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From Grungy Garage to Functional Office

By Randy Myers | Business on Main



Is that attic, garage or basement the only office you can afford? Here's how to make your low-cost found space a productive workspace.

Setting up shop as a motivational speaker in 2003, Mike Jaffe knew the basement of his suburban Westport, Connecticut, split ranch wasn't the ideal office space. It had no natural light, and poor air circulation. So he painted it an upbeat yellow, bought a fan, invested in a sun lamp and warmed the space with family photos and thank-you letters from some of his earliest clients.

For a while, it worked. "Then the walls started to close in on me and I started to resist going down to 'the dungeon,'" recalls Jaffe, who also works as a personal and executive coach. He ultimately built a new office adjacent to an upstairs bedroom. Light and airy, it proved a far more pleasant and productive place to work.

Countless entrepreneurs have launched businesses from their basements, attics, garages, spare bedrooms and kitchen tables — found space that seldom offers the comforts or convenience of a professional office building. Yet it can work — with a little creativity.

Make technology your officemate

Beyond choosing the space with the best possible physical attributes, veteran bootstrappers use technology to level the playing field. Matt Knox and his brother Johnnie Munger were living in two different states in 2009 when they decided to launch DiggersList, an online classified ad service for buyers and sellers of home improvement products. To keep their overhead low, Knox chose to work from a cubicle in his garage and Munger from a spare bedroom in his home.

They're still doing that today, using inexpensive technology to close the distance between them. For daily "face-to-face" meetings, they communicate via free online video chat services like iChat, AOL Instant Messenger, Gmail Chat and Skype. They also use iChat and AIM to share each other's computer screens long distance, making it easy to collaborate on design changes to their website.

Rather than buying traditional office software, they're using Google Docs' online word processing and spreadsheet programs, which also are free. And they scan all important paper documents so they can share electronic versions online via cloud-based services such as Dropbox and Apple's MobileMe.

To make your found space work harder for you, Knox and other veteran bootstrappers offer these additional tips:

- **Secure high-speed Internet service.** "If you're going to skimp on anything, don't let it be your Internet speed," says Knox. "There are so many free or low-cost tools available for garage entrepreneurs, but if you don't have good Internet speed — upload and download — you're going to be extremely frustrated."

- **Take advantage of public space.** Coffee shops and restaurants are classic locations for business meetings when bringing clients or investors to your bedroom headquarters just won't do.

- **If you can't find quiet, create it.** A pair of noise-canceling headphones, says graphic designer Jasmine Wabbington, owner of Wabbington Studio in Tyler, Texas, can help block out distractions when you're sharing space with a roommate, spouse or children — or when you're catching up on work in a coffee shop.

- **Forgo the fancy furniture.** When husband-and-wife team Sachin and Ada Chen Rekhi launched Connected, a Web-based contact manager, from the living room of their one-bedroom apartment in San Francisco, they outfitted their office space with "recycled" Ikea tables and chairs found at another startup's moving sale.

Entrepreneur George Burke, founder and CEO of BookSwim, an online book rental service, started his business in the basement of a partner's home and stocked it with equipment and furniture offered free on Craigslist.

- **Set boundaries.** "When you're working from found space at home, it's easy to let everything bleed into itself so there's no boundary between work and non-work time," says Jaffe, who created a flippable door hanger with a green "go" on one side and a red "stop" on the other to let his children know when he couldn't be disturbed.

Boundaries are important for you, too. "Working from home sounds awesome until you start to realize how difficult it is to stay on task in your pajamas," says Ada Chen Rekhi. "Treat your home office like an office, even if it's just your dining table. Get dressed in the morning and show up at a normal time."

"Create a routine and stick to it," agrees Jen Lilenstein, founder of Kidzmet, a Web startup that helps parents find teachers, tutors and coaches for their children. "It'll help your spouse, kids, clients and colleagues all set appropriate expectations."

Finally, consider establishing physical boundaries, too. Wabbington says she found it difficult to focus until she defined her workspace. If you don't have a separate room for work, she recommends using room dividers.

Starting a business on a shoestring is always a challenge, especially in a space that wasn't designed with business in mind. But a little creativity and determination can go a long way toward making your found space a workspace.

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