

Marni Jameson

Home Office Is an Oxymoron

By Marni Jameson

Several years ago, my youngest daughter, then 3, was all set up at the kitchen table with her crayons coloring. As I started moving a few crayons to set the table for dinner, she stretched her arms over her precious work space and screamed: “Don’t! This is my office!”

“Hmm,” I said, casting a casual glance at my husband, Dan. “Wonder where she learned that?”

Ok, so I’m a little territorial when it comes to my home office, where I try to patch together a livelihood as a freelance journalist. But you try carving out a domain in a home where you’re family thinks you only work to fill the dull moments between the times they need you. (What constitutes a “need,” of course, is debatable.)

After nearly 10 years of trying to make working at home work, I’ve discovered that “home office” is an oxymoron. The term is an inherent conflict, like “necessary evil,” and “blessed curse.”

While working from home has definite advantages -- no commute, flexible hours, more time with kids, lower dry cleaning bills, easy refrigerator access -- it also has drawbacks. For one, I get no good water-cooler scoop. Dan, is no help there. Every day, it’s the same: “Any good gossip from work?” I ask.

“Nope.”

But the real problem is boundaries. In a real office, people know your role and let you do it. At home, you have a dozen roles, all blurred: I’m wife, mother, psychologist, plumber, nurse, cook, dog handler, chauffeur, forgotten violin or Brownie uniform fetcher, and scribe on deadline.

After years of conditioning, my kids know that if I’m typing on the keyboard, they best not interrupt. Instead, they hover. They stand behind my back and breathe audibly. This is worse than if they’d just blurt out whatever they so desperately need, which is usually along the lines of, “Can I have an Oreo?”

Yesterday was typical: I was finally getting my thoughts around the most profound passage I was likely to write that day. As I started to tap it in, a small arm holding a colored pencil reached past me. BZZZT! The arm, attached to my daughter was setting off the electric pencil sharpener two feet from my ear.

Dan generally tempers his approach, which goes something like, “Sorry, but ...” and ends unpleasantly, as in “...weren’t the videos due back yesterday?” Or “Since you’re home all day,” (read doing nothing while I’m at a real office slaving) “would you mind...having the garage door fixed ... reseeding the lawn ... and so on.”

I can't imagine these scenes occurring in the Bonafide Workplace, which I often fantasize about. I picture myself dressed in nice, tailored clothes, possibly something in navy, riding an elevator with a bunch of soberly dressed people wearing contemplative expressions. We're discussing things like the stock market or North Korea, while holding steaming cups of black coffee. Ahh, civilization.

Then other days my family brings me back to earth. Like the day my kids snuck into my office to give me pictures they had each drawn of the plum tree outside. The tree had just let out its first pink blossoms, and they remembered how much I like the coming of spring. As they taped the pictures quietly above my desk, I stopped writing, hugged them both, and thought, for the hundredth time, how bittersweet it is, this home office.

If you are contemplating giving up a real office to work at home, heed this advice:

1. Lay ground rules. Establish office hours, or a closed door policy. Mine is: If the door's closed, don't come in unless you're dripping blood. Which, of course, happens. If you really want to get some work done, know your best times are between midnight and 4 a.m.

2. Don't share your office with another room. Forget setting your office up as part of the kitchen, or family room or even the master. Go for a separate room with doors and no other purpose.

3. Don't share your office with another person. When we bought our last home, I was seduced by the home office in the model. It featured a built-in partner's desk, which we copied. I figured I'd have my work space, and Dan, when he needed to work at home, would have his – on the other side. Without going into the gory details, just know this was a failed marital experiment. Spare yourself.

4. Put a lock on the door.

#

Copyright, Marni Jameson, 2007. May not be reprinted without authors permission.