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There's no place like home – to work

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BY JENNIFER V. HUGHES

SPECIAL TO RECORD

THE RECORD

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As someone who has worked from home for more than 15 years, Caryn Starr-Gates has always enjoyed a short commute.

But at one point, her commute was a little too short. She was running her gift-basket business from a spare room right next to her bedroom in her Fair Lawn colonial.

"It was just too close," Starr-Gates said. "In the middle of the night, I could hear if someone was faxing me. I don't think it was good that I could literally roll out of bed and go next door to be at work."

Today, thanks to a 2006 home renovation, Starr-Gates — now in advertising, public relations and copywriting — works out of a sunroom converted into an office off her living room. She's not working home alone: Her husband, Larry Gates, has a recording and mixing studio in the basement.

"On occasion we will meet for lunch upstairs, but we're both so engrossed in our work, we're not tripping over each other all the time," said Gates, whose recording studio space has a separate entrance so musicians don't disturb the rest of the household.



Musician Larry Gates has a recording studio in the basement of his Fair Lawn home, while his wife, Caryn Starr-Gates, works at advertising, public relations and copywriting out of a sunroom upstairs.

Tough, but well worth it

A few years ago, I was finishing a tough article and had to interview an important source on the phone to double-check some complicated facts.

Just as I was wrapping things up, my daughter — then 3 — ran into my "office" and started barking

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They're certainly not alone in the workforce. According to 2009 U.S. Census data, 5.9 million Americans work from home, up 41 percent from 2000.

Like most people who work from home, Gates said the ease of technology has paved the way.

"I'm mixing a record for a Brooklyn musician and he's only been here once — the rest of it we can do by e-mail," Gates said.

Over their years working from home, Starr-Gates and her husband have "moved all over the place," inside their house. At one point, both were in the basement; then she was in the upstairs bedroom and he was in the basement. At another point, she was working off the dining room table and he was in the sunroom.

They contemplated buying a new home with an eye for their home offices, but decided it was cheaper to renovate.

The market for home offices is growing so much that Jay Feingold, who owns the organization company Tailored Living Featuring Premiere Garage, recently shifted his business focus from garage space to include interior spaces.

"We're offering more services inside the home, and one of those areas is the home office," said Feingold, whose company is based in Hackensack. A few years ago, his company created a work space for a Livingston man who repaired computers in his garage.

"We came in and designed a cabinet layout that allowed for a station to repair computers, a place to keep materials and a place to do office work," he said.

Glenn Gustafson, owner of Bergen Home Wright, an Oradell-based contractor, said he did a job for a Whippany man who worked in computer networking, crafting a home office in a garage addition.

Other options include partitioning off a piece of a basement, using a spare bedroom or converting a walk-up attic, said Gustafson.

loudly, laughing hysterically and chasing the cat around the kitchen table.

Not my most professional moment, but such are the perils of working from home.

I've worked from home as a freelance writer for the past six years and I love it. It has been the perfect way to maintain my career, keep some cash flow and spend time first with my daughter, now 7, and later, my son, who was born in June.

But working from home is not without its challenges. There is never a break from my "work" or my "home," and I rarely feel like I can focus solely on either at any time.

I have bribed my daughter with more junk food and television than I'd like to admit when I needed to answer one more e-mail or write a few more paragraphs. Once when I got distracted by a long phone interview I realized she had spent those crucial 20 minutes playing "doctor" with the cat, covering him ears to tail in tape.

While my kids and their mayhem are predictably distracting, it's sometimes tougher to work at night after they are sleeping, as the flicker of the television beckons. (As I write this column, I'm trying desperately to tune out the fascinating documentary on Martin Luther King that my husband is enjoying.)

Part of the problem is that unlike many people who work from home, I don't have a separate work space. I park my MacBook on a butcher block island between the kitchen and living room.

It doesn't provide much privacy, but it does give me the ability to simultaneously supervise my second-grader's homework, watch dinner simmering on the stove, nurse my 7-month-old and field e-mails from one editor and phone calls from another — as I did one afternoon the other day.

And that is the key to one of the most important things I've learned over the past few years as someone who works from home: It has made me a smarter, faster, more efficient worker.

I know that the 30 minutes before school pickup time is perfect for answering e-mails and managing invoices, but that I need to hire the sitter for serious writing. I can pack more Internet research into my son's two-hour nap time than I could do in a full day

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But Gustafson said most homeowners don't spend a lot of money on home offices because the improvements do little for resale value. According to Remodel Magazine's Cost Vs. Value report from 2010-2011, a home-office remodeling job in the mid-Atlantic region cost about \$29,000 and added only \$12,000 to the resale value.

Renovating space

Many home workers retool an existing space for their offices. When Verena Visser Aibel set up her home office it cost only about \$3,300 to pay for standard supplies, such as a desk, chair, computer, printer and an area rug. She rented an apartment in a [Hackensack](#) multi-family house in October specifically because it has office space in a sunroom.

Aibel, a business and life coach, said working from her home actually helps her business because it presents to her clients a tangible example of how they, too, can blend their personal and professional lives.

"My home and my work space are a showcase of how it's possible that you can be on your own and be successful," she said. "I have clients who may be fabulously successful in their work but they have trouble in relationships ... work and the rest of your life is intertwined, so it makes sense to have work and home together."

When Ryan McGonigle was looking for a home, having a home office was one of his major priorities.

An intellectual-property attorney, McGonigle can do much of his work from home and plans to do so once he has a family. He's putting an offer on a five-bedroom Dutch colonial in [Essex County](#) that has spare bedrooms and even the chance to finish a separate carriage house as an office. The current owner works from home, connecting to his office in China, he said.

"It was a big part of my decision," he said.

in a cubicle because I know the clock is ticking.

I've learned about the value of Caller ID, which can tell me whether an incoming call is that source I need, or my gabby aunt, and I've developed the discipline to let the latter go to voice mail. I've learned that a laptop is superior because I can move it from room to room as the day goes on.

Over the years, I've discovered that if I ever do go back to a "real" office — one without a teething baby and the distractions of PBS, a 7-year-old's math drills and the waiting piles of laundry — it will be a piece of cake.

Don't be hesitant about tax deductions

As April 15 approaches, those who work from home have special considerations when it comes to tax time. Sandy Lefstein-Suchoff, a CPA based in Fair Lawn has the following tips and suggestions:

* If you have a separate and distinct space in your home that is used regularly and exclusively for work, you can deduct a percentage of your rent or mortgage interest, your utilities, home insurance and real estate taxes. So, if you work from your kitchen table that would likely not qualify, but if you have a partitioned basement area — that probably would.

* If you use a portion of your home for storage of work-related materials, that also can qualify you for deductions.

* Most people know they can deduct items they use for work — from paper and supplies to computers and office furniture. Deductions are taken in a different way, however, depending on the item. Deductions for machinery and equipment like a computer or printer that depreciates over time is taken in one way, while other items like paper and pens are taken in another. Check with your accountant to make sure you have the right forms. And, of course, keep all of your receipts and paperwork.

* One common misconception about tax filings for people who work from home is that it is an "automatic red flag," when it comes to possible audits. Suchoff said that's untrue: "If you truly use your home as a business, it should not be a problem."

* Some home improvements might even qualify for

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"Ninety percent of what I do is push papers on the Internet and file documents ... being able to telecommute is a priority."

McGonigle's Realtor, Joshua M. Baris of Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage in [Fort Lee](#), said many of his recent clients were looking at homes with an eye for a home office.

tax deductions. If you frequently have clients or customers come to your home and you purchase, say, new siding to improve the appearance, that can be seen as a capital improvement.

* Suchoff said she sees far more work-from-home clients than in previous years. She noted that even the Internal Revenue Service allows its employees to work from home three or four days a week.

— Jennifer V. Hughes

A juggling act

"Almost everyone I'm working with now is looking for that," he said. "Having that option to have another room is highly beneficial."

Joyce Restaino runs her business writing company, Grow Your Business Write, from a spare bedroom in her [West Milford](#) home. Like many from-home workers, she said it can be tough dealing with distractions.

"You are by yourself and you can run out and get milk or throw in a load of laundry," she said. That's not always a bad thing, she said.

"Sometimes when I'm stuck it's good to take a mental break, step back, and you can clear your head and do something else and come back with a different perspective. You can't always do that in a traditional office."

While many people who work from home can handle client or customer needs solely on the phone or computer, some of Starr-Gates' gift basket customers wanted to see merchandise in person, back when she ran that business. She said most of the time people didn't think it was unprofessional when told that she worked from home.

"I think the perceptions of working from home have changed," she said.

"People have been outsourced or downsized for the past 10 years — it's becoming so common it's just not an issue anymore."

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