

Basic of backing up: Do it often enough

By ARATI BECHTEL

Backing up is crucial, and everyone will say so, with emphasis. If you lose files or data, people may chide you for neglecting this important responsibility.

Yet, according to one estimate, not even 10 percent of computer users back up their personal data, says James Wanyoike, an information technology consultant with Work Smart in Durham.

Your files at work, if saved to your office network, are probably backed up regularly. But you may not be backing up your home files often enough.

So how should you approach backups?

Backing up means creating copies of files or data important to you. You may face hardware or software problems, such as a hard drive crash or a virus infection, that temporarily prevent you from using your computer. But if you've backed up your files, you can still access them using another computer.

Which files should you back up? Wanyoike says you should make backup copies of everything on your computer that you cannot replace from a CD or download from the Internet.

These items may include digital photos, spreadsheets, tax returns, database files, Web browser favorites, e-mail files, e-mail address books and word-processing files, such as a resume. You can reinstall your operating software and applications from CDs, so you don't need to back them up.

"When backing up my files, I think to myself: What would I be upset over if I lost it tomorrow? For me the answer is digital pictures, a few spreadsheets and my Quicken data," says Clay Harris, vice president of Work Smart.

In addition to figuring out what you need to backup, you will need to decide where you'll save your backups. You could save backup files on ZIP disks or CDs. Backing up to a CD is likely to be a suitable answer for many computer users because CD writers are ubiquitous, blank CDs are inexpensive and, when written, CDs are accessible by many other computers.

Other possible destinations for backup files include online storage space, DVDs using a DVD-rewritable drive, tapes using a tape drive and a second hard drive, often external. But performing backups to a second hard drive may not be the best solution, says Scott McClure, a technology consultant in Maryland. "The drive's still connected to the PC; so your backup goes if the PC goes," he says.

You can use software to help automate backing up, but many of the applications are pricey and designed for corporate computer networks. One option for home users is to try the backup program that comes with Windows or with their Iomega ZIP drives. Also, Harris recommends Stomp's BackUp My PC software (<http://www.stompinc.com/>)

But Harris also says you can skip backup software altogether: "You can just as easily pick and choose files to back up using your normal CD-writing software, such as Roxio's Easy CD Creator, or other burning programs. In Windows XP, you can drag and drop to write files to a blank CD."

Techniques include comprehensive or partial backups, Wanyoike says. "A comprehensive (or full) backup is the least complicated but does involve more files and thus more time and space. Partial backups, on the other hand, are much faster, as they include only those files that are changing on a regular basis," he explains.

Backup frequency will depend on how often your files change. So observe your own computer habits and consider how losing a day's, week's or month's worth of data would affect you. If you would lose a lot in one day, then back up daily. For many computer users, weekly backups are sufficient.

Wanyoike offers some final tips. If you automate your backups, ensure they are taking place successfully. Make sure you carefully label your back-up media, so you can easily find what you need when you need it. And to protect your data against fire, flood, theft or other disaster, consider storing a comprehensive backup away from your house.

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