

Introduction

Need a building fast? Office trailers, also known as mobile offices, are one of the best solutions. Office trailers are pre-manufactured buildings, typically leased for temporary office space. (Modular buildings, in contrast, are custom-built to a user's specifications, are usually more permanent, and are typically more expensive.)

With both types of buildings, construction takes place in a factory-controlled environment. Office trailers are delivered to dealers for rental or sale complete with windows, doors, wiring, heat, air conditioning, and even some basic furnishings.

By far the most common usage of office trailers is in construction, mainly as on-site offices for contractors. They're also popular as sales offices and temporary workspace for employees displaced by remodeling or other construction. Office trailers also provide temporary space for health care, education, professional offices, and industrial applications.

Office trailers are an inexpensive solution for anyone who needs temporary space. This **BuyerZone Office Trailers Buyer's Guide** will help you understand what you should know before you start looking for an office trailer, what your options are, how the buying process works, and how much you can expect to pay.

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Pricing guidelines

The exact price you'll pay to rent a trailer will vary quite a bit depending on your location, the size and condition of the trailer you choose, and how long you choose to rent it. And in addition to the base fee, you'll pay additional charges for delivery, setup, rental steps, skirting, and removal. Here are some rough guidelines – details are on page 5.

Size	Monthly rental costs
8' x 20'	\$90 to \$200
10' x 40'	\$150 to \$300
12' x 60' (singlewide)	\$300 to \$500

Office trailer basics

There are four main questions you need to answer before you're ready to shop for an office trailer:

- **How much space (land) do you have to put it on?** Make sure you measure the available room for your trailer. Having a trailer delivered only to find that it partially blocks a driveway or sidewalk is an expensive and embarrassing mistake.
- **How do you plan to use it?** A trailer that will be used as a sales or construction office will differ from a classroom or storage trailer. Knowing the use will help the dealer show you appropriate trailers.
- **How many people will it house?** A very rough rule of thumb is that for general office applications, you need 100 to 150 sq ft per person, so a 12' x 60' single-wide trailer, with 720 sq ft, can handle 5 or 6 people. This will change as you include bathrooms, meeting rooms, or storage space.
- **How long do you need it for?** 80% to 90% of office trailers are leased, not sold. Knowing how long you'll need yours for will help determine the price you'll pay and availability.

Once you know these answers, you can consider the size and type of trailer you need.

What size do you need?

Office trailers are available in widths of 8', 10', 12', and occasionally 14', and lengths of 16' to 60'. At the upper end, 12' x 60' is a "singlewide", and a doublewide is 24' x 60' – simply two singlewides put together. Some common sizes are 8' x 24', 8' x 36', 10' x 30', 10' x 40' or 42', 12' x 50', and 12' x 60'. Every dealer will have different sizes in stock and can help you determine which size is right for you based on occupancy, use, and available space.

One important caveat: not all dealers measure size the same way. To best compare sizes, make sure your dealers are quoting you sizes based on the size of the box – the usable floor space. Some dealers include the trailer "tongue" in their measurements – that's the piece that connects to a hitch for towing – and that adds four feet. While that external dimension is useful to know for site planning, that extra four feet does not give you any more space inside. You should specifically ask for both internal and external dimensions.

The term of your lease may affect the size, as well: generally, smaller buildings are leased for shorter terms. 12' x 60's or doublewides are usually set up for 1 or 2 year terms, while the smallest units are more often used for 1 to 6 month jobs.

Choosing a trailer

It's common to find a mobile offices in a vendors' fleets that is ten or more years old. While vendors do clean and repair their units between rentals, older offices may have more wear and tear, so ask how old the unit you're considering is. If it's more than ten years old, ask if it's been refurbished or had any major repairs recently.

If you're working with a dealer in your local area, you should visit them and check out the unit: there's no better way to get a sense of the condition of the trailer than taking a look yourself. Some dealers will email you digital pictures of the units, as well, which is great if you're not able visit the dealership.

Because their use is almost always temporary, it's best to emphasize features and price when choosing a mobile office, as opposed to appearance or durability. Here are some of the interior features you should evaluate.

Basic mobile office configuration

Mobile offices are all wired for basic electricity, usually including overhead fluorescent lights. Newer models may also include some basic telephone wiring, but you won't find computer networking cable built-in.

In most cases, mobile offices have built-in two-drawer file cabinets and desks for each workstation. A plan table for holding and reviewing blueprints is a common addition.

You'll usually have several options for interior configurations. So many construction sites have a need for both a

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small office and extra storage space for tools and equipment that the “office/storage combination” is a popular option at many office trailer dealerships. These are typically smaller trailers that provide an office at one end and storage space at the other.

Other options include private offices with interior doors and walls and conference tables. Keep in mind that the more specific your configuration needs are, the fewer models you’ll be able to choose from – try to go in with a general idea of the setup you want, but be flexible.

If your mobile office is going to be open to the public, you may have significant additional work to do to satisfy the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This will include ramps to all entrances, wheelchair-accessible bathrooms, and more. Make sure to talk to a general contractor or civil engineer about these types of concerns.



Climate control

Almost all mobile offices include heat and air conditioning – but what kind? Smaller models often have electric baseboard heating and through-wall air conditioning. Some vendors will give you the option of propane heat, which is much cheaper than electric heat found in most trailers.

Larger and/or newer models more commonly include central HVAC systems that do a much better job of climate control while reducing your utility bills. Mobile offices are usually insulated to some degree, but not as well as more permanent structures, so your heating and cooling costs are important to consider.

Restrooms

If you’re getting a model larger than 8’ x 30’, you’ll probably have the option to include a bathroom. This can be “nice” or essential, depending on your usage plans. Keep in mind that restrooms in most mobile offices can be easily connected to water and sewage lines, giving you a bathroom with running water instead of the standalone chemical toilet found at most construction sites.

Some smaller mobile offices may only have the option for a chemical toilet, which is less desirable in most cases but can still be better than a separate facility.



Security

Project managers and general contractors know that construction sites are tempting targets for thieves and vandals. Depending on your location and situation, you may want to investigate available security features. Ask if the doors include deadbolt locks or security bars and if the windows include security screens to prevent break-ins. For additional security, you might want to look into closed circuit television systems, as well.

Exterior

If you’re setting up a sales office or classroom, the appearance of your trailer is more of a concern. While “construction grade” trailers are typically plain boxes, some suppliers also offer more upscale trailers with such improvements as vinyl siding, louvered windows, and shingle roofs. If you don’t want your trailer to look like a construction office, be sure to ask about these options.

You can improve the look of any trailer with a skirt – a strip of material that covers the gap between the bottom of the trailer and the ground, covering the wheels and anchors underneath the trailer. In most cases you’ll also want to rent a set of stairs for each door.

Choosing a dealer

The office trailer industry has gone through significant consolidation in recent years. Smaller office trailer dealers either went out of business or were purchased by national chains. Now even the “small” dealers have millions of dollars of trailers in inventory and can handle the largest orders.

You will almost always be obtaining your trailer from a dealer, not a manufacturer: few factories work directly with the public. However if you find a factory that does go direct, there’s no reason to shy away: you may get a slightly better price when dealing directly with a manufacturer, although delivery charges from their location could cancel those savings out entirely.

Reputation and longevity are two factors to evaluate when choosing a dealer. Word-of-mouth is important because there are relatively few dealers: we suggest talking to any contacts you have in the construction industry to get a good sense of who the better office trailer dealers in your area are. And because customers who rent office trailers tend to do so repeatedly, the best dealers tend to stay in business for years and years.

Established dealers should be able to put you in touch with references who they have long-standing relationships with. Some sample questions to get a sense of a dealer’s reputation:

- How long have you worked with this dealer? How often do you rent or buy from them?
- Are their deliveries and installations on time and to spec?
- Did you get the right trailer for your needs?
- What could the dealer improve about their operation?
- Are they flexible enough to respond when you have unusual requests?

Local or not?

Some customers prefer working with a local vendor whenever they can – and when the subject is office trailers, this provides a couple of advantages. First is a very simple cost consideration: you’ll be paying a delivery fee that can range from \$1.50 to \$6.00 per mile. If the two dealers you’re considering are 30 and 50 miles away, there’s not enough of a cost difference to worry about, but if one is 30 miles away and the other is 150, make sure to factor in the increased delivery cost.

Also, be aware that states have differing limits on the size of trailers that can be legally transported over the road. If you’re ordering a trailer from another state, be sure you know the size limits in every state it will have to pass through.

Another consideration is repairs. If you’re leasing your trailer, the dealer will be responsible for any and all needed repairs, so having a dealer who’s relatively nearby can improve their response time.

What to watch out for

If you come across a dealer who is new to the business and only sells trailers – that is, they don’t lease them – you might want to investigate a little more closely. In an industry where 80% of the business is leasing, only handling sales can be an indication that someone is only trying to make a quick buck. Their lack of commitment to the industry can increase your chances of getting a bad deal.

You should also be careful of high-pressure sales tactics, even at larger, reputable firms. Even the best companies can hire over-aggressive salespeople sometimes – so be cautious if you hear sales pitches that include old nuggets like



“We just had a big order cancel” and “If you don’t sign today, you’ll miss this great deal.”

Delivery and setup

Once you choose a dealer to work with and pick out a portable office, you’ll sign a fairly standard lease agreement that outlines all the relevant terms. You will have to show proof of insurance, both liability and property, before signing a contract. Established businesses will usually have to pay the first month’s rent and all setup fees, while individuals or new businesses may be asked to pay a damage deposit and/or the last month’s rent, as well.

Delivery usually takes 5 to 10 days. If you need your trailer sooner, you may be able to pay extra to get a rush shipment, but in some cases the dealer’s schedule just won’t allow it.

Once it’s delivered, installation of a portable office is fairly simple. No real site prep needs to be done in advance – an appropriately-sized patch of semi-level land is all it takes. The delivery crew will use cinder blocks to stabilize and level the trailer. They’ll also install appropriate ground anchors depending on the soil conditions.

If you’ve rented steps and skirting for the portable office – both of which are strongly recommended – they’ll install those as well. However you’ll need to supply an electrician and plumber to connect utilities. Both are less than an hour’s work for a professional if you have power and water supplies nearby.

Pricing

Pricing for mobile offices varies from state to state, from dealer to dealer, and even from month to month at the same dealer. It’s a very price competitive industry since most dealers rent trailers that come from the same few manufacturers so there’s little difference in features or quality.

The geographic price differences are fairly predictable: the Northeast and West Coast are the most expensive, the Midwest is more average, and the South is the least expensive. A trailer that costs \$250 per month in Illinois might go for \$350 in Connecticut, but only \$150 in Alabama.



Dealers price their trailers according to demand, as well. As the construction business heats up in the spring and summer and their inventories go down, dealers will raise prices to compensate. This hurts short-term renters the most: to protect themselves from lost business, trailer dealers may adopt three month minimums on their most popular sizes. On the flip side, if a dealer’s lot is filled with unrented trailers, they’re likely to drop prices.

If you’re leasing a trailer for a year or more, you’ll also see some price breaks, potentially as much as 30% compared to a three-month rental.

Typical rental prices

Here are a few typical price ranges. Note that these are ranges only – depending on the factors described above, you could easily do better or worse than these guidelines.

The smallest common size, an 8’ x 20’ trailer, will usually cost between \$90 and \$200 per month. Most mid-sized trailers, such as a 10’ x 40’, will fall in the range of \$150 to \$300. Singlewides, at 12’ x 60’, commonly start around \$300 and can range up to around \$500.

Again, your pricing will vary considerably. Because office trailer dealers are so competitive on price, you may be able to negotiate your way to a better deal simply by talking to multiple suppliers and comparing their costs.

Additional fees

You can expect to pay \$20 to \$40 per month to rent steps – and you’ll need one set for each door to your trailer.

Delivery charges vary from \$1.50 to \$6.00 per mile, depending on location and the width of the trailer: 12’ trailers are

much more difficult to transport than 8'.

Setup charges can include a number of fees. Basic setup – blocking and leveling – is usually under \$200. Depending on soil conditions, you may need anchors to secure your trailer, which can add \$250 to \$500 to the installation fee – larger trailers will require more anchors. Adding a skirt that hides the wheels and undercarriage can be \$400 to \$800. And the electrician and plumber you need to hook up the trailer can add another \$100 or \$200.

One set of charges many people do not consider are for **removing** the trailer at the end of the lease. Everything we just described as part of setup needs to be undone: blocking, anchors, and skirting. Unblocking may be \$50 to \$150, removing anchors may add another hundred, and removing a skirt will cost about half of what it cost to install. You'll be have to pay the shipping charge back to the dealership, as well. All told, you can figure on \$300 to \$1000 to uninstall the trailer.

Buying v. leasing

As mentioned before, the vast majority of the office trailer market is in leasing, not buying. The main reason is that monthly rental fees for trailers are very cheap considering the their total cost.

As an example, a used 10 x 46 trailer that rents for \$250 per month might cost \$15,000 to buy. That's 5 years of rental fees – and it's a capital investment, instead of operating costs, which can have tax implications. However if you plan to use your trailer for three years or more, you should at least do the math and compare.

If you are buying a trailer, make *sure* you see it for yourself: just like you wouldn't buy a used car without test driving it, you should check an office trailer inside and out before committing to buy it.

Most used trailers are sold either "as-is" or with short 90 day warranties.

Buying a new trailer can cost you \$15,000 to \$40,000. It's an expensive proposition – and as such, only worthwhile if you intend to use the trailer regularly for years at a time. If you do have the need for a new trailer, you'll be able to order one with exactly the features you want, since the factory will be producing it to your specifications. You'll also typically get a one year warranty.

Buying tips

- **Read the fine print.** There are quite a few different costs and fees associated with renting a mobile office, so be sure you read the contract carefully and understand all the charges you're liable for and when they're due. This includes delivery and installation, cleaning and repair charges, and removal fees.
- **How long can you keep it?** Ask about what happens if you want to extend your lease. Some dealers will charge significant premiums if you want to add a month or two at the end of a multi-year lease. Other include automatic renewal clauses that kick in unless you say otherwise.
- **Setup counts.** The installation of a mobile office can have a big impact on your satisfaction: it needs to be level, solidly blocked, and properly skirted. Make sure the setup crew does a good job – and don't hesitate to ask the dealer for adjustments.
- **Avoid "rent to own."** Just like rent-to-own programs for consumer goods, these programs are usually a bad financial idea. Monthly rents for office trailers are low enough that you should stick with traditional leases.

