

Statistics show that more of us are either working from home or actually setting up our own businesses at home. So what does the future hold for the home office? Jeff Zbar asks how we will resolve the seeming contradiction of the office in our home

Consider Debra McKenzie. Today, her office is spartan and simple, matched keenly to her tastes. But it didn't start out that way. Seven years ago the space brimmed with files, papers and all the standard gun-metal grey gear of the corporate office.

But as her employer, business information firm LexisNexis, has gone increasingly paperless, so has McKenzie. She dumped the filing cabinets in favour of the corporate server and her desk now holds a 15in monitor and a docking station for her Dell notebook.

The desk itself is a simple wooden table with a metal base and no drawers. The chair is a functional yet unassuming ergonomic design from Herman Miller. Colourful art and photos taken on family trips adorn the walls. A skylight lights her space, and French double doors lead out on to an elegant deck overlooking woods and a creek.

At home at work

In the future according to various sources, including Professor Richard Scase, whose research into how we'll live in 2010 featured in the first *Future focus*, more of us will be working from home or from small offices. McKenzie's style of minimalist simplicity becomes highly appealing to experienced home workers, says Greg Parsons, president of Herman Miller Red, the small business and home office division of the furniture company.

The cumbersome bulk of the traditional corporate office is initially quite attractive to fledgeling teleworkers. The heavy files to be lugged around and stored at home and the large desks to accommodate their paperwork, in-baskets and other corporate accoutrements breed familiarity, comfort and contentment.

But over time, an interesting thing happens, Parsons says. Function and aesthetics grow closer. People begin spending their money on office furniture and decor that matches their home – at times good looks might even surpass function. Parsons says that workers are eschewing the styles often selected by corporate facilities managers in favour of designs that suit their own tastes.



↑ Free of clutter and excess hardware, the new home office is an airy, minimalist space where style rules over functionality

← Tidy and space saving, the new office layout may soon not even include a desk

“As you spend more time in the office, you realise you can make it more comfortable and that can help you be more productive”

Debra McKenzie, LexisNexis

“When you first start, you go for function, not aesthetics. You're concerned about being productive and making sure people back at the office know you're working,” says McKenzie, a senior director of corporate services at LexisNexis. “As you spend more time in the office, you realise you can make it more comfortable and that can help you be more productive.”

Work improvement

In a series of focus groups held last summer by furniture manufacturer Ikea, home-based workers ranked style above function as the most important element of their home office design.

“Your office has to work for you, but you don't want it to look like a cubicle,” says Tracey Kelly, a US commercial manager for Work Ikea, the company's home and professional office division. “It can't look out of place from the rest of the home.”

McKenzie has a very clear vision of the home office of the future. It will become much more uncluttered as computers become smaller and flat-panel displays more commonplace. The already popular paperless document management will be joined by increasing amounts of wireless electronics, creating an atmosphere free of cables and so unencumbered by the need for proximity to power outlets and phone jacks.

“The office and technology will be smaller and more streamlined,” she says. “It will take up less room so you can use your desk for other things. Or maybe you won't even have a desk.” ■