

HOME OFFICE BUYING GUIDE

Before you begin your shopping trip, take some time to think about your requirements. This guide will help you hone in on what you need.

Measure the space

Home office furniture varies widely in scale, so the first step anyone should take is to measure the room, or the space within a multi-function room, it will be placed in. Don't forget to measure the doorways. Many furniture returns are made because the furniture can't be moved into its intended room. Try laying things out with an online room planner to get an idea of how you want to set up the space.

Power and Connectivity

Next, consider whether or not there are outlets, phone jacks, or internet ports access in the immediate area and plan your furniture placement accordingly. You will save yourself a lot of frustration if you plan for these necessities in advance. Attention to this detail will also allow you to line up power strips, battery backups and the like before you put the furniture in place. Otherwise you may end up doing a contortionist act to plug in your computer.

Work style

Are you the organized and efficient type who prefers to work in a space that keeps everything in its place? Then you might do well with a tidy computer armoire or an office in a box with storage capacity and compartments, but not a lot of counter space. Or perhaps you like to spread things out to get the big picture. If this is your work style you might be better served with a full desk and a return.

Capacity

What equipment do you use in your home office? Is your computer a laptop or a tower? Is your printer a compact inkjet or a hefty laser printer? Take inventory of your equipment before you go shopping so that you can find the furniture to house it all. It's also a good idea to measure your equipment in advance. Computer hardware and peripherals have gotten smaller and smaller with each new model. So if, for example, your printer is more than a couple of years old, it's probably bigger than the newest models on the market, and it may not fit into a printer cubby on a new computer armoire.

As you inventory your components, you might want to check the ventilation requirements for the equipment. Excess heat can impair the operation of

electronics, so you want to make sure that cooling fans will not be blocked in your new office furniture.

The best furniture designed for the home office will have built-in features that make it easy to set up your workstation. Cord access holes are essential to modern home office furniture; look for finishing touches of wood, metal or plastic grommets around cord access punch-outs. Many designs also incorporate cord management systems that neatly tuck them away so you won't be left in a tangle. Newer innovations include built-in recharging stations for cell phones, PDAs and other electronics.

Keyboard trays have become a common feature in home office furniture. Many times they are masked by false, drop-down drawer fronts. In addition to keyboard trays, pull-out platforms for scanners, printers and fax machines can improve a workstation's functionality.

There are many options available in home office furniture today, scaled for different needs and different spaces. In addition to looking at your needs for computer storage, be sure to consider storage for all the little stuff that goes with it. Do you have tons of disks and CDs stacked around your computer now? If so, then you might want to look for home office furniture that offers built-in disk storage areas.

Workspace

We all need a space to sit down, pay the bills and check e-mail. But some of us do much more in our home offices. Workspaces can be customized to fit your work style and available space.

A desk is what we immediately think of when we conceive of a home office. At its most basic, it offers a broad level surface on which to work. No matter the style, a desk's functionality can be increased with the addition of other components.

A return attaches perpendicularly to one end of a desk to create an "L" shaped workspace. If you like to spread things out while you are working, a return can keep you from dropping stacks of stuff on the floor. A return can also increase your storage capacity with additional drawer space.

A hutch sits on top of a desk, against a wall, for additional storage. Open shelves or cabinet doors usually frame the space around a computer monitor. A hutch with built-in lighting should shed light on the task at hand without aggravating computer screen glare. In addition to added storage, a hutch can bring character to your home office.

A corner desk is a great way to make use of what would normally be wasted space. They work particularly well in rooms with multiple functions, such as family rooms or bedrooms.

Home office wall systems are a great option when you want to make a dramatic statement. Desk, hutch, and return can be combined with bookshelves, cabinets, and lateral files for great functionality and good looks. Lateral Files

Lateral file cabinets have become increasingly popular in home offices. They offer more capacity than traditional two-drawer cabinets and since they are broader than they are deep, the contents are easier to access. Rising half the height of a full-sized traditional file cabinet, a lateral file can provide an additional work surface. Lateral files can also be fitted with a hutch for book storage above. Many new designs disguise the purpose of the file cabinet by making them look like a small chest of drawers.

A computer armoire or an office in a box are both great alternatives when your home office is located in a multifunction room. In addition to hiding away computer clutter when not in use, many have built-in extra features to help organize your workspace. Chalk boards, dry erase boards and bulletin boards fit neatly on to doors. Mail-sorting cubbies, paper storage and disk storage keep your supplies in order. Some armoires incorporate built-in lighting. Lights should illuminate without aggravating computer screen glare. If you like to spread things out when you work and are concerned that an armoire won't offer enough space, try looking at one with a fold-up or swing-out return. It's sort of like a Murphy bed of desks: a whole table tucks away until you need it for an additional work surface.

Ergonomic is not synonymous with ugly. With the rise of telecommuting, home office furnishings have moved towards attractive designs that are intended for daily use. If you will be spending large amounts of time working in your home office, be sure that it not only fits your home's decor, but fits your body too. Try it out in the store: sit down and go through the motions you regularly go through in your work. Are you sitting in an awkward position? Do you feel any strain in your arms, shoulders, back or wrists? If so, look elsewhere.

Seating

While you are furnishing your home office, don't forget to pick up an office chair. If you spend a lot of time on the computer at home, be sure that the chair fits your body as well as your style. There are two primary categories of office seating: executive chair and task chair.

Executive chairs are larger in scale and have arms that are usually attached to the seat and the back. While the height of an executive chair is often adjustable, the back is not. Executive chairs also frequently incorporate tilt features. A column tilt pivots the back and seat from the middle of the seat. A knee tilt pivots the back and seat from a point closer to the front of the chair; a knee tilt leans back farther than a column tilt while keeping the knees in relatively the same position.

Task chairs are generally smaller in scale and consist of a seat and back; armrests are optional and, when present, are usually connected to the seat only. The height of the seat and the back are often adjustable on task chairs. Task chairs may or may not tilt.

A chair that will be used by more than one person should have adjustable height controls. Ideal seating positions the thighs between 90 and 105 degrees to the back. The back should be well supported. Thighs should be supported and square with the floor, and feet should rest comfortably on the floor. A rolling chair should have five sturdy casters so that it will not tip when you lean one direction or another.

Construction

Like any case good purchase, you will want to look for the following structural details before you buy. Overall, the piece should be sturdy and should not wobble when rocked. Corner blocks should be used to insure the stability of the piece and levelers will help to make sure that all the doors and drawers line up correctly.

Drawers should be constructed with dovetail joints for strength and stability. The drawers should move easily on their glides and should have stops to prevent overextension. Good quality glides will use ball bearings or nylon wheels to make it easier to move the drawer. Drawers for file storage should have compound glides for full access to the drawer contents.

Doors should fit well and should not have any visible gaps. They should be easy to open and should not squeak or rub. Doors on computer armoires should have sturdy hinges and should open wide enough for easy access.