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Out of the office

Technology, casual atmosphere just about any place into the new office

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Renea Myers, a Greensboro-based marketing consultant, does most of her work out of her home office. With a 5-month-old son and two stepsons, ages 12 and 15, the home office allows her to spend more time home with her kids.

But several times a week, Myers needs to meet with clients to discuss upcoming events or their new marketing campaign. While she frequently goes to a client's office to meet with them, Myers often has meetings in more casual settings as well, regularly meeting clients at Tex & Shirley's in Greensboro for breakfast or for coffee at Starbucks or Barnes & Noble.

Occasionally, she will even invite clients to her house for a cup of coffee and a homemade muffin in her kitchen or out on the back deck.

Myers says the meals and conversations, which often include more than just business, have helped her to know her clients better and have proven to be a successful way to do business.

"We get to know each other on a more personal level," Myers says. "And the better I know my clients, the better job I can do for them."

Myers is just one of a growing number of professionals, often consultants, who conduct a large part of their business in coffee shops and restaurants.

Aided by technology like wireless Internet and mobile phones, they are able to conduct business just as easily as if they were sitting in a permanent office.

But, these professionals say, there are many advantages to working in a "nonoffice" that can't be found in a more traditional setting.

Relationship building

Tamara McLendon, a Madison-based marketing and public relations consultant, says working in restaurants and coffee shops is "almost a matter of survival."

With most of her clients in Greensboro and Winston-Salem, McLendon doesn't have time to run back to her home office between meetings. So a few days a week she drives south and sets up shop at a coffee shop or restaurant.

Sometimes her clients will meet her there; sometimes she will go to their office to meet them, returning to a coffee shop or restaurant between meetings.

"It just works so much better for me," McLendon says.

Since many of the people who spend a lot of time conducting business in coffee shops and restaurants work out of home offices, they say it allows them to keep a more flexible schedule than if they worked out of a traditional office.

Myers says she doesn't feel like she needs to be ready and working at 8 every morning and doesn't feel tied down to a specific location.

"Your day is dictated by your clients, not by your office," Myers says.

And, like Myers, people say they feel they get to know their clients on a more personal level.

"It's a real strong way to build a relationship," says Phyllis Little, owner of Phyllis Little Designs, a interior design business. Little estimates she does about 30 percent of her business at coffee shops and restaurants, with most of the rest being done at clients' homes. "You sit down to share a meal and wind up talking about different things."

These businesses also see some savings in overhead costs. A one-room office generally leases for between \$10 and \$15.50 a square foot per year, says Ann Buffington, who handles small office leasing for Brown Investment Properties.

Based on the average size of these offices being around 200 square feet, a business renting a typical one-room office could expect to pay rental costs of between \$2,000 and \$3,100 a year -- or \$167 and \$258 a month, including utilities and insurance.

Air of unprofessionalism?

Those who work out of coffee shops and restaurants say there are a few downsides, especially the perception of potential clients.

"I do get the sense that there are some prospects taken a little aback by it," McLendon says. "I do imagine there are some people who don't think I'm a real business because I don't have an actual office."

But, McLendon says, if people are turned off by the fact that she does most of her business at coffee shops and restaurants, they probably wouldn't be a good fit for her personality and business model anyway.

Myers says she sometimes sees the same hesitation from potential clients, but that most of her regular clients don't seem to mind. In fact, she says, many of them conduct business the same way.

"I work primarily with small businesses and they don't seem to mind," Myers says. "I think they see it as a way I can keep my overhead down and my rates low."

And, Myers says, even those clients from large firms seem to like the opportunity to get away from the formality of an office meeting every now and then.

"Some of them tell me they can concentrate better away from the hustle and bustle," she says.

Aid of technology

The people who work out of coffee shops and restaurants say it wouldn't be possible without wireless Internet (Wi-Fi) connections in many restaurants and coffee shops as well as the use of laptops and mobile phones.

McLendon says her office phone forwards to her cell phone so she can be reached seamlessly by clients wherever she is. And, while she has a desktop computer at home, she does most of her work on her laptop.

McLendon is not the only one to say technology has made this business model possible.

"Technology has managed to liberate," says Dr. Bill Lynagh, a physician and the owner of the Center for Holistic Leadership, who often meets clients at restaurants and coffee shops.

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