

# 5 Tools to Put Yourself in Business

**Advice from a long-time freelancer on the best software and home office equipment you need to start working for yourself.**

By **James A. Martin** | August 15, 2012

In 1994, when I started my freelance writing/marketing business, I bought a dial-up modem, a fax machine, and a landline phone with built-in answering machine.

Oh, how times have changed.

Over 18 years of self-employment, I've tried all sorts of home office equipment, accessories, and technologies. The following are the foundations of my business: the software, Web services, and tools that keep me productive.



## Telephone System: Google Voice

With [Google Voice](#), I can make domestic long-distance calls for free and international calls cheaply. My number rings simultaneously on my home-office landline and iPhone. I receive an email whenever a voicemail is left. The voicemail is transcribed into text—not very accurately, but usually it's enough to get the gist. And I can send a text message to multiple recipients (and receive messages) for free.

## Time Tracking: Toggl

I've tried a handful of time-tracking software and services over the years. [Toggl](#) is my favorite. It's a Web-based service with a clock timer that makes it super easy to track hours by project and client. Free Mac, Windows, Linux, iOS and Android apps sync with your Toggl data in the cloud. The basic plan, which I use, is free. For \$5 a month, you can import time-tracking data into [Basecamp](#), [QuickBooks](#), and [FreshBooks](#), among other features.

## Personal Database: Bento

Database programs have always seemed impenetrable to me: hard to learn and use, expensive, and boring. FileMaker's [Bento](#) for Mac OS breaks these patterns beautifully.

At \$49, it's way more affordable than most database programs. It's not only easy to use but fun, too. And if the many included templates for creating databases aren't enough, download more (free) from [Bento template exchange](#). I track projects and keep client notes with Bento, but these are just two of its countless uses. If you don't own a Mac but have an iPad, good news: [Bento 4 for iPad](#) (\$10) is a full-featured database tool in its own right. If you have a Mac *and* an iPad, you can sync files between them.

## Other Stuff I Recommend

\* I use an Excel spreadsheet template for invoicing and another spreadsheet for tracking invoices. You'll find plenty of free [Excel service invoice templates](#) online.

\* For me, Quicken and QuickBooks are overkill. [Mint.com](#) is all I need for bookkeeping.

\* Everyone knows Skype is great for video chats. But it's also an easy way to share your screen with others. That feature is free for sharing between two people. You'll need [Skype Premium](#) (\$5 monthly and up) to share with multiple parties.

\* Ergonomics are critical for work-at-homers. A split [Kinesis Freestyle keyboard](#) (\$99 to \$139, for PCs and Macs) has rescued me from tendonitis (or worse).

\* A [WorkRite workstation](#), which can be raised or lowered with a button press, has spared me lower-back pain and the dreaded 'fanny fatigue.' Beginning around \$1,300, WorkRite motorized workstations aren't cheap. But like a good mattress, they're worth it.

\* To avoid neck cricks, invest in a quality telephone headset. [Hello Direct](#) has a good selection.

**Bionote:**

[James A. Martin](#) is a writer and consultant specializing in online reputation management, SEO, social media and blogging. He's the author of the blog [Martin on Mobile Apps](#). Follow him on [Twitter](#).