful attorney meeting space with private rooms. Many courthouses have out-of-the-way spaces where you can have a private conversation.

Also, encourage the use of email. Most client questions after the first interview can be handled that way. As an added bonus, you will have a written record.

While you're out looking for neat places to meet, get a mailbox and convenience address near your home. If you must give out a physical address for snail mail, give that one. Keep your home address private. Nobody needs to know it.

4. AVOID DISTRACTIONS

When asked why they don't work at home, many attorneys reply that there are too many distractions. Of course, there are plenty at work too: managing partners who barge in and demand answers, co-workers who want to chat, etc.

Distractions at home, like piled-up dishes from last night's dinner, should be ignored until it's time to deal with them.

Viewed from the right aspect, the dishes can become a Zen break from an intense writing session.

A task list is invaluable. A few minutes spent over coffee and your favorite Getting Things Done tool (computer, journal, piece of blank paper, whatever) first thing in the morning will keep the rest of your day

running smoothly. If you have trouble getting organized, read David Allen's wonderful book, *Getting Things Done*.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0142000280/thetechnolawyer>

5. STAY AWAY FROM THE FRIDGE

Another reason commonly given for not working at home is that the refrigerator is there, calling your name. Of course, in an office there is usually a fridge too, plus the co-worker with the candy jar, and the secretary who brings in freshly-baked cookies.

You can control what's in your fridge. If there is only fruit and water, that's all you'll be able to eat. If you have kids, this is a good excuse to get them to eat healthy food, too. You can tell them they'll be keeping Dad from getting fat.

One of the advantages of working within reach of your kitchen is that you can cook long-simmering dishes, which will provide better food for your family at lower cost. No more last-minute pizza runs.

6. EXERCISE FOR FREE

Since one of the benefits of working at home is saving money, you can save even more by canceling your gym membership. Schedule an exercise period and keep it like any other appointment. Practice yoga with a DVD, or exercise by doing housework. Did you know that vacuuming for 30 minutes can burn up to 140 calories?

7. USE YOUR WHOLE HOUSE, BUT DON'T LEAVE YOUR WORK LYING AROUND

There's no law that says you have to work all day in your designated office. Take the laptop to the deck on a beautiful day. Read that transcript sitting comfortably on your living room couch.

But that doesn't mean that you should leave piles of work lying around the house. First, important stuff is likely to get lost. Second, you will tick off your family.

If you must keep piles of paper (the subject of another article), keep them tucked away in your office.

8. STAY CONNECTED TO THE WORLD

If you are naturally introverted, working at home can turn you into a complete hermit. Schedule lunches with friends, visit museums during the quiet morning hours (or the free days), volunteer at a shelter, read newspapers and magazines, talk to friends and colleagues on the phone, or let politicians know how you feel. Join online professional groups and "chat" with your virtual friends.

Just don't let yourself get too distracted, and don't use email as an excuse to stop doing real work.

9. BUY TOOLS YOU LOVE

You play every role in your home office practice, including the purchasing agent. That means you no longer have to put up with boring beige and black. Paint your office pink (mine is), buy a Mac (I did), hang photos of anyone you like (I have photos of my husband and the Dalai Lama -- not in the same photo).

While you're at it, take the time to explore your tools.

Invest in some computer classes, or learn your favorite word processor inside and out.

10. ENJOY THE EXPERIENCE

If you have set up a home office due to financial necessity, don't whine and pine for the day when you can have a "real office." Embrace the freedom, the flexibility, the beauty of being on your own, in your very own space. Don't be ashamed of your space. Carry a card with your telephone number (try Google Voice), your email address, your Facebook page (you can now get a vanity URL), your convenience address, and your blog address. Everything except your home address.

CONCLUSION

I worked in an office for 25 years before switching to my home office eight years ago. I would not return to a "regular" office for any money. If you've been contemplating a home office practice, or if the economy has made the decision for you for you, jump in. The water's fine.

Respond to this TechnoFeature:

<mailto:post@technolawyer.com>

ABOUT GRACE SUAREZ

Grace Suarez works on criminal appeals from her tiny pink home office in a San Francisco Victorian. She is also a life coach and blogs at ElectricLawyer <<http://www.gracesuarez.com>>. Her blog, which features summaries of recent criminal decisions and anything else she wants to write and rant about, is also available for the Kindle as ElectricLawyer.

Contact Grace:

E: <mailto:gracesuarez@mac.com>

ABOUT TECHNOFEATURE

Published on Tuesdays, TechnoFeature is a weekly newsletter containing in-depth articles written by leading legal technology and practice management experts, many of whom have become "household names" in the legal profession. Most of these articles are TechnoLawyer exclusives, but we also scour regional legal publications for superb articles that you probably missed the first time around. Your friends and colleagues can subscribe

here: <http://www.technolawyer.com/technofeature.asp>
