

You stand in the rain, jostling with your fellow travellers to be the one who claims that 3 inches space on an already overstuffed train that is late (again). At times like this, it's tempting to think of giving up the daily commute in favour of working from home. Ursula Tolaini looks at the practicalities of teleworking

No workplace like home

As the rain lashes against your bedroom window and you lie in bed in the dark contemplating a damp, cramped journey into work, the idea of working from home never seemed more attractive – and, yes, we do speak from experience. However, before you hand in your notice and set up shop in your spare room there are a few practical considerations to take into account.

Whether you simply plan to work from home on an occasional basis or are lucky enough to have an employer who will let you split your working week between the home and office, you need to think carefully about how best to set yourself up to work effectively from home.

The first consideration is obvious: you will need at least the basic office tools – a computer, printer, fax facilities and, perhaps, a copier. You will also need to be able to access your email, the internet and, possibly, a company intranet. A decent desk and chair are pretty vital too, unless you want to risk RSI (repetitive strain injury) and other nasties that arise from un-ergonomic office furniture. The final thing you should think about is the psychological and domestic impact of shifting your work into your home.

Over the following pages we offer advice on how to set up a successful home office, guiding you through the range of products to choose from – from computers and printers to internet access. We highlight health and safety issues and warn you what to be wary of when you start to bring your work home with you.

ILLUSTRATION: JESS READ

Equipment

First of all, you'll need some sort of PC setup. If your work at home will be on behalf of your company, they will probably provide you with a notebook primed with all the necessary software. If you have a desktop PC at home check for a docking station on the notebook. This will allow you to use the PC's far less fiddly keyboard, mouse and monitor with your notebook. Even without a docking station, many notebooks have ports allowing you to add on at least a mouse and screen.

If your company doesn't provide a notebook, you'll have to rely on your home PC. If you don't have a computer at home you'll have to invest in one. See our recommendations of systems ranging from under £500 to £1,800 excluding VAT in our Top 10 Power, Budget and Superbudget PCs charts, starting on page 98.

Software

Next you need to ensure your PC is capable of running all your applications and that your company has the necessary licenses to permit you to load them at home. If your home PC is running the same operating system and office suite you have at work, it's easy. Most shrinkwrapped applications will run under any version of Windows – just check the manufacturer's website or the software box to find out.

Proprietary applications may not be so accommodating and you will have to check about these with your IT manager.

Similarly, if you are using Microsoft Office at work, you will also need it at home. It doesn't have to be the same version as most are compatible with each other, but watch out if you are running very old software as this may cause problems. Try a test document to make sure you can open it on both home and office systems.

Once you know which software you need, you should check on your licence

You could just take a copy of the software home from work and install it on your PC. But if you do you could well be breaking the law

agreements. The Federation Against Software Theft advises you check with the software publisher and read the licensing agreement before installing anything from work on to your home PC.

If necessary, get written permission from the publisher confirming you can install the software on multiple PCs in multiple locations. You could just take a copy of the software home from work and install it on your PC. But if you do that you could well be breaking the law.

Hardware

Finally, you should ensure that your home PC is up to the job. This rather depends on what sort of work you do. If you are running basic office applications, even an old PC (possibly even a pre-Pentium one) should be able to cope.

But if your work involves memory- and graphics-intensive tasks your three-year-old budget home PC may not be fast enough. If you plan to work from home frequently it might be worth investing in a new system – find out if your employer will foot the bill, or at least help out with the cost.

But it's not just the internal parts of your PC that matter. If your PC isn't brand-new it may have a measly 15in screen – fine for occasional use but very unpleasant to work at for long periods. Do your eyes a favour and upgrade to a 17in model at least. If space is tight, choose a 15in TFT (thin-film transistor) flat-panel, which will offer the same viewing area as a 17in CRT (cathode ray tube) display. Our Top 10

Flat-panel displays chart (page 154) should help you decide on the one for you.

Once you've ensured your PC is up to scratch and you have all the necessary software, it's time to fit out the rest of your office. Again, what you invest in depends on your job, but most of us would be lost without a printer. For text, a monochrome laser device is best, but for colour you'll need an inkjet model. See

PC Advisor's rating of the best models on page 144.

However, before you rush to the shops consider whether a printer alone will suffice: it may be better to choose an MFD (multifunction device), which combines printer, scanner, copier and fax facilities. These are really an office-in-a-box solution, with all the benefits and disadvantages this brings.

MFDs save space and are generally cheaper than buying the combined products separately, but quality may be sacrificed for convenience. And if your MFD breaks down, your home office will be out of action until it's fixed again.

If you opt against an MFD, you can always install fax software on to your PC, such as WinFax Pro from Symantec or ZetaFax, which means you can do without a fax machine. If you need copying facilities too, a standalone fax that doubles as a copier might be a better bet.

Ergonomics, health and safety

Once you've got all the hardware sorted there's just the furniture and fittings left to deal with. Ideally, you need to make sure your home office meets the same standards of health and safety as your workplace. We've put together a basic checklist, to help you ensure your office is as healthy as possible:

- **Avoid the limelight** Make sure your screen is stable and free from glare. You can buy clip-on filters to cut glare if necessary.

- **Spin doctor** You should be able to tilt your monitor easily to get the best position.
- **Handycraft** Have enough space for your keyboard and, if required, a wrist support.
- **A good spread** Your desk should be large enough to accommodate your work and your office spacious enough to let you move freely.
- **Let there be light** Make sure there's adequate lighting so you don't end up squinting or hurting your eyes.
- **Get settled in** Get an adjustable work chair, so you can modify the height and the backrest. You may also need a footrest.
- **Breathe deeply** Check there's adequate ventilation and your office is not too hot, humid or noisy.
- **Be prepared** Make sure everything you need is easily to hand.
- **Get the power** Check there are sufficient power sockets for your equipment and that you have shelves and storage for any documents you have to keep at home.

Dorling Kindersley's Small Business Guide, *Working from home*, has a useful section designed to help you evaluate your home and create an efficient home office. See page 160 for where to purchase.

Internet access

Internet access and email are vital in today's work environment, so you'll have to hook up your PC to one of the many service providers on offer.

You may already access the internet at home using a dialup modem. This is relatively slow – its maximum speed is 56Kbps (kilobits per second) – and it requires you to make a connection each time you want to go online. If you plan to stick with your modem, a second phone line is a good idea. This allows you to use one

broadband services that are now becoming prevalent. These are generally more expensive, but offer much faster access and download times, as well as an always-on web connection. Your PC may need an ethernet card in order to use a broadband connection.

If you plan to have broadband access installed in your home for work purposes find out if your employer will help out. BTopenworld's recently-launched Teleworker is aimed at businesses with remote workers. It allows firms to simultaneously connect up to 100 employees to the company network via a high-speed ADSL (asymmetric digital subscriber line) link.

If your company doesn't provide this sort of service, but you still want the benefits of broadband, there are two main options: ADSL and a cable modem. A wide range of operators offers ADSL services – all currently require you to have a BT telephone line installed; cable services are provided by NTL and Telewest.

ADSL is delivered via your existing BT phone line, which is split into two – one for data and the other for voice calls. It allows you to access the internet between 10 and 40 times faster than a standard modem, though exactly how fast will depend on a number of variables, including the service you choose.

ADSL degrades over distance and, as well as having to have a BT phoneline, you have to live within 4km of your local exchange. A list of prices and providers, plus in-depth information about ADSL, can be found at www.adslguide.org.uk.

Cable modems are much less prevalent than ADSL as a broadband solution. To use this option you have to live within the catchment area of one of the cable providers. Both Telewest and NTL offer

If you'll be working from home regularly, it is worth investigating the broadband services that are now becoming more prevalent

line for fax/data calls and the other for voice calls and prevents frustrating callers hearing the engaged tone when you're online.

If you'll be working from home regularly, it is worth investigating the

cable modem access services, which are around 10 times faster than a standard modem. Telewest calls its service Blueyonder and you can get more information on pricing and coverage at

Checklist

- **Give me space** Make sure you have adequate and suitable office space. Do your research and work out what equipment and furniture you need.
- **Right side of the law** If you are working from home, look into the legal and tax implications of doing so. If you remain a full-time employee, these should not change. If you switch to part-time work or earn all your income working from home, find out how this may change your status. The DTI's booklet *Working Anywhere* has useful guidelines and a list of the contact numbers for relevant organisations.
- **Keep in touch** Set up a good means of communication with the office and ask your IT manager to set up access to any work resources available to remote workers, such as intranet or email server. If possible, get your home equipped with a broadband connection.
- **Security issues** You must protect your PC and data from family members as well as criminals. If you share your work PC with other users, protect important files by using multiple-user logons and passwords. If you use a notebook, find out about smart card or fingerprint recognition, both of which hide data if your computer is stolen. Antivirus and firewall software protect you against viruses and attacks, keeping you safe from data loss and security breaches.
- **Lay down the law** Set up some ground rules, such as working hours and areas of the house that will be out of bounds during office hours. Make sure you minimise potential disturbances and that you keep the boundaries between work and home clear.
- **Out of sight, out of mind** Make sure you won't be cutting yourself off from the office and losing out on opportunities. Arrange to have regular meetings with your colleagues and make sure you are kept informed of social events.
- **Family affairs** Ensure your family life isn't disrupted by your working patterns. Discuss domestic responsibilities with your partner to ensure you aren't expected to run the home just because you are working there.

www.blueyonder.co.uk. NTL provides information on its cable modem service at www.broadband-cable.co.uk.

Telewest doesn't make it easy for you to hook up a notebook to broadband. ADSL and NTL's cable modem connection can be swapped between computers in exactly the same way as a dialup connection, but Telewest requires you to phone its tech support line and give the MAC address (the unique identifying number for your network device) for each computer you want to hook up. You can register up to a maximum of five.

Telewest says this is an antifraud measure that prevents unauthorised use of its cable modems. Fair enough, but it's a pain if you borrow notebooks from a company pool.

Cable broadband is not limited by its distance from the exchange, but this won't help users in out-of-the-way areas unless they are covered by the cable operator's franchise. It also tends to work out cheaper than ADSL, starting at around £25 per month rather than £40. However, the installation fees can be pricey.

No consumer broadband service supports those who need to network two or more home PCs. That doesn't mean you can't do it, but it means it's not going to be easy. And if things go wrong, the tech support guys won't help you out.

For those who live in remote areas, far from an exchange and cable coverage, there is one option: ISDN (integrated services digital network). This requires the installation of a box to convert your existing line or a second line and offers

access speeds of up to 128Kbps – just over twice as fast as a basic modem.

ISDN can be a solution for some areas, but in the most isolated locations even this may not be feasible. BT offers an ISDN service called Home Highway. To find out if this could be the answer visit www.bt.com/homehighway.



Other considerations

So you're all set up with the equipment you need to work from home and data is whizzing to and from your computer thanks to your broadband connection. But that's not the end of the story. Working is about more than simply slogging away on the computer, it's also about interacting with colleagues, networking and socialising.

Once you move out of the office, even for just a few days a week, how will you ensure you aren't left out? If you only work from home occasionally this will be less of a problem, but for those who are routinely based away from the office, it is vital to retain good communication with your office-bound colleagues.

If you have access to your company's intranet, access to messageboards and memos should ensure it's easy to keep track of what's going on. However, you still won't have day-to-day contact. To help combat potential isolation the DTI's leaflet *Working Anywhere* recommends you "check what arrangements your employer is making for social interaction, keeping you as part of the team and keeping you in touch with events and opportunities at work". Also work hard

on keeping in touch with colleagues and friends in the office.

Another danger of bringing your work life into your home is the blurring of the line between the two. It is important to maintain discipline, keeping your work within office hours.

Before you take the plunge you should also think about how it will affect the rest of the household. Will it disturb other members of your family who are at home during the day? You will also need to ensure friends and neighbours don't call round just because you are at home – you must make it clear that you are working.

Peter Hingston, co-author of DK's Small Business Guide *Working from home*, who runs his publishing company from home says: "I used to wear a collar and tie, just like I had in my previous job" during working hours. He admits that once children come on the scene things can become more complicated. But his kids know that the office is out of bounds and don't disturb him while he is working.

A partner who will encourage you to pull the plug at the end of the day is probably the most effective way to make sure you don't overdo it. As Hingston points out, working from home is about being part of a team and everyone in the family has to be supportive of your decision.

However, as there is no demarcation between home and work, you must also ensure that work doesn't start to take over your life. *Working from home* sets out a 10-point self-discipline plan, giving tips on how to adapt your work life to the home. Hingston suggests making a physical change to denote the end of the work day, such as putting on slippers.



End of the line

Working from home is not the answer for everyone, nor is it suitable for all types of business. But as long as you plan carefully, you can really benefit from taking a break from the office grind. Away from the distractions of the office your productivity can increase. And just think of the hours you'll save by giving up commuting. ■

Books and contacts

If teleworking sounds attractive, don't rush things. We've listed plenty of useful books and contacts, so you can get all the details before you take the plunge. All the books listed here are available from www.amazon.co.uk unless otherwise stated.

- *Working from Home*, DK Small Business Guide, Peter Hingston & Alastair Balfour. ISBN 0 7513 1414 5
- *Which? Guide to Working from Home*, Lynn Brittney. ISBN 0 85202 754 0
- *Working Anywhere – Exploring telework for individuals and organisations*, DTI: 020 7215 5000; website: www.dti.gov.uk.
- *BT Working from Home*, website: <http://www.wfh.co.uk/>
- Health & Safety Executive: 0541 545 500
- Inland Revenue: 020 7438 6420