



FARM OFFICE REDESIGN

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IF REDESIGNING your farm office ranks behind buying a new sound system for your combine, consider moving it up on your spending calendar. A farm office that is well designed not only provides physical comfort and improves your morale but makes your entire operation run more efficiently.

“A farm is a very active place,” says author and architect Neal Zimmerman, considered by many to be the leading authority on home office design. “But all that action is derived from thought. The farm office is where all thinking is centralized and the place from which the entire operation is run. Nothing can be a better investment than improving the efficiency and quality of thinking that drives the farm.” Zimmerman runs his own office design business and has authored three books. His most recent, *At Work At Home*, is a category best seller. Although most of his work relates to home offices in urban and suburban settings, we asked him to apply his principles to farm offices in the rural Midwest.

Think BOPS

Zimmerman says farm offices were actually the first home offices. He cites a page from his *Home Workspace Idea Book* (The Taunton Press, 2001) that shows a restored farm manager's home office dating back to the late 19th century. “It's where the owner caught up on office work at night,” says Zimmerman from his attic office in West Hartford, CT. Sound familiar?

Zimmerman says, whether today or back then, every good functioning home office embodies three basic elements: balance, order and personal spirit. “I use the acronym BOPS,” he says. Specifically, the office should create a balance between work and home life in a way that is harmonious for all people sharing the living or working space. It should be planned for comfort, efficiency and organization. And finally, it should reflect the occupant's personal spirit.

“Your home workplace shouldn't be a place where you simply go to suffer work,” Zimmerman says. “It should be a reflection of who you are, what you do, and what you are working for to begin with.”

So how do you achieve that? Zimmerman says there are five steps to planning any good home office, including a farm office.

1. Determine your needs

Zimmerman provides a list of questions to help you identify what you need in a farm office (see sidebar, page 21). Your answers will determine your general space requirements. During this step there are four basic workstations you need to consider, which Zimmerman has coined as CAMP. “C” stands for computer station. “A” stands for administrative station — a place for administrative tasks, such as sending and receiving mail. “M” stands for

meeting station, where visitors and staff can meet. “P” stands for project station and is designed according to your line of work or for tasks that can't be accomplished in any of the other three places.

In farm offices, Zimmerman recommends at least one computer station, a meeting station, an administrative station and a new station he has named specifically for farmers called a “technology management station.” “So what I suggest is, along with their computer station, they have a central place where they download field data, charge their electronic devices, and back up and store all of their information and components,” he says. The station should be supported by an uninterrupted power supply that can provide clean power to all equipment and can maintain enough power to work through a shutdown. The administrative station also should be planned carefully to accommodate the flow of materials farmers must deal with, such as small-quantity orders, catalogs, bills, letters and packages.

The different stations also can be designed to overlap. For instance, Zimmerman has two stations in his home: a computer/project station and an administrative/meeting station (see photos, page 21). “My administrative/meeting station is designed so that I can be working,” he says. “But it enlarges at one end to provide space to sit and meet with another person.”

2. Choose the right location

“Do you want to try your attic, take the spare bedroom, share a family room, go to the basement, convert garage space, do an addition, or use an outbuilding?” Zimmerman asks. In farming the general trend is to have the farm office inside a barn, farm shop or building that is separate from the house. However, if you are working in your home, it is important to separate workspace from family living space.

Creating separation is also important when the farm office is in another building. “A shop environment, for example, is very different from an office environment, and there should be a feeling of separation between the two rather than just a door that goes from shop to office,” Zimmerman says. One model is to have a service space between the office and shop spaces that has restrooms, storage and a coffee area. “That way, you are creating distinction between the two rooms,” he says.

3. Develop a floor plan

Once you know your needs and location, the third step is to draw a floor plan to ensure all the elements fit and flow together. “In our business, we say measure twice, cut once,” Zimmerman says.

The layout should be drawn to scale on graph paper or CAD. If you are unable to draw it yourself, hire a design professional such as a local architect, interior designer or space planner. You can also get help online by typing “home office designers” in your computer search engine.

4. Create a healthy and safe work environment

When you work for a corporation, your employer is responsible for protecting you from repetitive stress injuries. But when you have your own work environment, maintaining health is your responsibility. “There are only a handful of issues to worry about,” Zimmerman says. “But you need to be aware that eye strain, back and neck strain, and other harm can come to your body if you don't have the right computer screen position, the right keyboard tray height and a good chair.”

When buying a chair, it is important to sit in several chairs before buying one. Zimmerman's favorites are the Human Scale Freedom Chair, Herman Miller's Aaron Chair, and the Brewer Exam Stool. Another of Zimmerman's

favorite office tools is the Human Scale keyboard tray. He also has his own line of desks, built-in cabinetry and storage called Partner Home Office, which can be shipped anywhere in the U.S. For more information, visit <http://www.atworkathome.com/>.

5. **Develop a space for who you are**

This last step goes back to the “PS” in BOPS and stands for “personal spirit.” Your farm office should be a place you enjoy being in and should reflect your purpose and passions in life. “It should be a joy to go there,” Zimmerman says. “It should be a reflection of who you are and what you are working for to begin with.” For example, if your passion is collecting old farm equipment, you could incorporate an old tractor panel or steering wheel into your design.

Special considerations

There are a few other issues you need to consider when designing a farm office, especially if you have employees or visitors. For example, bathrooms should be planned according to the Americans With Disabilities Act. You also need to plan for two exits to meet safety standards.

If your office is in your home, it is not appropriate to bring visitors through private family quarters to reach your office. Therefore you will need an alternative meeting place such as the front foyer space or a dining room off the entry.

Lighting is an important safety factor because of the potential for glare. There should be both ambient or “ceiling” lighting for the room and task lighting in work areas. Zimmerman likes recessed instead of surface-mounted ceiling lights to provide a general level of ambient illumination without the glare. Task lighting at the work surface area provides a higher level of illumination and includes strip lighting, lamps or under-cabinet zenon lighting.

To control glare from sunlight, position computers perpendicular to windows or along an interior wall. If that's not possible, high windows above eye level are an option. Window shades should be reachable and easily operated as sunlight moves during the course of the day. Zimmerman likes shading devices made by Hunter Douglas.

Heating is another consideration. If you are putting up a new building, Zimmerman recommends radiant floor heat to get a more even heat at a lower cost than the alternatives.

Flooring in a farm office should be chemical- and skid-resistant. Carpeting should be avoided. Zimmerman recommends using rubber flooring made by Lonseal Corporation in walkways, roll-around areas and on countertops. The material can be cut to fit a variety of configurations. “I use it in my own home office, but it would be very appropriate for a farm environment,” Zimmerman says.

10 QUESTIONS to ask before setting up your office

1. What work will I do in my office, and how much space will I need to do it?
2. Will I need to employ people in my business in the future? Will those employees also need to use the farm office?
3. Where will I meet with visitors?
4. How will the work I do, and the place where I choose to do it, affect the other members of my household or staff?
5. Will I be able to isolate my workplace to accommodate my business needs and avoid disruptions?

6. Will there be enough space for storage and meetings?
7. Will there be adequate utilities — enough power, lighting and heating/cooling — to satisfy my personal and equipment needs? If not, can they be made available?
8. Do I have a clear idea of how much it will cost, in time and money, to get my workplace prepared as required?
9. Do I need approvals from local authorities to use or modify my workplace as intended?
10. Where do I turn for professional help if I need it?

Source: Home Workspace Idea Book by Neal Zimmerman (The Taunton Press, 2001)

FARM OFFICE BUILDING TRENDS

MORTON BUILDINGS, a leading farm builder, sees the following trends in farm offices:

- Offices located in the shop or barn, rather than in the house
- Larger farm offices
- Offices that support more electronics and communication equipment
- Multifunction capability
- More windows — both to the outside and to other areas of the shop or barn — so that the business can be monitored and managed
- More electronics (computers, faxes and satellite connections) requiring clean electrical power
- Internet connections
- Multiline phone systems
- More “living area additions” to the office — restrooms, locker rooms and showers, kitchenettes, lounge areas, and even bedrooms

STOCKING UP

Here are the latest office supply trends and products that fit the bill

THE OFFICE furniture business is on the uptick. The Business and Industry Furniture Market Association reported an 11% increase in office furniture shipments in 2005 and forecasts a 7% increase for 2006. New office building construction and white-collar employment growth are the primary factors driving demand.

So what are people buying? For answers, we asked Kirby Salgado, who manages the furniture, seating and lighting categories at Office Depot. “Farm owners are no different than our typical small business owners,” he says. “They are looking for products that are more attractive and that will give them the work space and functionality they need to focus on their business and improve their productivity.”

Designer furniture

Salgado sees several new trends in office products. One is more design and style in office furniture. “Gone are the days where there is a boxed, cherry-finished, simple kind of look,” he says. “People now are looking for products that fit their environment.”

Styles in demand include higher design hardware, crown moldings, detailed door fronts, and mixed mediums such as glass with metal, glass with different wood treatments, and different textures and materials.

Mobile solutions

“Another big trend we are focusing on at Office Depot is mobility,” Salgado says. “Workers are becoming a lot more mobile. Consequently, we have come out with a lot of products that go along with that.”

For example, notebook computers now outsell PCs, he says. And the advent of portable storage drives called “thumb drives” let you carry files you previously could only store on your desktop. “They are literally no bigger than your thumb and can hold anywhere from 256 megs to 512 gigabytes,” he says.

Other products in line with this trend include personal organizers such as portfolios, padfolios and briefcases; portable plastic totes with built-in filing and dividers to store and organize files; and briefcases and luggage with built-in wheels to make it easier to carry a notebook computer and other materials.

More expensive chairs

“Customers also are spending a lot more money on chairs because that is where you are spending most of your time,” Salgado says.

Popular are chairs with added features such as adjustable backs, seats and arms, and adjustable heights and widths. Special fabrics also are in demand.

Modular storage

Finally, small business owners are looking for file cabinets and modular storage that cater to their space demands. Office Depot recently introduced a modular storage program that lets customers to take six different storage units and configure them in the way that meets their needs.

“So yes,” Salgado says, “people are starting to step up and spend more money on their home office and small office furniture because they want something that will last awhile and looks great with their environment.”

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