

Office Spaces THAT WORK

My work as a business consultant puts me in touch with contractors seeking to improve their businesses

by **Melanie Hodgdon**

and their working lives. One of the first places I start with is their existing office space. Rearranging the physical work environment can almost always enhance efficiency. I find there are three basic types of construction offices:

The strictly home office. This workspace is set up for the company owner and maybe one assistant; generally, clients and employees do not visit this space, so it answers to work needs only.

The semi-formal home office. Usually, this is within the contractor's home or attached directly to it; the workspace is for the owner and office people, and becomes a place where clients and employees visit occasionally, but infrequently.

The full-fledged business office. This is located away from the owner's home, with workspace for employees and the owner; it's intended to be a place for clients and employees to work, meet, and interact.

The differences between offices that work and those that don't center on the two major components of office design: physical layout and what I call task management — systems for producing, handling, storing, and retrieving information in all formats.

Organize the office around your tasks for improved efficiency

In this article, I'll focus on the physical layouts of three offices I was hired to reorganize and the design criteria I used to rework them. For more on storage and task management, see "Organizing the Small Construction Office," 10/98.

Design Criteria

Construction offices come in many shapes and sizes, but I have developed a common set of criteria to evaluate and enhance the available space. The principal areas I focus on are individual workstations, public spaces, and reception and task areas. I look at who will be working in each space, what that person's primary tasks are, and whether that person needs to be able to meet with others.

The employees. Construction business owners frequently assume the majority of the office tasks, as well as responsibil-

ity for interacting with clients, employees, subcontractors, and suppliers. This makes their workspace requirements priority number one, so I usually begin any office plan by creating this space first, and then building the rest of the office around it. My top criteria here include how the owner will be protected from unnecessary distractions and interruptions, what work he or she will concentrate on while in the office, and whether meeting and conference space will be required.

The bookkeeper may double as the receptionist, and need a central location to best fulfill his or her job requirements. Your designer/draftsperson will need to meet with clients and have ready access to the central work area during design conferences. Your construction supervisor needs wall charts and storage space for tools, parts, and

paper. If you have a part-time person, that person should have a space near the employee he or she is assisting. If the bookkeeper has an assistant to help at month's end, then this person needs to be located nearby to ask questions and receive instructions.

Focus on tasks. Roughly, the amount of time spent on a task should equal the amount of space devoted to that task. If you spend half of your time working at the computer, then plan to dedicate half of your space to house the hardware and provide for document storage, supplies, reference materials, and the like. If frequent bidding questions require trips to the shop, the estimator's office should be set up near the shop space. Your bookkeeper's workspace requires file cabinets as well as a place to store office supplies, mail, and projects in process.

You also need to consider lighting, phone, and electrical requirements. If you're reading blueprints, you'll require good task lighting, but beware of fixture placement. A computer monitor is subject to screen glare from poorly positioned overhead lights, as well as uncovered windows. Creating a cat's cradle of wires and extension cords to meet the computer's requirements is both ugly and dangerous, so avoid tangled wires by planning in advance for the power requirements of desk lamps, computers, and other office equipment. You may even have to modify some of your electrical and phone wiring.

Reception area. Your clients need to be invited into your company's offices and shown to comfortable chairs and a clean table. If this space is properly planned, your clients and potential clients will not only feel welcomed, but be more apt to commit to you. You should provide lots of nicely framed job photos on the walls, and use furniture placement and visual barriers (such

as potted plants) to minimize disruption to or from adjoining office spaces.

Visiting salespeople, on the other hand, may not always be welcome. Keep them standing on the periphery if you want them to go away quickly. An owner's office shouldn't be positioned in full view of the front door, since he or she doesn't need to be interrupted by every casual visitor to the office. Position the receptionist's computer sideways or facing away from the door. Then, if an unwanted visitor doesn't leave, the office worker can bid the nuisance visitor a cheery farewell and *turn away towards the monitor*. Very few people can mistake this dismissal.

On the other hand, subcontractors and employees need a more informal and functional place to meet. Tracked mud and spilled coffee are inevitable, so accommodate these transgressions with easy-to-clean surfaces and easy access to the shop.

Restrooms are also an issue because they need to be available, clean, and well maintained for everyone, especially for clients and other guests. You need to define them as unisex, men's and women's, or perhaps office and crew.

Making the best use of floor space. Look at your existing space with a critical eye. How much of this can be recaptured from inappropriate usage? My personal favorites are the bottomless heaps of unread magazines, receipts to be sorted, and potentially useful junk mail known to breed at night in every builder's office. If there were a fire, how much of this stuff would you really miss? It tends to grow until it has consumed all available desk space. Throw it away, file it away, or find it a new, less obtrusive home; but, whatever you do, create a system for reducing and hiding it.

I have found that more storage space is always useful. With floor space at a premium, consider going up. Wall-mounted shelving gets the to-do piles off your desktop. Be sure to use adjustable shelving or allow sufficient space (13 inches minimum) to house three-ring binders, catalogs, and hefty reference books comfortably. The lowest shelf above the workspace should allow free access to the work surface and should not cast shadows on it. One way to avoid the feeling that the walls are "closing in on you" is to use shallower shelves at the bottom and deeper ones at the top.

It's amazing how much bigger your desk is when your monitor is hovering above it on a monitor arm instead of squatting in the middle. Tucking the computer tower under your desk gains space for a file rack or other useful item.

Make good use of existing systems. Desks should have good, full-extension drawers, and printer stands should also house supplies. Roll-out storage shelves can accommodate infrequently used items, such as scanners. The space under tabletops can house built-in shelves, roll-out file cabinets and drawer units, or under-counter hanging storage drawers.

Since your fax machine doesn't require anything more than an occasional refill of paper, stick it on top of a two-drawer lateral file cabinet. A 36-inch unit will give you three lineal feet of flat surface, more than enough for the fax and a printer, answering machine, or radio.

Case 1: The Basement Office of Al's Allegorical Additions, Inc.

This small company (an owner and two employees) was housed in the basement of the owner's home. The space was adequate, but under-used. When recordkeeping was entirely manual, lots

Case 1: Enlarging the Computer Workstation

of counter space was needed. In making a gradual shift from manual records to a computerized system, the owner had squeezed himself into a corner with the new computer but without the necessary space to lay anything out.

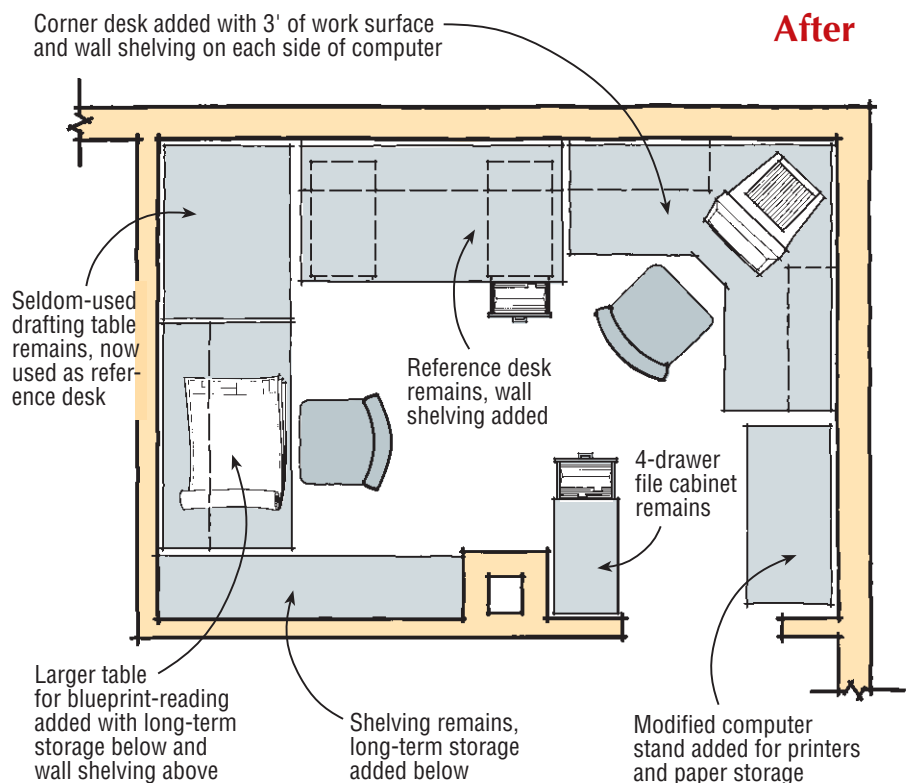
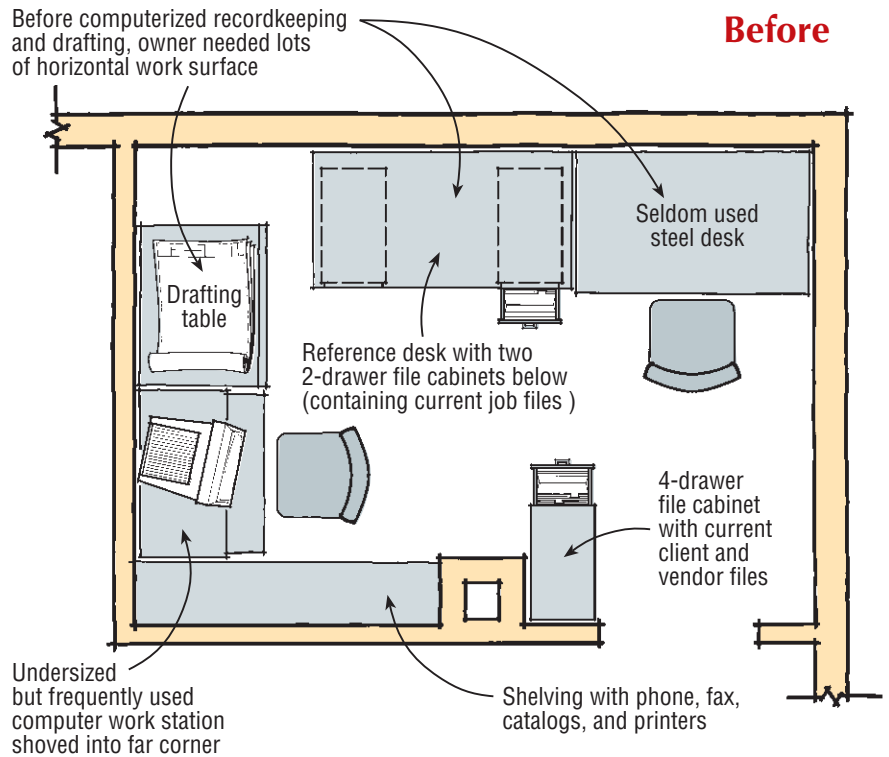
I discovered that 90% of the paperwork was now being performed in the computer area, which occupied only 10% of the floor space.

I generated a CAD drawing of the room and indicated all electrical outlets, phone jacks, and overhead lighting. Existing furniture pieces were drawn onto the floor plan, allowing them to be moved around and resized at will. I also created a general breakdown of space needs based on tasks as they were performed.

My client, "Al," uses QuickBooks Pro to generate estimates and invoices, and to record vendor bills. The computer needed to be located in a place that allowed nearby storage of client and vendor files, as well as open job folders, order forms, and other necessary forms.

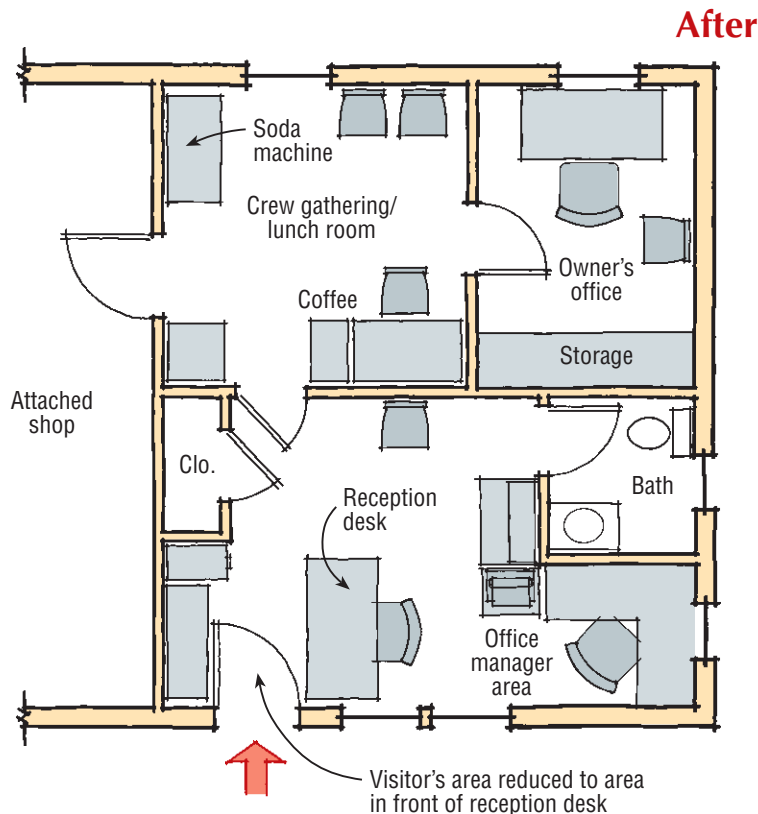
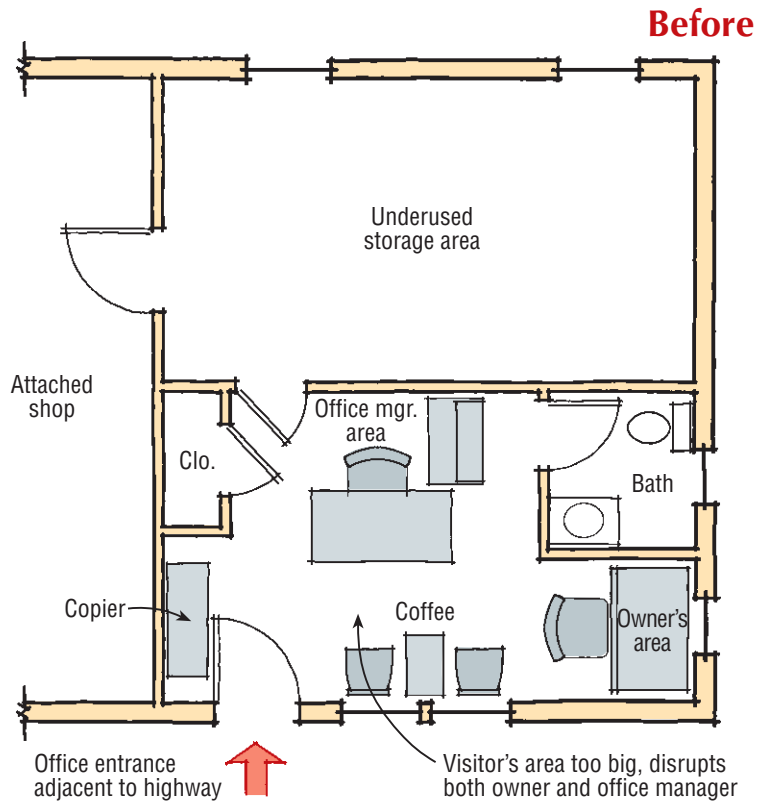
I added a corner-hugging computer desk with open surfaces on the left and right to provide flat work areas for layout. The computer-related tasks, which make up nearly 90% of the paperwork, are now conducted in about 65% of the floor space.

Newfound space. I also significantly increased vertical storage by adding a double row of wall-mounted adjustable shelves above this desktop, as well as above the other flat work surfaces. The lower shelf is 6 inches deep, conveniently close to the desktop, and holds ready-to-use tools like staplers, rulers, erasers, and postage stamps. How high up the wall you run the shelving depends on your height, the weight and bulkiness of the items to be stored there, and the depth of the work surface beneath it.



Originally, the computer was the center of 90% of the work being done, but occupied only 10% of the floor space. After my rearrangements were in place, computer-related tasks took place in 65% of the floor space, a more appropriate reflection of the work taking place.

Case 2: Decreasing the Visitor's Area



The initial arrangement allowed the “visitor zone” to take over the entire office, disrupting both the owner and the office manager. Moving the owner’s office to the storage area and shrinking the visitor zone redefined the space in favor of those who worked there.

Al uses two printers (an impact printer for continuous-form checks and a laser printer for documents), so I searched for a storage unit that minimized the printers’ overall desktop footprint. I found, and slightly modified, a computer workstation to house his laser printer on top, the impact printer on a slide-out shelf below, and all of the necessary stationery on the upper shelves. This took up only 4.75 square feet, less than a third of the previous arrangement.

Al was also in the habit of keeping lots of old magazines and related references nearby, and rejected my suggestion to file them away. So, I added a simple 5-foot folding table to provide a flat surface for him to spread out his collection. The legs were thin enough to allow a group of crate-like storage modules to fit under the table.

Finally, overhead lighting was shifted to provide shadow-free light above the computer monitor and work surfaces. The remaining space was given over to file cabinets for long-term storage. A second table surface is used for laying out blueprints. Since my client customarily reviews these plans standing up, the area underneath is available for additional storage units.

Case 2: Bob’s Best Building, LLC

The office of this medium-sized company (12 employees) was attached to a shop and fronted a major highway. While visitors were not encouraged to stop in, the location proved way too tempting. Clients, subcontractors, and salespeople wandered in, as did out-of-towners asking for directions. My challenge was to create a roomy and inviting workspace for the occupants, while discouraging the random visits and long-term gabbing that had been taking place.

I identified three problems with the

original setup: Work and storage space were both inadequate and disorganized; the disproportionately large “visitor zone” invited casual drop-ins to pull up a chair, pour some coffee, and yak away the hours; and the two most important people in the company, the owner and the office manager, were on either side of the visitor zone, enabling these uninited guests to disrupt both of them simultaneously.

My solution was to create clear boundaries between the work and client areas, while reducing the visitor zone itself. In the original plan, the furniture placement suggested that the visitors “owned” about three-quarters of the floor space, with the office manager and owner backed into opposite corners. I decided to evacuate the owner entirely, reclaim an adjacent storage room and refurbish it to create a private office, and use the leftover space for a crew lunchroom.

I rearranged the furniture to define a clear (and much smaller) visitor area, and removed chairs so that unwanted lingerers were forced to stand while chatting. Next, I positioned the coffee machine so it was accessible to the crew, but not to unwanted visitors.

The rearrangement gave the office manager about 85% of the floor space and created an efficient corner computer layout. We pressed an old computer workstation back into service to hold both stationery and the occasionally used electric typewriter.

We added a used desk with multiple file drawers and a large desktop to hold the crew’s daily paperwork, as well as their phone and radio. The old cord phone was replaced with a cordless phone and two recharge cradles, for use in different areas of the office. This simple change meant that employees could receive calls and conduct conversations

in areas other than the manager’s office. A four-drawer file cabinet was brought into the room to store current paperwork, and a used copy machine cabinet was purchased to house toner and paper supplies.

Case 3: Clyde’s Classy Cottages, Inc.

This builder/remodeler had just moved from a home office to a main street location when he hired me. He had leased a two-room office on the second story of a commercial building. The office had an entrance from the ground level and another from the hallway, which led to the restrooms and other offices. The large, open space needed to become a series of well-defined zones.

The owner required sufficient working space for himself, a full-time office manager, and a future bookkeeper, as well as

a generous area for client meetings. We decided to sublet the second room until the additional employees were hired. Next, I generated a floor plan and scaled versions of the existing furniture. I opted to leave the floor plan empty, and placed the furniture in a cluster beyond the perimeter of the room. I then printed the view of the room and furniture on heavyweight paper, and cut out the furniture pieces with scissors.

Because the room was big and relatively formless, I found that the most effective way to experiment with dividing it was to push the little furniture cutouts around the plan until I had created a satisfactory arrangement. It beat the heck out of lugging huge desks and loaded bookcases around.

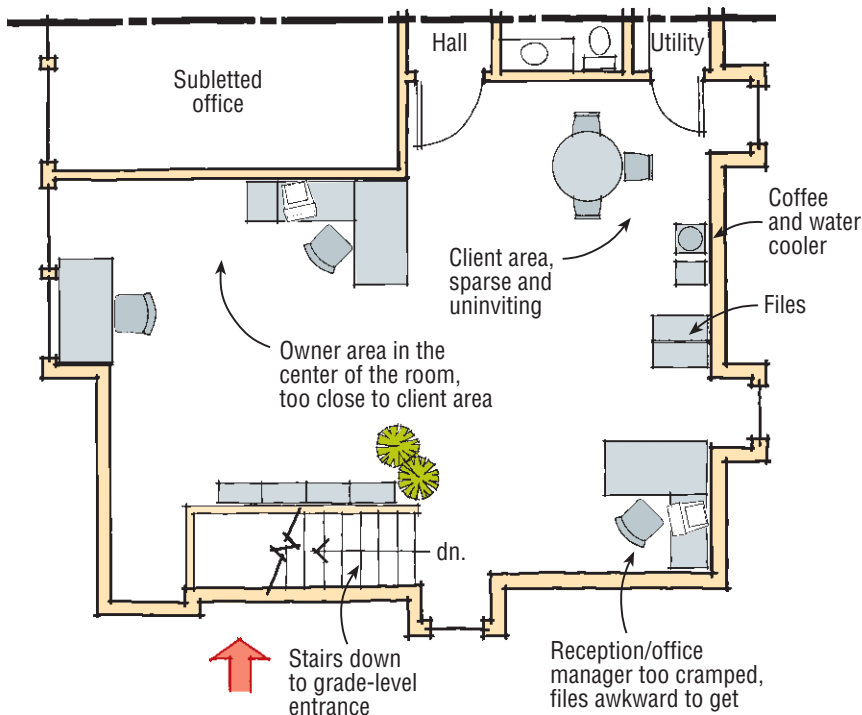
Eventually, we created four zones: the office manager’s area, the owner’s area, a client welcoming area, and a common

Reorganization Questionnaire

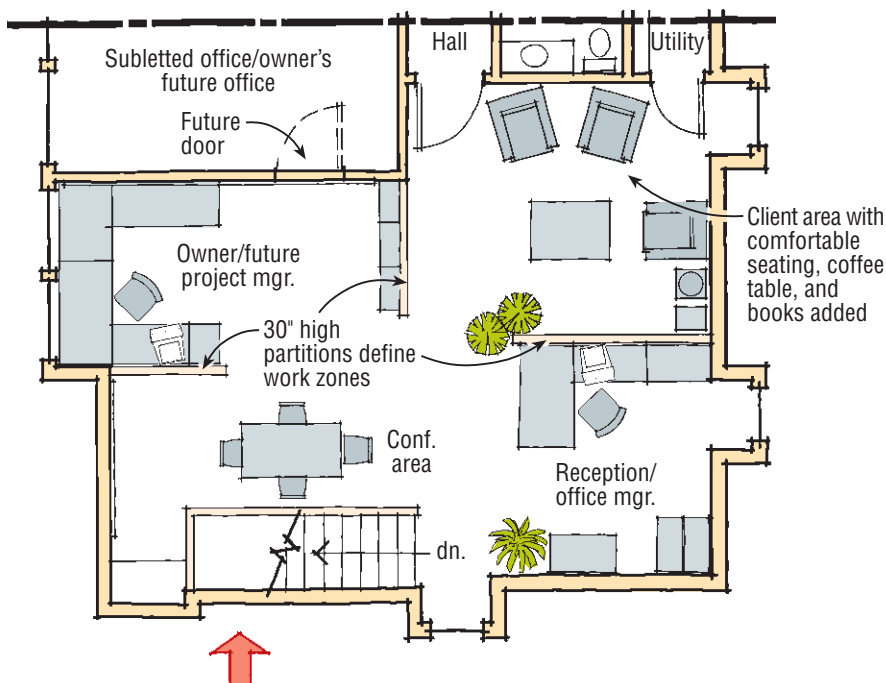
- Who will be working in the space?
- What tasks will be performed?
- Who will need access to the office? To the shop?
- How will deliveries be handled?
- How will common office supplies and forms be stored?
- How will office visitors be greeted?
- Do you need a meeting area for visitors? For employees?
- What items will you display for visitors?
- Will you be adding any employees in the near term?
- What furniture and office equipment will you keep and what will you add?
- Where will current client files be kept?
- Where will archived records be kept?
- How will the workspaces be lit?
- What are the power requirements of your office equipment and how will they be met?
- Who will use which restrooms?
- Who is responsible for keeping the common areas clean and well organized?

Case 3: Defining the Work Zones

Before



After



By moving the furniture pieces around in the model, I was able to create four well-defined working zones to answer the needs of the company: the office manager's area, the owner's area, a client-welcoming area, and a common meeting area for clients and personnel.

area to be used for the crew's Monday morning meetings and for client meetings. A generous portion of a white wall, out of direct sunlight, was left for showing project slides.

We used 30-inch partition walls to separate the zones. The owner's side of the partition provides shelf space for infrequently used catalogs and reference books, with a photo display area for clients on the other side. Two 4x8-foot pieces of 1/4-inch Marlite (coated Masonite) were attached to the owner's walls to serve as inexpensive dry erase boards for job schedules and other job-tracking information.

We added some new pieces to the furniture mix, including additional four-drawer file cabinets for long-term storage, a new copier cabinet for housing the copy machine and its supplies, and a new printer cabinet to house the printer, fax machine, and paper supplies. We also purchased new chairs for the client meeting area.

Where To Begin in Your Own Office

Everybody gets comfortable with the look of their workspace, and familiarity is often equated with efficiency or charm. But seeing it the way a new client or new employee sees it will be a real eye-opener. Here's a trick I use: Buy a roll of slide film and take photos of your office interior. When you get them developed, look at the slides *in reverse*. Just seeing your space this way can help push you past complacent acceptance of your present arrangement and move you toward a space that really goes to work for you.



Melanie Hodgdon is an organizational and business consultant in Bristol, Maine, who works with contractors around the country.