

SPECIAL REPORT ON SMALL BUSINESS

Set boundaries for the home office

Creating an organized workspace can boost productivity

JANE SWITZER
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Camille Lawson runs three businesses out of her Toronto home. For a while, it was one big mess.

Lawson, a writer, registered nurse and relationship-and-sexuality psychotherapist, was working out of a disjointed, partitioned-off rectangle in her living room. Although she could dig out what she needed from the piles of paper stacked on top of her radiator, the process ate into her productivity.

"It was definitely chaotic," she recalls. "I also have three teenagers. And it annoyed them, too, because it was part of our home and I wasn't organized."

Lawson hired a professional organizer who revamped her filing system and picked out a charming wood filing cabinet to replace her clunky and inefficient one. Lawson says reorganizing her space had a positive effect on how she runs her businesses.

"I learned that aesthetically having a serene and organized space really mattered," she says. "She really took the time to find out about my businesses and how I work, and together we created an organization system."

About 20 per cent of Canadians work from home, according to a 2008 study by Statistics Canada. But those statistics don't measure organization. Toronto-based professional organizer Clare Kumar of Streamlife says sloppy workplaces impeding productivity is the No. 1 concern she hears from clients.

"It's a disaster in terms of limiting their ability to get things done," she says. "Unless boundaries are set, functionality can disappear without a clear focus."

Home offices can be distracting because they tend to be a depository for everyone else's junk, explains Toronto-based professional



SALVATORE SACCO PHOTO

Clare Kumar is a professional organizer. She says an unorganized work area is the biggest concern she hears from people working from home.

organizer Laura Kay. The key, she says, is keeping your desk clear to reduce distractions. For paper junkies, that means creating a filing system that works with their personal organization style.

"If you have baskets, magazine holders or file folders, everything should be labelled," she says. "If you have shelves in the office, put the knick-knacks and family photos there and keep the desk strictly for work."

Before running out to Staples, professional organizer Lynne Freeman Haque of Simply Organized advises business owners to create a detailed plan of what they want their home office to look like and assess which organizational systems work and

which ones don't.

"A lot of people don't think they have systems in place, but they do. It's just usually buried under the clutter," she says. "You need to ask yourself: How do you want your office to feel? What's your favourite colour? What kind of items do you need?"

Equally important for home-office dwellers, Kay says, is maintaining a daily routine to create a sense of continuity. In other words, get out of those pyjamas and curate a daily to-do list.

"Bring forward what you didn't do yesterday up to the top of today and prioritize," she says. "Close the door if there are other people in the house so they know you're in the

office, especially when it comes to children — they need to know that mom has her business hat on."

Cleanliness habits often need a makeover, too. It takes about 21 days — or 28 or 30, depending on who you ask — to break a habit. The key to staying organized in the long term, Freeman Haque says, is practice and persistence.

"It's hard to get over old habits, but if you want to make it a priority, you have to make the time to do it," she says. "Good habits are worth the investment it takes to develop them."

Psychologically, says Kumar, the benefits of having an organized home office are innumerable.

The biggest payoff, however, is

time saved from not having to hunt for rogue documents.

"You find what you need when you need it and have a deeper sense of control over what you do," she says. "It can also affect how other people perceive you. People might not see you when you work in a home office, but it'll come out somehow."

Lawson, who worked with Kumar to take control of her workspace, says she's increased her productivity and has more free time.

"I still get the stacks of paper occasionally, but I don't let it get out of control," she says. "If anyone is struggling to adjust to a home-office environment, organization is key. I really wish I had done it sooner."

Small-business owners let their fingers do the talking

Many turning to social media to build relationships, profits

SHARON ASCHAIK
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Thanks to Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, a Toronto-based software company has seen multiple increases of 50 to 100 per cent in weekly sales numbers.

"Social media is the most important aspect of our marketing," says Anthony Rinella, co-founder and chief engagement officer of Algrin Technologies, which offers SkedX, an employee-scheduling program for retail and food-service businesses. "We've done trade shows, placed ads in magazines and many other kinds of traditional advertising, but nothing brings results like social media."

Two years ago, Rinella began transforming the company's website into a resource for small- and medium-sized business owners. He scours the web and business magazines for new strategies and shares them on the company's blog — which he updates several times per month — and in an e-newsletter for almost 1,000 subscribers.

On YouTube, Rinella has created an online magazine, with videos featuring human-resources experts and business leaders, or tips on effectively using SkedX software.

This content is shared on Twitter (12,587 followers), LinkedIn (299 connections) and Facebook (198 likes), with posts sent simultaneously using TweetDeck, a social-media manager.

Rinella and his four team members regularly respond to comments on their posts or initiate conversations with people in their networks. Special software helps them track the efficacy of their social-marketing activities.

"We want to come across as knowledge leaders for SMEs (small and medium enterprises), and our customers are on social networks, so it's important for us to be there talking to people," Rinella says.

Canadians are heavy users of social media. A July 2011 Ipsos-Reid report found that half of all Canadi-



SALVATORE SACCO PHOTO

"Social media is the most important aspect of our marketing," says Anthony Rinella, co-founder of Algrin Technologies.

"It's a really great way to connect with people in a more sincere and honest way than traditional marketing."

AARON JOSEPH BEAR ROBE
CHEF-OWNER OF ABORIGINAL RESTAURANT KERIWA CAFE

ans, and 60 per cent of online Canadians, have a social-networking profile. As well, 48 per cent "like" or "follow" at least one brand or company through their social-networking site. The average number of brands they follow is 6.7.

According to Dawn Boshcoff of Bosh New Media Communications, businesses that market through social networks can access these users as well as anyone around the world with an Internet-enabled device — computer, tablet or smartphone.

"Businesses can get noticed online on a much greater scale. You can reach a global audience in seconds," says Boshcoff, who helps creative entrepreneurs with their social-networking strategies.

Social media has also changed the dynamic of marketing from pushing one-way messages to pulling in potential customers through two-way conversations, which Boshcoff says, are ultimately more effective.

"Doing business is all about building relationships, and it always has been. That's easier to do now because people can respond to what you have to say in so many different ways," she says.

What's also useful about social-marketing tools, particularly to small operators with limited budgets, is that most of them are free.

Aaron Joseph Bear Robe, chef-owner of Aboriginal restaurant Keriwa Cafe, which opened last August on Queen St. W. near Roncesvalles Village, agrees. "Being a small-business owner, particularly of a restaurant, our margins are very small, so using free social media works well."

Robe regularly uses Twitter and Facebook to share everything from photos of currently featured entrées to recommendations on local food artisans to news on culinary events in which he participates.

The approach has so far attracted 741 Facebook likes and 1,052 Twitter followers; retweets or comments on his posts increase his exposure to thousands more. Robe says many patrons have been drawn to Keriwa by these social interactions.

"It's a really great way to connect with people in a more sincere and honest way than traditional marketing," he says. "I love what I do, and these tools let me share it with people, all in real time."

IT'S TIME TO GET SOCIAL

Want to learn how to leverage social media tools to grow your small business?

A good place to start is Social Media Week (socialmediaweek.org), a bonanza of free professional development sessions focusing on social networking trends, ideas and strategies. The next such event in Toronto takes place Sept. 24 to 28. Or, check out the training options of these organizations:

Canadian Marketing Association (the-cma.org)

The International Association of Business Communicators/ Toronto (toronto.iabc.com)

Professional Writers Association of Canada — Toronto Chapter (pwactoronto.org)

The Canadian Society for Training and Development (cstd.ca)

Enterprise Toronto (enterprisetoronto.com)

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Small businesses and big nest eggs

Entrepreneurs need to remember to organize solid retirement plans

MARY GOODERHAM
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

When Beverley Simpson left her job as a nurse and started her own consulting business 20 years ago, retirement was already on her mind.

An organizational expert and a “planner by nature,” she developed her company, Beverley Simpson Associates, and started putting funds away to live on down the road, despite having three kids at home, aging parents to look after, and a mortgage.

“I wanted to control things and not be controlled,” explains Simpson, who at 65 spends 30 per cent of her time working in her company, which helps hospitals and health-care agencies with leadership development.

Simpson says the key to retirement for small-business owners is “planning and learning.” While investing in her own professional development and the business, she paid down debts, maxed out her RRSPs, incorporated to be able to set a cushion of funds aside for the future and made other investments like buying a cottage, where she and her husband Gord can enjoy their grandchildren.

Experts say that for many entrepreneurs, it can be difficult to pay attention to the company and personal finances.

“Business owners work at their business and their focus is solely on their business,” says Scott Plaskett, a certified financial planner and CEO of Ironshield Financial Planning in Toronto who specializes in helping people transition to retirement. “Eventually, their focus needs to come back to what their exit strategy is.”

He says that entrepreneurs often fail to think ahead or to spin off capital from the business because of the expectation that they can sell the company. This “puts all their eggs in one basket,” he says, which does not honour a major rule of financial planning: diversification.

“No one would put 100 per cent of their retirement funds into one security, but that’s what business owners are doing by focusing on just reinvesting in their business,” Plaskett says.

Doug Bruce, vice-president of research for the Federation of Independent Business, says that only 10 per cent of small-business owners have a formal, written succession plan, while 38 per cent have an informal plan and 52 per cent have no plan at all. “They have a lot of planning to do,” he says.

Plaskett says a good option for business owners is an Individual Pension Plan (IPP), which he calls an “RRSP on steroids.” It gives the company a significant tax deduction when it puts aside money and has other advantages, like deductibility for the cost of managing the assets.

However, a 2010 survey by the Federation of Independent Business found that more than 78 per cent of small businesses offer no retirement savings plan at all; just over 10 per cent have plans for the owner and employees; 6 per cent have plans for just the owner; and 4 per cent have employee-only plans. Among business owners with pension plans, 87 per cent have RRSPs and 15 per cent have IPPs.

Plaskett says deciding whether to get an RRSP or an IPP is an “exercise in mathematics,” which should be done with a financial planner or plan administrator.

Bev Moir, a senior wealth adviser with ScotiaMcLeod, says that self-employed people must “put the building blocks in place” for retirement. This means developing a vision of what their retirement will look like, figuring out how much they need and have to spend in retirement and planning for the “what ifs,” like ensuring they have wills and powers of attorney.

“People are so busy building a business they are not taking the time to stop and think ‘What about me? What’s down the road?’” she says. “The key is not leaving it too late.”

Entrepreneur pressure cooker

Incubator, accelerator programs aim to help startups get going

JANE SWITZER
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Winston Mok describes the experience of working with seasoned entrepreneurs in a business accelerator program as “mentor whiplash.” And that’s a good thing.

“You feel like a lobster in a cooker — there’s pressure, but you know you’re going to come out tasting good,” says the CEO of Toronto-based digital coupon company Simply Good Technologies. “It’s worthwhile for the entrepreneur because you’re stripped down to your bare essence of what you do and what you value.”

Mok, a former manager at Waterloo-based Research In Motion, co-founded the company with fellow University of Waterloo graduates and RIM alumni Ambrose Choy and David Man in 2008. When the recession hit soon afterward, the threesome received support from Toronto’s MaRS Discovery District, a non-profit innovation centre that offers advisory services and workspaces for budding startups.

“They have a great open office



SALVATORE SACCO PHOTO
Andy Yang, chief innovation hunter at Extreme Startups.

space. And we went in for their seminars to meet with the financial advisers,” Mok says.

In the last decade, Toronto has seen an explosion of business incubation and accelerator programs aimed at helping startups get off the ground through mentoring, funding and access to office space.

According to a recent survey by California-based research group Startup Genome Project, Toronto is the place to be: The city ranked as the fourth best place to start a tech company after Silicon Valley, New York and London.

“Toronto is on the map. It’s a com-

ination of creative content, finance, all merging together with talent,” says MaRS CEO Ilse Treurnicht. “We’ve tried to build an integrated suite of programs that can meet entrepreneurs depending on where they are on the development curve. If they’re just testing out an idea, they can benefit from our educational programs and our market intelligence. As they get deeper into building their revenue and business model, advisory services become very powerful.”

Incubators provide tips to make idea-laden startups into investment-ready companies, says Michael Donahue, vice-president of the Toronto Business Development Centre. Since 1990, it has launched more than 4,500 companies.

“They need a really effective business plan so they have a clear idea of what their financial requirements are for the business,” he says. “Second, they need to know how to go out and effectively sell their product to the marketplace so that they can generate the initial revenues that they need to break even. Thirdly, they need to know how to create value in their companies and express that evaluation so they can attract investment capital to support their growth.”

Would-be entrepreneurs should

also understand the difference between an incubator and an accelerator. Whereas business incubators offer longer-term support to grow a business, accelerators tend to be technology-centred and offer intensive training to attract capital investment quickly.

“You have access to investors, mentors, a platform for PR, technology providers, sponsors and partnerships on a scale that you wouldn’t necessarily have otherwise,” says Andy Yang, chief innovation hunter of Extreme Startups.

The Toronto-based accelerator, the brainchild of venture capital investor Extreme Venture Partners, launched its inaugural program in January. In exchange for 10-per cent equity, five startups are given office space in downtown Toronto, access to a network of more than 50 mentors, and an initial investment of \$50,000. Upon completion of the program, businesses receive up to an additional \$150,000.

The process worked for Mok. After connecting with MaRS, Simply Good Technologies developed a mobile app for retail giant Canadian Tire. In February, the company became the first Toronto startup accepted into TechStars, a prestigious 13-week accelerator program that runs in four U.S. cities.



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