



Backing Up is Hard to Do

(Three Steps To Fail Proof)



I'VE TALKED about it, written about it, warned about it, worried about it, and even implemented it with varying degrees of success. Our office always has meant to do it consistently, but in retrospect, we never gave it the appropriate attention. In fact, over the years it was a task whose only consistency was that it consistently was neglected and forgotten.

Until recently, backing up critical data was a time-consuming and troublesome little annoyance that all computer users knew they should do, but didn't. Backing up data correctly can be a difficult undertaking. In many offices, the intention to back up is there, however, most computer users lack the devotion to follow through consistently. It does not need to be this way.

One: Centralization

Like many agencies, our office has several computers scattered about. Every producer and employee has a computer, and each of them has his or her own way of working. Part of the difficulty in backing up critical data in an agency setting is the number of locations in which data usually is stored.

To solve this complexity, agencies should implement a network and a centralized file server to hold the information. When properly implemented, all of the critical data within the agency will be stored on the server, not on every person's computer. After the data has been centralized, it is easier to protect it and back up.

A key item to remember is that data and programs should be treated differently. Computer software can be reinstalled, as can the operating system. The letters we write, the spreadsheets we build, and data we place in our programs, however, are irreplaceable. The data needs to be backed up.

Producers should avoid the natural tendency to want to back up every file and program on their computer. It usually is not necessary and only makes the process of backing up more time-consuming. The producer should identify the data that is important and move it to the server.

To ensure data is centralized, all computers on a network should have "mapped" drives to the server. While most programs default to the "My Documents" folder, many will allow the user to define file locations for the data. As an example, in Microsoft Word the user may click "Tools" -> "Options" -> and then click the file locations tab to specify where the default location should be.

I would recommend an agency or producers seek the help of a skilled network administrator to establish the network, set up the shared drive, and install the back-up system. The extra dollars invested here may help avoid undue frustration.

Two: Duplication

Several things should be kept in mind when storing information in a centralized location. First, the server used should have some form of fail over for the data that is stored there. The minimum requirement would be "mirrored drives." This option is found in Windows 2000 Professional, XP Professional, or any of the Windows Server software series. Windows 95, 98, 98SE, Millennium or XP Home Edition do not offer disk mirroring.

With mirrored drives, information written on one drive is duplicated on a second identical drive. As information changes, both drives are updated. If one drive were to develop a problem or fail, the alternate drive automatically would be used until the failed drive was replaced.

A RAID controller is a slightly more sophisticated approach whereby data is written over two or more

drives at a time. If a drive fails in a RAID array, the data that was on the failed drive can be rebuilt from the data on the remaining good drives. Servers with RAID controllers usually are more expensive. Number-crunching power in a file server is not necessary. After all, doling out information to users on a network is not such an intensive task. The producer should invest instead in faster and larger hard drives.

Three: Off-Site Storage

What one uses to back up probably depends more on the amount of data than anything else. Most computers today come with CD/RW or DVD/RW drives that enable the computer to write data to disk. For the individual producer or home user, this form of back-up may be fine; for larger volumes of data, however, a dedicated back-up system still should be considered.

Computer users have used tape-back storage devices with great success for many years. An alternate option that may be implemented is to copy critical data to another computer on the network. The problem with the last scenarios, however, is that the backup data remains in the same location with the original data. If there ever were a fire or theft, it is possible to lose everything. Ideally, backed-up data should be stored securely off site.

Recently our office signed up with an online back-up provider. This provider, <http://ias.backupmybusiness.com>, is one of many service providers that enable users to back up their critical data to a remote location through the Internet. I looked at many similar companies, and the pricing, service, and simplicity of this company's software made this solution an obvious hands-down winner. Online back-up services eliminate most, if not all, of the headaches usually associated with backing up.

Agencies are digitizing more. More and more producers are scanning documents for storage instead of keeping bulky physical files. Backing up these documents is a critical part of the process.

In today's computerized modern world, backing up the information we use every day becomes increasingly important. For most of us, allowing more than a day between back-ups is too long. With the amount of information and the number of tasks for which the producer uses a computer, he or she quickly should realize that it would be almost impossible to recall even a half day's worth of work.

Producers and agencies that do not back up their data are catastrophes waiting to happen. Knowing that our data is properly stored on our mirrored network drives and backed up to a remote location enables me to sleep better at night.