The Realities of Remote Working
Home office must-haves

Chimney repair
Maintenance is necessary

Downspout Damage
Signs your gutters are in need of repair

Laundry room renovations you’ll love
A laundry room need not be limited to laundry only
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Remote work has been around for many years, though it certainly picked up steam in 2020. In an effort to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus COVID-19, in March 2020 government officials implemented stay-at-home measures that mandated many working professionals to begin working from home. That transition occurred seemingly overnight, forcing men and women to find somewhere in their homes to work.

As the dust settled and working professionals grew accustomed to working from home, many recognized the need to have an office in their homes. Various factors can make home offices more conducive to getting work done, and the following are some home office must-haves that can help people be more productive while working from home.

**Lighting**
Lighting is important in a home office. It’s easy to overlook natural light, especially for workers who previously worked in offices that did not have windows. But natural light can help save on energy costs and boost mood. In fact, natural light is a valued commodity for people used to working in office settings. A 2018 survey of more than 1,600 workers conducted by the human resources advisory firm Future Workplace found that access to natural light and views of the outdoors were the most sought after attribute of a workspace environment. In addition, 47 percent of workers surveyed admitted they felt tired or very tired from the absence of natural light or a window at their office.

When designing their home offices, homeowners should keep this in mind and choose areas of their homes that get ample natural light during a typical workday. Additional lighting also will be necessary. Recessed lighting can give an office a sleek look, and lights that can dim can allow workers to adjust their lighting based on how much they need at any given point in the workday.

**Quiet**
Professionals forced to work at home when social distancing measures were implemented may not have had much quiet, especially for those with young children whose schools were closed. But when designing a home office, homeowners have the chance to make their offices more conducive to concentration. Soundproofing walls may not be necessary, but look for areas of the home that don’t get much foot traffic. Kitchens are very popular rooms in many homes, so try to locate your home office away from the kitchen. A spare bedroom upstairs may make for the most ideal home office setting if the home does not have a traditional den. Spare bedrooms come with doors, which can instantly create a sense of quiet when closed. A converted garage also can make for a useful home office, but make sure the room already has cooling and heating and, ideally, windows.

**Electrical outlets**
Recently built homes tend to be equipped with enough outlets to accommodate our increasingly connected lifestyles. But older homes may need some electrical updates before they can capably accommodate home offices. When updating your electrical, replace existing outlets and fixtures with energy-efficient LED fixtures, which save money and benefit the environment. Before updating the electrical, decide on how you want the office to be laid out so you can have outlets installed where your computer, devices and other items, like a printer and television, will be. This makes it easy to hide cords and give the office a clean, professional look.

Home office capabilities became a big priority in 2020. Designing such spaces can be fun and easy.
5 tips to prepare for window replacement

Winter is coming, and for millions of people who reside in areas of the country that see the mercury drop considerably between December and March, that means prioritizing staying warm. Inefficient or aging housing materials may compromise your ability to do just that. Drafts from doors, poorly protected attics and basements and aging windows may force heating systems to work extra hard to maintain interior temperatures.

Replacing old windows can make a home quieter by blocking out exterior noises. Consumer Reports also notes that new windows are often easier to clean and maintain than older varieties. Many homeowners are interested in replacing their windows, but may not know where to start. These guidelines can help the process along.

1. Get several estimates. Ask for recommendations from neighbors or other people in your area on which companies they used to install their replacement windows. When you interview the prospects, ask several questions about how they go about installing the windows. Questions can include:
   - How long will the project take?
   - Will I need to remain home during the process?
   - Do you discard of old debris?
   - What is the protocol for installation during inclement weather?

2. Research permits. Most home renovation projects need to be approved by the local municipality. Go to the permit office and find out the requirements. Some window contractors will include securing permits in the cost of the project. After the project is completed, an inspector will come by and ensure the work was done according to code.

3. Change up the appearance. Look at the type of hardware you have around the home and other fixtures. Choose windows that have locks or latches that can match those features for continuity of style. Think about choosing a different style or frame color of the window, or a different type of window to improve efficiency and function.

4. Research top window manufacturers. It’s tempting to purchase windows based on price alone, but replacement windows are often a decision that only has to be made once or twice for the life of the home. Invest in durable windows that will have staying power. Consumer Reports offers unbiased reviews on various window brands and can help homeowners make sound decisions.

5. Prepare for installation. Clear pathways, remove window treatments and disconnect window alarm systems. Plan for one to two days of installation, advises Andersen Windows and Doors. Keep pets and children away from work areas.

Replacement windows can be a smart investment. New windows can improve the look of a home, reduce heating costs and can keep interior spaces comfortable.

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When thinking about renovating their homes, homeowners may imagine changing wall colors, expanding room sizes or upgrading appliances and fixtures. However, unless people take inventory of the less glamorous components of the home, such as structure, plumbing, heating and cooling, and insulation, other improvements may be for naught.

A home insulation project certainly doesn’t offer the wow factor of a kitchen remodel, but insulation serves a vital function in the house that helps keep people comfortable and reduces energy consumption. Insulation is typically placed in areas where air escapes, such as between the stud cavities inside the walls and in the attic, and serves to slow and reduce heat transfer.

The U.S. Department of Energy says between 50 and 70 percent of the energy used in homes is for heating and cooling. By improving home insulation, homeowners can make their homes more comfortable, consistent and efficient. In fact, the ENERGY STAR program overseen by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says homeowners stand to save an average of 15 percent on heating and cooling costs by adding proper insulation. To do so, homeowners can take a crash course in home insulation and find the products that fit their needs.

Blanket batts and rolls
Blanket batts and rolls typically are constructed with fiberglass, so proper safety gear, such as a mask and gloves, is needed when handling them. Installing this type of insulation is relatively easy since the materials are designed to fit the standard width between studs, rafters and floor joists.

Loose fill
Loose fill is usually made of fiberglass or cellulose (recycled paper fiber). It is blown or sprayed into place with pneumatic equipment, according to The Home Depot. Loose fill can be ideal for hard-to-reach areas in attics or inside wall cavities. It’s good for adding insulation to irregularly shaped areas. Since it requires special equipment, this is a job best left to professionals.

Sprayed foam
Sprayed foam is just as the name implies, a foam made from polyurethane, polyisocyanurate, cementitious, or other materials that are applied by a spray container. DIYers who need only small applications can use canned products. Large quantities are pressure-sprayed by professionals.

Foam board/ rigid foam panels
Ideal for unfinished walls, such as basement or foundation walls, floors and ceilings, these are boards of polyurethane or polystyrene. Foam boards tend to reduce energy consumption more effectively than other types of insulation. Homeowners considering upgrading their insulation or amending existing insulation should do their homework on the type of insulation that will be most effective for their homes.

Understanding R-Values
Insulation recommendations are based on certain factors that coordinate with regional climate zones to increase energy efficiency. These factors are known as R-values. The R in R-value stands for "resistance," and refers to how certain products resist the flow of heat through walls, floors and ceilings. Products should reduce heat escape so heat is kept on the right side of the wall. In summer this means outdoors, in winter it means indoors. R-values relate not only to insulation, but also to walls, windows and other barriers. R-values also coordinate to the type, thickness and density of the material being used. The higher the R-value, the more resistant to heat the product is. The U.S. Department of Energy coordinates R-value to climate zones 1 through 7 (1: Tip of Florida; 7: Canadian border). A higher R-value is needed in Zone 7 and a lower R-value is necessary in Zone 1. Those embarking on home improvement projects that involve choosing between R-values are urged to speak with a professional or to visit the Department of Energy website (www.energy.gov) to determine which R-Value is ideal for their homes.
Home improvement projects run the gamut from minor repairs to complete overhauls. Replacing exterior siding is one of the most significant home improvement projects homeowners can undertake. Such a project can give homes a completely new look, which is why choice of siding is such an important decision.

Homeowners have many siding options to choose from, and the following guide can help them make the best choice for their homes.

**Vinyl siding**
Vinyl siding is easily maintained and among the more budget-friendly siding options. According to the home improvement resource HomeAdvisor, vinyl siding is made from a PVC plastic that does not rot or flake. Siding professionals note that the technology used to create vinyl siding has changed considerably in recent years, making this option more diverse than traditional vinyl siding. So homeowners turned off by the potentially plastic look of vinyl siding might be surprised at how different modern vinyl siding looks compared to the vinyl siding of yesteryear.

**Fiber-cement siding**
The home improvement television network HGTV notes that fiber-cement siding has grown in popularity among homeowners in recent years. This material does not require much maintenance and it’s non-flammable and resistant to termites. HomeAdvisor notes that fiber-cement siding can create the look of wood, stucco or masonry, making it a versatile option capable of creating various looks. In addition, fiber-cement siding is known for its durability, with some products coming with warranties lasting as long as 50 years.

**Wood siding**
Homeowners have many choices if they prefer wood siding on their homes. Cedar, cypress, fir, pine, and spruce are just a handful of the many wood siding options homeowners can choose from. HomeAdvisor notes that cedar shingle siding offers a natural look that blends well in wooded and waterfront landscapes. Wood clapboard siding is another popular option, though it tends to require more maintenance than cedar shingle siding. Homeowners who want wood siding should discuss their options with an experienced siding professional, as many factors, including the choice of wood, must be considered before making a final decision.

**Stone and stone-veneer siding**
Many homeowners fall in love with the natural appeal of stone, but the price tag, which tends to be costly, may not be as awe-inspiring. HGTV notes that stone can be difficult to add to an existing home, and doing so may drive the price up even further. Stone siding is durable, and there are many options, including solid stone and natural stone cladding, that make this an option capable of providing an array of looks. Stone-veneer siding is less expensive than natural stone and also comes in an array of styles. As is the case with wood, stone siding options are so extensive that homeowners are urged to discuss each one with a siding professional before making their decisions. These are just a handful of the many siding options homeowners can choose from. Siding can give homes a completely new look, making choice of siding a significant decision worthy of careful consideration.

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Homeowners want their residences to look inviting inside and out. Part of keeping an attractive property involves addressing issues that can compromise not only the appearance of a home, but even its integrity. People who live in regions with high humidity may find their homes are vulnerable to exterior mildew growth. Mildew is a kind of mold. Molds include all species of microscopic fungi that grow in the form of hyphae, which are multicellular filaments, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Mold thrives on any organic matter and surfaces with moisture management problems. Mildew, in particular, lives on shower walls, windowsills and other places where moisture levels are high. Mildew also can grow on home siding as well as fences and other exterior structures. While typically gray or white, mildew can be various colors. Experts recommend various cleansers to help combat the issue of mildew on a home. One of the first products that homeowners tend to reach for is sodium hypochlorite, which is a standard bleach used in laundry and pool sanitation. While sodium hypochlorite seems to make mildew vanish, those at This Old House say that chlorine evaporates too quickly to get to mildew’s roots on porous surfaces, such as wood or vinyl siding. Bleach also can stain clothing and damage foliage around the house. Hydrogen peroxide, or oxygen bleach, is less volatile, will not affect foliage and can clean mildew, algae and dirt on and below the surface. Trisodium phosphate is another effective cleanser. Commonly known as TSP, it often succeeds where other solutions fail in regard to stubborn stains and mildew. TSP also works well on various exterior surfaces. TSP needs to be used with extreme caution. When using TSP, wear long sleeves, gloves, goggles, and a respiratory mask, says Today’s Homeowner. The product also requires adequate ventilation. There also are some environmental concerns, as TSP can damage foliage. In addition, if the product ends up in lakes and streams, it can trigger an overgrowth of algae that results in the depletion of oxygen levels in the water. Eco-conscious homeowners may want to try oxy cleansers before TSP.

Mildew shies away from bright sunlight, so it tends to grow on the north side of homes. Removing trees or other foliage that can further block sunlight to areas of the house can help eradicate mildew growth and stop it before it starts. Another tactic is to clean out gutters regularly and thoroughly to reduce moisture and to prevent decomposing debris from running over the edge of the gutters. This runoff can drip down the home’s siding and spread the mildew to other areas. Mildew can be problematic any time of year. Clean up mildew when the weather cools down to spruce up the look of a home.
Signs your gutters are in need of repair

Fall is a great time to tackle projects around the house. The weather each fall allows homeowners to make improvements to their homes’ exteriors without worrying about extreme heat or cold, while interior projects like painting are made easier because homeowners can open the windows to allow for proper ventilation.

Fall also marks a great time to prepare for upcoming projects that can make winter work that much easier. For example, fall is a great time to take stock of your gutters so you can address any issues before leaves begin to fall or the first snowstorm touches down. Compromised gutters can contribute to water issues in basements and adversely affect a home’s foundation if not addressed immediately, so it behooves homeowners to learn the signs that gutters are in need of repair or replacement.

Gutters hanging off the home: Gutters were once installed predominantly with spikes. However, many industry professionals now install gutters with hanger brackets. Why the change? Spikes loosen over time, leading to the gutters hanging off the home. That can contribute to serious issues if left untreated. Gutters hanging off the home need not necessarily be replaced, but rather secured to the home, ideally with hanger brackets instead of spikes. Brackets hook into the front of the gutter and are then screwed into the fascia of a home. A professional who specializes in gutter repair can perform this task relatively quickly, and it’s an inexpensive yet highly effective solution.

Gutter separation: Gutters that are no longer fastened together can leak and contribute to issues that affect the home’s foundation, siding and appearance. Clogs and the accumulation of debris can cause gutters to separate because they are not designed to hold too much weight. Replacement of separated gutters may or may not be necessary depending on how big the problem is and the condition of the existing gutters. If replacement is not necessary, separated gutters may be remedied by securing the joints, another relatively simple and inexpensive fix.

Peeling exterior paint: Paint that appears to be peeling off of your home may indicate that water is seeping over the edge of the gutter closest to your home. When that happens, water is coming down the side of the house, causing the paint to peel. In such instances, replacing the gutters is often necessary.

Basement flooding: Not all signs of deteriorating gutters are outside a home. Many a homeowner has been flummoxed by flooding in their basements, and such flooding can be caused by aging, ineffective gutters. That’s because deteriorating gutters sometimes allow water to leak near the foundation of a home, contributing to basement flooding.

Fall is an ideal time to inspect gutters and have any issues fixed before leaves begin to fall or harsh winter weather arrives.
Get ahead of chimney repair this season

Woodburning fireplaces or fuel stoves can add warmth and ambience to a home. These appliances are particularly coveted in the cooler months when people spend more time indoors. Maintenance is necessary in order for fireplaces and stoves to function safely, and that upkeep must include paying close attention to the functionality of the chimney. Chimneys are designed to last for decades. Cracks and spalling in brick chimneys are common concerns that can cause significant damage if left unchecked.

Chimney maintenance involves more than cleaning the flue. Rather than running the risk of costly repairs, which can cost several thousand dollars, homeowners can take some simple steps to keep their chimneys in tip-top shape. Certain components of chimney maintenance are do-it-yourself tasks, while others may be better left to the professionals.

Start from the inside and ensure that dampers are working properly. When using fireplaces and other appliances, dampers need to be open to allow smoke to vent outside; otherwise, smoke will be trapped in the home and could lead to carbon monoxide buildup. Dampers need to be fixed or replaced if they are not operational. Replacement fireplace dampers should be snug and not have any gaps, states Vertical Chimney Care.

Conduct a visual inspection of the chimney to check for any cracks or spalling. Spalling is the wearing away of masonry due to water, weather and time. If enough of the material erodes, that erosion can adversely affect the structural integrity of the chimney. Some repairs can be made by patching up cracks or replacing missing bricks. Chimney tuckpointing is the process of repairing mortar.

Think about waterproofing the chimney to prevent damage. A water sealant applied to the outside of the chimney can prevent moisture from breaking down the masonry.

Inspect and replace the chimney cap if it is worn out. A chimney cap is a contraption that sits atop the chimney to allow the smoke to vent while also preventing critters and water from going inside the flue, helping to extend the flue life. The chimney cap attaches to the flue liner, so outside dimensions should be taken to ensure the cap is the right size for the chimney.

Have the chimney swept. Sweeping helps remove the soot and debris that clings to the inside of the flue, known as creosote. The amount of time the fireplace is used will determine how often the chimney must be cleaned. Generally speaking, the chimney liner needs to be cleaned if it has 1/8-inch or more of soot. Regular inspection and maintenance can help keep a chimney working safely for decades. For those who do not like working at such an elevation, leave exterior chimney repair to a certified professional.

Simple ways to improve a kitchen pantry

People have been spending more time at home in 2020 than in years past, and certain projects around the house have become a priority. One home improvement idea that serves the double benefit of creating organization and making cooking at home more efficient is to reimagine the kitchen pantry.

A pantry is a room or closet where food, beverages and linens or dishes are stored. Pantries can be highly useful spaces that provide ancillary storage in kitchens. Many modern homes are equipped with pantries, but older homes may require some modification to create more useful pantries. Whether starting from scratch or modifying an existing pantry, these tips can help projects go more smoothly.

Maximize vertical storage. Utilizing vertical areas can help increase storage capacity. Build in extra nooks by investing in undershelf storage baskets. These baskets can instantly create designated areas for different types of ingredients. Homeowners also can look for ways to use the inside of cabinet doors or add extra shelves on walls or in eaves.

Consider your needs. Figure out which items you would like to store in the pantry and then shop for corresponding storage systems. For example, storage solutions may feature pull-out drawers are convenient. Pull-out drawers can reduce the need to seek and reach for items. These drawers conveniently roll out so items in the back can be accessed without disturbing foods in the front. Drawers can be custom built for any pantry space.

Make it accessible. Think about who will be taking items from the pantry. Put children’s snacks on the bottom pantry shelf where they can reach them, and then organize other shelves for adults in the home. A pantry remodel can add valuable storage space and make one of the busiest rooms in the house operate more efficiently.
Does it seem like your hamper is always full and the washing machine is running constantly? You may not be imagining it. Laundry Butler for You, a wash, dry and fold service, says the average household washes 50 pounds of laundry a week and 6,000 articles of clothing every year. Families with children at home are doing laundry most often, and those with pets may find there is ample laundry to wash as well. With so much laundry being generated, homeowners may want to consider paying extra attention to the space in the house where their clothing is being cleansed. Laundry room renovations may not top homeowners’ priority lists, but it may be time to give these rooms another look.

Assess your equipment
If your appliances are aging, a laundry room renovation can start with an investment in new appliances. New models have large capacity loads, tend to be energy-efficient and could have innovative features that help fit with your laundry lifestyle. Purchasing front-loading models also can free up design space, as you can install a counter directly above the units, saving room for other items like drying racks.

Figure out your room needs
A laundry room need not be limited to laundry only. Many homeowners make large laundry rooms catch-all spaces that can serve as utility or mud rooms, pantry overflows, or off-season storage areas. Consider the functions you want the room to serve and include those ideas in your designs.

Add some natural light
If possible, include a window in your laundry room. Natural light can help make the room more enjoyable. It also can help you identify stains on clothes that need to be addressed and make it easier to fold matching items like socks.

Think about a utility sink
Many washing machines drain out directly to waste pipes in the floor or wall, but you also can opt to have them empty into a utility sink. This sink also provides a convenient place to handwash items, clean tools or paintbrushes, or store items that perhaps you do not want to bring into a bathroom or kitchen sink.

Include some flair
This utilitarian space need not be boring or bereft of design elements. Mirror your home’s style in the laundry room, and include wall hangings, plants, accent items, and even task lighting. Play up certain features with a bold floor tile or brightly colored walls.

Updating laundry rooms can be a great way to make doing laundry more enjoyable and efficient.
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