



# HOME HEADQUARTERS

Six months into the pandemic, the home office becomes more than a niche

By ANNE DALTON

**W**hen Wanda Bass and her family were shopping for a new house 17 years ago, a home office was high on her list of must-haves. Bass, a local advertising executive, was working from home at the time and wanted a space where she could continue to do so, just not in her bedroom.

The family of four found a house in a quiet Midlothian neighborhood with a room on the second floor that fit the bill. While the space could work as a bedroom, she says, “The floor plan really seemed more suited to an office.” The room has an opening that overlooks the kitchen, she explains, with louvers that can be closed if it gets too noisy. “The previous owner used it as an office as well,” she says, adding that she thinks the original owner may have had that purpose in mind all along when building the home in the 1980s.

For Bass, having that dedicated workspace has worked out really well. “It is good to have a separate space,” she says, “where you are sitting and know you are actually working.”

These days, Bass is one of the lucky ones. When the coronavirus pandemic took hold earlier this year, legions of

workers left their cubicles behind to set up shop at home. For those without a dedicated office space, kitchen islands, dining room tables and assorted nooks have been converted to makeshift offices, and in the case of families with students, distance-learning classrooms as well. And from the look of things, the telecommuting trend isn’t likely to go away soon. While the kitchen has always been considered the heart of the home, in 2020, the home office space may very well be its hub.

Melissa Grohowski, a realtor with Long & Fosters’ Village of Midlothian office for over 10 years, says homebuyers have always been looking for additional space to accommodate the family and often, a room they can dedicate to an office. “I’ve had buyers looking for office space previously, but it has definitely increased with COVID. Many people don’t use living rooms anymore, so they can switch that into an office, or if it is an open space, they can possibly add French doors to it.” The real estate market is good right now, she adds. “Buyers are looking and inventory is low,” she says. “Many are looking for more space, looking to get out of an apartment and into a home.”

Builders are also incorporating home offices and flexible spaces into their designs. According to Lori McNulty,

design studio manager for Lifestyle Builders, home offices have been part of their plan – and floor plans – for several years. “I don’t know if we were having a premonition or what,” she says. “I’ve been working with the design center for about two and a half years, and with all the homes I’ve worked with, we are consistently trying to add that flexible approach, whether it is in an older floor plan or a new one.”

“We’re trying to make sure that we have an office area as well as a ‘Zoom room’ for kids if they’re in the home and trying to do schoolwork from home,” McNulty says. She explains that one of their floor plans has an office downstairs while upstairs in the hallway between the bedrooms, they’ve added a “brain space,” a desk area or homework station where kids can do schoolwork or even play video games. “Just trying to have some space where there is some versatility,” she continues, “where moms and dads can work from home maybe in the same space or a separate space as well as the kids ... we’re trying to feature that aspect in some way.”

Once a home office space is established, it’s important to make sure it functions efficiently. At a recent Chesterfield Chamber event, Erin Leigh, owner of theNeatNiche, a Richmond-based professional organizing company for

individuals and businesses, discussed organized office spaces with chamber members. For 10 years, she has been offering practical advice helping people corral their stuff and improve their productivity. And while she generally provides a custom approach for each client, her advice applies to those who work in home offices of all kinds.

In terms of physical office space, she says, “Think of a bullseye over your desk. The middle section is where you sit and can reach everything from arm’s length. That’s the area where all the things you use all the time should be. Beyond that would be the second ring, and the things you use occasionally. The third ring, or even outside of the office space would be the things you don’t regularly need access too. Think about the functionality of the office and the things you use every day to make sure that the space has the tools you need at hand.”

Bass, who still works in that second-floor office, also offered some advice for folks working from home. No matter what the dedicated space is, she says, “Make it comfortable with a good chair and good lighting, and make sure you have all you need on hand.”

“Make sure you are in a space you actually like,” Leigh says. “It seems obvious, but you want to be in a space that feels good to you.”