

## **From Lawnmowers to Laptops – Is a Backyard Office Right for You?**

by **Phil Montero "the Mobile Man"**

**Phil Montero**, "the Mobile Man" is the author of "**WORK AT HOME: The Telework Job Seekers Handbook**" and founder of **YouCanWorkFromAnywhere.com** providing advice, strategies, ideas and tips to help improve the productivity of telecommuters, mobile workers, entrepreneurs and home based workers. He also publishes a free bi-weekly ezine. Visit <http://www.YouCanWorkFromAnywhere.com> for more information.

When you think of setting up a home office, a couple of things probably come to mind. Your first thought might be to work from your basement, turning a spare bedroom into an office space or build a room addition onto your house.

But did you ever consider setting up an office in your backyard? No I'm not suggesting you pitch a tent and run an extension cord out to it for your laptop and fax machine. I'm talking about a concept that is gaining in popularity, setting up a finished shed to use as a Backyard Office.

Now I know what you're probably thinking. If you're like me when you hear "shed" the first thing that comes to mind is a small metal box like structure similar to the one I had in my backyard when I was a kid. It was always filled to the brim with rakes, shovels, the lawnmower and other assorted yard tools. Not the kind of place you'd want to work in.

What I'm talking about here is a finished shed that looks and feels like a freestanding house, cottage or cabin complete with insulation, paneling, electricity, windows and a front door!

This concept was kind of new to me until I had a great conversation recently with Paul Johnston of *The Shed Shop*. His California based company has been helping homeowners with their space needs for over 14 years.

With real estate prices skyrocketing and a sluggish economy there are several factors that have caused this concept to become more and more popular.

Johnston explained that there are very few attics or basements in California so the homeowners there have more of a need for extra space. A finished outdoor shed is really a great alternative compared to the hassles of an expensive and time-consuming room addition.

Johnston said about 2 years ago the requests for “people use” sheds (rather than storage use) started to grow and that this new trend accounts for about 20% of his shed sales. “I feel like we’re responding to a trend rather than create something.”, state Johnston. People use these sheds as a hobby room, playhouse, exercise room, art studio, or backyard office. Needless to say it was this last use that really intrigued me.

I asked Paul how they handle the power needs of a home office. “The power part of the equation really has two parts. First there is getting the shed wired with outlets, lights, etc. The second part is getting power from the home to the shed.”

He explained that in his business there is a package price for the shed and then a separate fee to hook up the power from the home. They have partnered with electricians that can help provide this service for his customers.

As for price – obviously it varies depending on the size of the shed you get and the additional features you choose. But to give you a ballpark Johnston said a nice 8x12 shed with a house door and windows, like their Heritage Model, goes for about three thousand dollars. Then add on a finished package on the inside at about \$16/square foot (\$1600) and about \$1200 for the electrical work and you’re talking a total of about \$5800.

According to Johnston, that is a far cry from the 40 – 50 thousand dollars that a typical room addition to your house can cost. A shed as a backyard office can give you a dedicated work space at a fraction of the cost. Of course there are lots of upgrades available as well such as skylights, cement slabs for it to sit on (rather than skids), shelving and additional windows.

One thing Johnston cautioned about when thinking about setting up one of these backyard offices is to be sure you look into the building codes for your area. He said this was especially true in the San Francisco Bay area where a lot of his customers are located.

There is a proper way to present this kind of structure if a permit is required. *The Shed Shop* studied the California Building Codes. “The key was to stress that these were not habitable buildings (no plumbing, bathrooms or kitchens) but rather auxiliary structures more suitable for use as a workshop, playhouse or hobby room.”

As for providing phone and internet access for a backyard office there are a few options. You could run extra wires out from your home or you could use a cell phone and setup a wireless network in your house to share your cable or DSL internet

access. Most wireless networks have a range of 200 – 900 feet depending on the area. There are also a variety of booster antennas available today that can extend that range.

Although *The Shed Shop* only services the San Francisco Bay and greater Sacramento area, Johnston has some suggestions for anyone looking to setup a Backyard Office:

- Find a reputable shed company that specializes in nicer, all-wood buildings. They will usually understand the permits in your area and can help you with your planning and research. They should be able to guide you in some of those issues.
- Although shed kits can be ordered the shipping can get really expensive. It's best to find someone local.
- You can get a general contractor to build you a shed but the advantage of a shed company is that they will have products on the lot to show you so you know what you're getting.

When it comes to working from home, my suggestions is always to have a dedicated office space. You want a room with a door you can shut to keep noise out and help you separate your work life from your personal life. What better way to do this than with your own freestanding Backyard Office! You still get the benefits of the 2-minute commute but with the comforts of your own office. "One of the big advantages," Johnston pointed out, "is that your stuff doesn't bother anyone and no one bothers your stuff."

Visit Johnston's website [www.shedshop.com](http://www.shedshop.com) for more information about finished sheds and backyard offices. There are photos you can view, and even some free booklets, reports and videos you can request. Johnston also said you can feel free to call him with any questions you might have about using a shed as a backyard office. He was a pleasure to talk with so take him up on his offer!

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