

The Home Office: How To Make It Work

by Dawn Chase

Every morning, Richmond lawyers Susan R. Gerber and Irvin V. Cantor head off to work.

Gerber, a solo practitioner who lives in a quiet suburb in Henrico County, goes no further than her living room. There, her domestic relations clients sink into a loveseat and pour out their troubles. Occasionally, Gerber will rise from her plush chair, cross the room to her baby grand piano and launch into an appropriate tune—usually something with gallows humor, to lighten the mood. Her elderly beagle wanders in occasionally to check on things.

Cantor, who lives on Monument Avenue in the city, travels a little further. He leaves the house, crosses his back yard—past the playhouse, the trampoline, the tennis wall, the basketball hoop and the extreme sports ramps—and enters his garage—dubbed “the Garage Mahal” by friends. In a recently renovated space upstairs—over his wife Karen’s art studio—he logs onto the computer at his East Main Street firm, Cantor Arkema PC, and works on personal injury cases.

Both lawyers chose to work at home for lifestyle reasons. Gerber, a former public defender in the Bronx, took the step when she moved to Richmond almost twenty years ago, so she could be a stay-at-home mother to her son, now a freshman in college in New York. Cantor also wanted more time with his three sons, who are now seven, eleven and thirteen. The other reason: “My absolute dislike of downtown . . . I hate downtown,” he said.

Practicing from home is not for everyone, but Gerber and Cantor have made it work—in different ways.

Cantor offered his advice on home offices at the first annual Solo and Small Firm Conference sponsored by the Virginia Trial Lawyers Association in Charlottesville last fall. His first point: “If you’re going



to do it from home, don’t let anything distract you.”

That isn’t always easy, Gerber said. “There are advantages and disadvantages to everything.” The advantages to working at home: “You don’t have to pay any office rent. And you don’t have to get up and put on panty hose every day and go somewhere.”

The disadvantages? “The TV. The DVD player. The piano. The dog. The bed . . . “I think some people might need the sep-

aration of their personal life from their professional life,” she said.

Cantor and Gerber offered advice to those thinking about practicing at home:

- **Get advice.** “I read as much as I could about how you do a home office,” Cantor said. The builder who renovated the space and the computer consultants were particularly helpful.

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• **Check your local zoning ordinance.**

Gerber said she isn't allowed to hang a shingle, but she can see clients at her home by appointment only and employ a part-time assistant, because her 1950s neighborhood was grandfathered out of the current regulations, which prohibit most business activity in residential areas.

Because 99 percent of Cantor's practice consists of referrals, he sees his clients at the office of the referring attorney or at his downtown office. "My clients don't even know I'm here," he said. He draws on the firm's employees for clerical and investigative support.

Lawyers without a "mother ship" who can't see clients at home can join a shared-office suite, where monthly rent will give them use of a conference room when they need it.

• **Consult with a tax expert.** You can write off dedicated home-office space if you meet certain conditions.

• **Don't skimp on technology.** "I'll match any lawyer anywhere in the state with my technology in this garage," Cantor said. He invested in a high-quality

printer, copier, fax machine, scanner and video equipment, as well as a basic phone system that is separate from the family's phone lines. He advises lawyers to get good advice on "how to wire their space for the future—or 'wire-less' their space for the future."

Gerber says her phone is intrusive sometimes. The household has two phone lines, on which they receive not only personal calls, her business calls, but emergency calls for her husband, who is a doctor. "You can never get away from it," she said. She sets strict guidelines for what hours her clients can call.

• **Consider security.** All of Cantor's digital files are stored on the mainframe computer downtown. If someone else uses the computer, they cannot access the information without Cantor's pass code.

• **Use what you have around.** Before Gerber hired an assistant, she made her husband and her cleaning lady become Notaries. "When my child became eighteen last year, I made him become a Notary," she said.

She also put her large home to maximum use. The living room is just for

client meetings; a vast den downstairs provides the family's gathering space. One of her five bedrooms is her assistant's working office. Another room is used for storage.

• **Maintain relationships with other lawyers.**

Cantor said he attends firm meetings and can pick up the phone anytime to discuss a case with a partner. Gerber said the divorce attorneys she sees regularly in court have formed a tight community. "We all call each other all the time with hypotheticals."

• **Don't work all the time.** Cantor said he has fallen into that trap. "I've always been a workaholic," he said. "I'm very detail-oriented." After family time is over, he usually heads back to the garage for a late-nighter.

However, he tries to keep in mind the reason he created the Garage Mahal in the first place. On display in the office, near where his sons sit when they come up for help with homework, are two caps. One reads "Joseph Jackson and John's Dad." The other, "I'd rather be in my garage!"

"I wear two hats," he said.

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