

Functionality, ergonomics key to a comfortable home office

An office at home is no longer unusual and home-offices are being used for everything from freelance work and telecommuting to more personal pursuits.

'Some people use these home offices for private correspondence, for online banking, tax returns or just to surf the internet,' says Ursula Geismann of VDM, the German Association for Office Furniture.

Regardless of its purpose, the home office should be planned and carefully furnished.

'Ideally, a separate room for working is the solution,' says Geismann. But, if there is not enough space, the office could be stored in a wardrobe, recommended Doris Haselmann, a Nuernberg-based author and furniture expert.

A wardrobe with a sliding or folding door can be used to hide a PC, monitor and printer. A sliding drawer for a keyboard, an adjustable monitor stand, integrated lighting and spaces for sockets and wires are vital.

But Haselmann says these multi-function centres are not suited as permanent workspaces, especially as storage space is quickly maxed out ... the more peripherals, the less shelf space. So, calculate the required storage space beforehand and then purchase the furniture.

Most people who work at home usually spend many hours online. When setting up a home office, people usually focus on whether the furniture looks good and whether all the computing systems are set up properly.

'Less attention is paid to the ergonomic needs of people who spend a lot of time in front of a PC,' says Detlef Detjen of AGR, a German society that focuses on helping people keep their backs healthy.

'A healthy PC workspace will have a desk at a height of between 62 and 79 cm,' says Haselmann. In an ideal situation, the monitor will be a little higher than the keyboard. If they are at the same level, typing can become a strain. Some people experience pain in their wrists because their keyboards are too high. Conversely, if a monitor is positioned too low, a user runs the risk of neck and shoulder pain.

'A good office chair is a must for people who work a lot at home,' said Detjen. And a swivel chair should allow people to change positions routinely while working because sitting still for a long time can cause stress and pain.

An office chair must be able to be set for individual preferences. 'It's vital that the seat level and depth, the height and resistance of the back and arm supports are all adjustable,' cautions Detjen. The seat level should be high enough to allow a person's thigh and calf form a 90-degree angle when seated.

A person should be able to sit with their back touching the support. An appropriate seat level allows a person to easily insert two or three fingers between their knee and the desk.

Even in the computing age, a home office usually requires plenty of folders, books and writing material.

'If you have a lot of binders and books, then a shelving system is a good idea,' says Geismann.

Narrow shelves that can be rolled away are a good idea, if space is tight. Wheeled containers also offer plenty of storage and can be hidden beside or under the desk after work.

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