

TECHNOLOGY Matters

SHEDDING SOME LIGHT ON THE MANY MYSTERIES OF OUR FAST-PACED HIGH TECH WORLD.



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Back Up to Speed

It is a beautiful Monday morning and you walk through your office door without a care in the world. Life is good and business is good until...

- "Where is my computer? It was on my desk when I left."
- "Why won't my computer work?"
- "What is that odd smell emanating from the server closet?"

Let's face it, computers are machines and machines can break, get lost or stolen. Computer problems can bring your daily business to a screeching halt. The resulting loss of time and money can be catastrophic to your company, and can potentially put you out of business. The solution: Be prepared—have a backup and recovery plan for your computer systems.

BACKUP OPTIONS

There are a variety of options available which can provide adequate backup of your computer systems. They range in complexity from manual daily procedures that copy your files and store them in an off-site location to automated services which use the Internet to provide backup and recovery services.

1. One basic method uses the free Windows backup functions already on your computer like "Windows Backup" on Windows 2000, XP or Windows Server. If you are using Vista, look for "Backup Status and Configuration" and "Backup and Restore Center." You identify the files and data you want to backup and then select where the data will be stored as the target or destination drive (for example: a USB drive).

How long it takes to backup will depend on the size of the files/data being backed up. On completion, the backup software displays what was backed up and how much space was used. Unplug your USB drive and store it for safe-keeping. For detailed instructions on using Win-

dows backup, use your computer's search function and look for "steps for backing up."

2. A second option is to purchase backup software to load on your computer. One option is software which creates an "image" of your computer's hard drive, such as "Acronis." This software makes a "Bootable Rescue CD" using an external USB drive. If you have a system crash, you can put a brand new hard drive in the workstation/server that crashed, boot off the latest rescue CD and restore the entire computer contents including the operating system.
3. A third option is to backup your data off-site using some type of Internet backup and recovery service. These services normally charge a fee based on the amount of information you are backing up. In most cases, the charge is per gigabyte. Prices will vary based on many conditions, so it is important to evaluate all the features and options provided to ensure they best fit your needs.

Another consideration when using an off-site backup is the speed of your Internet connection. Internet backups are only a practical option for high speed connections like DSL or cable. When performing the initial (full) backup, the process could take several hours to a couple of days to complete depending on the speed of your connection and the amount of data to be backed up. Thereafter, if using incremental backups, the differences that need to be backed up could take anywhere between a few seconds and many minutes. It all depends on how much your local data changes.

EVALUATING YOUR OPTIONS

As you evaluate how to backup your system, there are several questions to consider:

- Who will be responsible for performing the backup procedure?
- What are the risks from different kinds of com-



puter problems? Computer theft? A desktop computer breaking? A server problem? A lost laptop? If your laptop is lost, what problem will it cause? What private confidential information might be lost? What equipment is critical?

- What systems and data would be critical for you to recover?
- How often should your system be backed up: daily, every other day, weekly? For example, if you backup weekly on Friday, could you recover adequately on the following Thursday?
- Where will you store your backup files? Off-site storage is recommended, so how will the backup file be delivered off-site?
- How many versions of your backup files will you retain off-site? If you are backing up to a USB drive, you may choose to have multiple USBs to rotate through off-site storage.
- Should you do full backups each time or supplemented with incremental backups? An incremental backup saves only changes made since the last backup was performed.

These are some of the questions you should consider. How they apply to your business will depend on whether your systems are standalone, networked or hosted.

CHECK WITH YOUR SOFTWARE VENDOR

As property managers, your primary concern is your property management software and accounting/financial systems.

Often, your best resource for investigating backup and recovery issues is your property management software supplier. Your software company understands your business, your computer system and data. It is to their benefit to assist you with backup issues. If you experience a problem, you will probably call them first. Speaking from personal experience as a property management IT professional, it is easier for everyone involved if you address the problem before it happens.


At a minimum, your software supplier can offer guidelines for backup requirements. Many have backup and recovery documentation specific to their system. If they provide it, the best option often is an integrated backup and recovery service they offer exclusively for their clients.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

- It is often recommended to keep a daily/weekly backup and also a monthly backup off-site. This approach allows you to recover from a problem which isn't recognized for several days or weeks such as an operational issue or malicious destruction of data by a disgruntled employee.
- Backup utilities typically backup only closed files. Your databases cannot be backed up by the utilities when the databases are open.
- Check with your software provider or consult their documentation to ensure that all the necessary files are backed up. Some systems have .log files in addition to the .db files.
- Consider if there are additional files associated with your software which needs to be backed up such as Word documents, Excel spreadsheets, and pictures/media files.
- Verify your backup files to ensure that the backup procedures worked properly. Problems can occur such as bad storage media or if your files are open at the time you do the backup.

You can test your restore procedures by restoring to a different computer separate from your production system. This will also help you to be familiar with the restore process.

ACT NOW

The main thing to remember is that having any kind of backup will get you back up to speed faster than having nothing at all. The more recent the backup, the faster you will be up and running again. 

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