

Computer back-ups save heartache



By Spencer Kelly
BBC Click Online

Backing up your computer is terribly boring, but when your machine inexplicably dies, you will regret not doing it.

The great advantage about keeping your data on paper is that it is pretty resilient.

Short of fire, flood or the shredder, the information will survive and you can still read it.

When you are storing electronic data on a hard drive, however, it is much easier to mess it up.

In the past, a disk head crashing into a piece of dust on a spinning hard drive would have roughly the same effect on your data as a car crashing into a wall.

Although modern, hermetically-sealed hard drives do not suffer from as much dust, everything moves really fast and your data is still vulnerable.

Keith Martin, technical editor of MacUser magazine, says: "There are two types of people. Those who have lost data, and those who will."

And he is right. Let's face it, few of us back up our precious files as often as we should.

The options

A quick web search will show there are plenty of software companies willing to do it for you.

But before you splash out, it is worth looking at the basic back-up facilities built in to Windows XP and Mac OS X

They require a modicum of competency, but are sophisticated enough to let you schedule regular back-ups, just so you do not forget.

After exploring the options, you can decide exactly what back-up features you need, and what package you may have to buy.

The most intuitive type of back-up takes a complete copy of your entire filing system - data, applications, even your operating system - and then writes that copy to a second hard drive.

This is a full-on disaster recovery solution offered by disk imaging packages. If something goes badly wrong, you just unpack the carbon copy of your files and continue working.

Some solutions go even further, giving you a panic button on the keyboard to kick off the recovery process.

A word of warning: keeping a back-up on the same drive as your data may be convenient, but it is not a great idea - hard drive crashes do not discriminate.

Backing up to a second drive is safer, but you are still vulnerable to viruses and power surges.

Rob Crampton of Hewlett Packard says: "If you have an unexpected power surge, it will fry and fuse the electrics on the motherboard. You can still retrieve your data, but it will be very expensive."

Where to put it

Keeping your back-up separate from your machine is much more sensible.

Your average home DVD-writer can now store almost 5GB on a single disk.

If you need more space then tapes, external hard drives and shareware - which chops up large files into manageable chunks - are all there to help.



How many of us have recently backed up our computer?



Although more robust than in the past, hard drives are still vulnerable

If you want to be even more secure, you can pay for your data to be taken off-site entirely. This is called online back-up, and you send your data across the net to a remote site - leaving it safe until you might need it.

Stephen Simpson says: "If you look at the likes of a floppy disk, CD-Rom or a Zip drive - which are probably the most popular ways to back up - they do have their limitations.

"For it to be totally worthwhile, you have to carry them with you.

"For example, say a sales guy is heading for a presentation in Birmingham.

"If his laptop crashes on the way, he'll need to be carrying those back-ups with him.

"However, if his laptop is stolen then his back-up is stolen as well - so he's scuppered."

Keith Martin of MacUser magazine agrees, saying: "Online back-up is quite convenient in that the data is then completely off-site.

"So if anything does go wrong, such as your house burning down, you can retrieve the data from anywhere else in the world.

"The only problem is that it can take a lot longer for files to be copied around, even with broadband."

But he also points out that you do not need to back up everything.

"If you back up your entire hard disk, it will take up a huge amount of space. It is much more efficient to just back up your work - not all your applications and your system.

"Presumably you would still know where all your installers were for your software and operating system, so you can go back to them to replace them."

Increments

Try configuring each of your pieces of software to save your work in one umbrella folder.

This is exactly what the Windows "My Documents" folder was made for. In fact, you do not even need to back up all your work every time.

Taking regular, full back-ups will not generally be necessary, since most of your files will not change much during their lifetime. An incremental back-up takes one full copy of the filing system, and then only records the changes that you make.

Because of this, subsequent back-ups run a lot quicker.

You will find most back-up programs have this incremental option. With storage becoming ever cheaper, backing up is becoming easier.

Choose what is best for you and get into a routine.

After all, there are many ways that your data can get frazzled.

“ Online back-up is quite convenient in that the data is then completely off-site ”

Keith Martin, technical editor of MacUser magazine