

# Home Offices vs. the Family: Working at home can mean more family time--if done right

By Todd W. Carter

For two months earlier this year, John Vastyan found a full-time use for his dining room. And it wasn't exactly what his family had in mind.

But business is business. So Vastyan temporarily converted the dining room into his home office and he, his wife, and two children ate their meals in the kitchen.

"Generally, it's worked out really pretty well," says the Pennsylvania-based advertising agency executive, who quit his job to work for a competitor before his new employer's local office was completed. "But I wouldn't want to stretch it any further--for my employer or for myself."

Aside from occupying a prime spot in the middle of the house, working at home brought other inconveniences. When a client from a major corporation called one day, and the phone was answered by his nine-year-old daughter, Vastyan had to think fast and offer some excuses, which "were, I think, ultimately fully accepted," he says.

"Those," he says, "are the kinds of things that you do when you're working from a home office." He adds, "You're miles ahead if you get the support of your family." Vastyan enjoyed that support, though it was "wearing thin" as the two-month mark approached.

"If I announced to my family, 'Hey, you've got to live with this for another year,' I'd have a revolt on my hands," he says.

As business becomes increasingly virtual, workers are spending more time at home. Some approach it informally, setting up shop in the dining room. Others are finding that a dedicated home office is the only solution.

"When you're working at home, you have to be even more professional," cautions Lisa Kanarek (<http://www.homeofficelife.com/>), a home-office expert and author of *Organizing Your Home Office for Success*.

In addition to the other benefits of working at home, employees are finding that home offices can mean more family time. But they need to fight the urge to work around the clock--and find ways to make their working hours more productive.

"I guess one of the maladies of having a home office, one of the disadvantages, is: Does work ever really end?" Vastyan says. "It's so easy to feel the urge after dinner (that) instead of spending time with the family. . .I'm just going to complete this one project tonight."

But it's never that simple. "An e-mail comes in, and now you've completed that project, and before you

know it, it's 11:15 and you've taken on three other things and you're still working," he says.

That, experts say, points to the key to peaceful coexistence among home workers and family members: Knowing when to quit. It also helps to set ground rules, such as banning nine-year-old children from answering the business line.

"If the home office is the only office, either for telecommuters or for those people who have a business established there, it's real important--for the quality of family life--to know the difference between when you're at work and when you're home," says Judy Feld, a Dallas-based business coach and publisher of the "SOHO Success Letter" (<http://www.coachnet.com/>), a newsletter for those who work in the new "small office/home office" environment.

"It sounds like a no-brainer, but really I think those people that kind of collapse those differences find that it's stressful," Feld says.

The work-at-home mom shouldn't be viewed the same as the stay-at-home mom, says home-office expert Kanarek. "I always tell people that working from home is not a substitute for child care," she says. "If you plan to be the nanny and a work-at-home professional, it won't work. You can't do both and your kids can't watch TV all day."

It's also important to find a place to work that's far away from the madding crowd. It's part of what Feld calls setting boundaries, whether it's physical location, time, or appropriate behavior.

"Clearly, when you're working at a corporate office there are certain boundaries," she says. "You usually don't walk around barefoot, you usually are dressed in the code of the office."

"When you come home, there is a tendency, because you're in different surroundings, whether you're working for yourself or whether you're working for a company, to let some of those standards and boundaries go."

For example, doing business in the dining room doesn't always work. "I think it would be far more acceptable to everybody if I weren't in the middle of the house with the only computer" that has access to a phone line, Vastyan says.

His brother, a sales executive, built a home office in the basement. And he told his family that he didn't exist during business hours. "Between 7:30 a.m. and 6 p.m., the kids have to pretend, and the wife has to pretend, that he's not home," Vastyan explains.

He's convinced that his brother's way is the only way: "You need to be able to give your employer the full benefit of a fully engaged, full-time person."