

# Setting up your office

Before you start your business, you'll need to make a few decisions about how to set up your office and run your business operations day to day. It's worth planning this carefully to make sure you buy the right type of equipment, keep costs to a minimum and run an efficient enterprise.

## Stationery

Most small businesses invest in some stationery because:

- printed letterheads make business correspondence look professional
- business cards are useful when meeting people
- leaflets are a good way to promote a product or service

You can either design your own stationery or ask a professional designer to do it for you. A professional designer will be more expensive but can create an eye-catching and consistent image for your business and will know how to use colour and font sizes to the best effect. A good designer will also be able to advise you on the cost-effective printing options.

Think about what sort of impression you want to create and look at how other established businesses present themselves. Don't forget to take into account how you'll use your stationery – for example, how and where you decide to distribute promotional leaflets will influence their design.

Once you have a design you'll need to find a printer to produce your stationery – with the particular paper quality and colours you have decided on – at the best price. If you have designed your own, remember that colours and sizes on your computer screen may not look the same when they are printed. Always ask your printer for a proof copy so that you can check your stationery for any mistakes before it is printed.

## Office equipment

When you first start, it makes sense to stick to the basic essentials to keep costs to a minimum. Charity shops and auctions are a good source of cheap, second-hand furniture which can save you a lot of money.

The types of things you should budget for include:

- desk and chair
- telephone and answering machine
- lighting
- storage for your paperwork and equipment
- extra seating and tables if you expect business people or customers to visit
- security features such as a burglar alarm or additional locks

## IT and communications

### Telephones

Make sure you can give out a business telephone number when you start up in business. This can be a mobile or a landline, or both. If you're working from home, it's worth having a second line installed for business calls – it doesn't create a great impression if a customer rings and the phone is answered by a family member who isn't expecting a business call.

A mobile phone will mean customers can contact you even when you're out of the office. But be sure to use it discreetly - switch it off before meetings and avoid downloaded ringtones which will make your business look unprofessional. Decide on a standard response when answering calls – something like, “Good morning, Blacks Plumbing, how can I help you?” – and stick to it.

It's also a good idea to have a system for keeping telephone contacts and responding to messages. Keep a message pad and make a habit of taking notes every time you talk with someone on the phone. This is a useful memory aid if you're not going to deal with the enquiry straight away, and also helps to keep a record of what was said for future reference. Make a point of returning business phone calls within a reasonable timeframe – ideally the same day and

certainly no more than two days. If you're going on holiday or will be unavailable for some time, record an answerphone message with this information so customers know when you will get back to them.

You may also want to invest in a fax machine. Otherwise, you can always use the fax services of a local shop.

### Computer equipment

A computer is useful for almost every business nowadays – it will help you keep records, write professional looking correspondence and send emails. Before you buy any computer equipment think practically about what you really need (not what you'd like to have), what you can afford and what kind of system best suits your business.

Think about:

- **PC or laptop** – consider the specification for example, the computer's processor speed, memory and hard disk storage capacity.
- **software and security features** – some of these will be pre-installed, others you'll need to buy separately. Make sure these are compatible with the computer's operating system (otherwise this will cause problems with your computer) and that you have enough security precautions in place to protect your computer.
- **printer** – consider the type of printing you'll need – is black and white enough or is colour essential? Some printers include a built-in fax and copier.

This will probably be one of the biggest outlays you will make so it's a good idea to get advice on the best computer equipment and software – it will save you money and help you choose from the huge range on sale:

- find a reputable computer shop, with experienced and knowledgeable staff. They will be happy to advise and can even help you install and set up your system.
- try looking through the reviews and tips found in IT magazines.
- consider going on a short training course to help you get the most out of your computer.

## Jargon buster

- **Processor** – describes the engine of the computer (such as Pentium and Celeron). Processors come in a variety of speeds which indicate the computer's performance.
- **RAM (Random Access Memory)** – the internal memory of the computer. The more RAM you have, the more programs your computer will be able to run at the same time.
- **Hard disk** – the main storage unit (to store programs and files). The storage capacity of the computer is usually measured in GB (Gigabytes).
- **Modem** – a device (often built into the computer) that allows you to connect to the Internet.
- **Operating system** – describes the type of pre-installed software program (such as Windows XP or Mac OS) that manages the core operations of a computer system.

Remember that there is always a risk that the information on your computer can be lost or corrupted, so make sure you regularly back-up your computer by saving data on another storage device, such as a CD-Rom.

### Internet and email

The Internet is a wonderful tool for a business. You can set up your own website, access an email account or research suppliers and your market. There are several ways to access the Internet either from home or in public places such as libraries and Internet cafés. Different types of connection vary in speed and price:

- **dial-up** - this is fine if you use the Internet only occasionally and it is the only choice in some rural areas. But it's relatively slow and is unsuitable if you need to send or receive large files.
- **broadband** - this will give you a fast connection and is ideal if you use the Internet a lot.
- **cable** - another type of fast connection similar to broadband.

When you first sign up for access to the Internet, you will be offered the chance to set up an email account. Pick one that will provide you with enough storage for business use and create an email address that relates to your business name. It's a good idea to use filters to stop spam email messages clogging up your system.

### **Creating a website**

Websites are a great way to attract and inform your customers and suppliers. For certain businesses, a website is an essential sales and marketing tool – allowing customers to buy online.

You can either pay for someone to create a website for you or learn about the programming language behind websites (called HTML) and build one yourself. This is time-consuming but much more economical. You can learn about building simple websites at your local college.

A website is hosted on a web server to make it available on the Internet. You'll need to pick and register a website address (known as a domain name) for your business. You can see if certain domain names are available by checking Nominet at [www.nic.uk](http://www.nic.uk) or calling 01865 332244.

Once you have a registered domain name you can decide on who will host your site. A wide range of companies provide web hosting services so shop around to find one that best suits your business needs in terms of cost, reliability and performance.

## Filing





When you set up your office you'll need to create a system to look after your paper and computer records efficiently. It's easy for things to get disordered so set up a simple system early on and then spend a set amount of time each week maintaining it.

Here are some tips for efficient record keeping:

- keep business and personal records separate.
- create a system that is logical – for example, using date marked envelopes for receipts.
- file things promptly and add comments to documents so you don't forget anything, such as writing on a receipt what the payment was for.
- consider using a simple card file index for customer information (for example, filed alphabetically by surname). As your business becomes more complex you may want to progress to using computer databases to store information.
- make copies of important records and regularly back-up electronic records on your computer.
- make sure your systems are secure – for example, by having a password to protect your computer records and locking your filing cabinet.

Remember that if you are keeping information about customers or suppliers you will need to comply with data protection laws. For more information contact the Information Commissioner on 01625 545 745 or [www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk](http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk).

# Top tips

-  Stationery is usually ordered in large batches so hold off on an order if your business is moving in the near future to ensure your correct business address is being used.
-  Check the classified sections of your local newspaper for adverts for second-hand office furniture and computers.
-  Computer technology is constantly improving but consider buying older versions if they meet your business needs – you may be able to find a bargain.
-  Develop a filing system early on and make sure you stick to it.

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