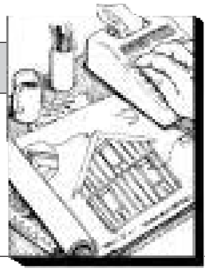
Moving the Business Out of the House



by Nina Winans

My husband Paul and I have run a general contracting business in the San Francisco Bay Area for the past 15 years. One of the most exciting — and risky — changes we made during this time was to move our business out of our home.

Home Office

The way our business got its start is a familiar story. Paul was a skilled carpenter looking to strike out on his own. I was home with a baby and a small child, and had some experience in bookkeeping. Together we learned by trial and error how to run a business (we had our fair share of error).

Our first office was in a small alcove in our dining room. I had a desk, Paul had a counter, and we shared a five-drawer file cabinet and a phone (our home phone, of course). This was world headquarters for Winans Construction for four years.

We experienced the ups and downs of the construction business like troopers. We learned about payroll taxes, overhead and profit, insurance, and everything else you need to understand to run a business successfully. Our small office served our needs adequately at first, but the intrusion of business into our home life grew as our business grew. The biggest annoyance was the almost constant ringing of the phone.

Phone Home

To help remedy the situation, we bought an answering machine with the idea of screening calls, especially the ones that come in at 8 a.m. on Sunday morning or 10 p.m. at night. Paul, however, just could not let the answering machine pick it up. So we got a separate business line. This was an improvement, but Paul still could not let the phone calls wait. He reasoned that he would worry about who called and about what, and that it was much easier to just pick up the phone and deal with the caller immediately. The last straw came when the phone rang one Thanksgiving Day just as we were about to carve the turkey. I thought it prudent to let the answering machine take the call, but Paul picked it up. It was a client who wanted to let us know that he had been going over our billings and had discovered an overpayment. We were appalled. Couldn't this have waited until the next day?

You Are Where You Work

Things improved a little at the next step in the progress of our office, which came after we remodeled our house. Our primary goal was to add a bath and create a third bedroom on the second floor, but we were also able to move the office into what had been a first-floor bedroom — an honest-to-god real room, with a door and a closet. When we weren't working, we could close the door and forget about it. If the phone rang when the door was closed, it didn't count, right?

During this time, I was coming to grips with whether I was helping out in my husband's business until I decided to do something else, or whether I really wanted to be identified as part owner of this thriving enterprise. I didn't feel like I had a "real" job. I alternately did house work and office work during the day, with no time specifically set aside for either. On the other hand, I was a vital part of the company, and I knew that I had helped to shape it.

At about the same time, we began to work with an accountant who can only be characterized as a crusty S.O.B. He came into our house, sat down at our dining room table (our "conference" table), and told us flat out that we were not a real business. We had not ventured out into the conventional business community. We would not be a genuine business, he maintained, until we moved out of our house and into the wonderful world of real estate.

We were a bit taken aback, to say the least. But after thinking about it, we came to see that the logical next step in the growth of our business was to become a "regular company" instead of the mom'n'pop, you-can-reach-them-at-all-hours type of business we currently were. Besides, the accountant had pushed all my buttons regarding the way I felt about my role.

Movin' On Up

We wondered if we could afford to make the move from no rent to regular rent and other associated overhead. We were financially healthy at the time, but what would we do if circumstances totally depleted our funds? Yet it was pretty clear that we had outgrown the old office. We took the risk.

After a few weeks of driving around, meeting real estate agents, and looking at various rental spaces, we found our new headquarters. It was next door to a popular cafe in a building that housed a variety of other businesses, and it was within our budget. It was an interior loading dock.

We learned about landlords and tenant improvements and who pays for what (the tenant, for practically everything). We were on a mission, though, and we liked the space, so we made the investment. We filled in the ramp to create a level floor, and we built a 400-square-foot office. We used the remaining 1,200 square feet for equipment and material storage.

Our new office was 20 minutes from our house. Almost no one called us at home about business, and our clients and professional associates learned that, even though we weren't reachable at all hours, we could still provide excellent service. We also discovered that what we had previously considered priority phone calls could usually be handled effectively between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. We stayed there for four years until we took the next step and purchased our own building.

In general, our business life no longer intrudes on our home life as it did in the past. Obviously, we talk about business when we're at home, but we don't "work." We rarely make business calls, write bills, or do other business-related chores when we're at home; that is all left to be done during the working day at the office. We may work on Saturday now and then, and we occasionally stay late at the office during the week, but there is not the intrusion of the home office pulling us away from our family.

For me it has been a psychological release as well. I go to "work," and I come "home." I can't do any housework during the day because I'm not in the house. I finally feel I have a real job. Moving into that first office helped me commit to the business. ■

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