

THE COMPUTER CORNER

No. 200. Don't Allow Anything to Get Between You and Your Data!

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So, what the heck is Stan talking about now? Backups.

A friend of mine recently bought some software to make backups of his data, which he did. After his main machine's hard drive died, the backup software also failed, and he had no way of getting back the files to place them on a replacement hard drive. No, it was not junky backup software written by some unheard of company. It was a widely known, good company, that just had written bad software. Luckily, my friend only had to pay slightly under \$100 to get the data back from the failed hard drive, because it turned out to be an easy job for the data recovery company that did it. More difficult recovery jobs for corporations that have this problem often run into the thousands of dollars.

I have never been a fan of any software that takes your files and changes them to something other than their original format. I don't even care much for zipping the files, in case something should happen during the zip process. I am much happier with backup schemes that keep your data files in their original format, so that you can copy them or manipulate them at will. It is just safer.

I have written about my approach before, but just to reiterate, here it is in a nutshell. All of my computers have three partitions. C: is where Windows resides. D: is where all programs go during installation. E: is where my creations go (letters, notes, PowerPoint presentations, Access databases, and even a folder called Working for stuff that is not finished yet).

I have two types of backup. First, I actually pay for a terrific backup program (called GoodSynch) that makes sure the latest version of every file on the E: drive in my main machine is present on all 5 of our machines. In my wife's machine, it all goes into a folder on her E: drive called Stan's Stuff. When I run GoodSynch, it makes sure the latest version of every file on the E: drive in my wife's machine is copied to all the others, too, in Nancy's Stuff. I run that backup scheme with GoodSynch every time she or I have written something major that is new or we have changed something in an existing major file. That happens every few days, and it reassures us to know that every file is also present on all the other computers. By the way, those backups take 2 minutes and 33 seconds to accomplish on our home network. I just timed it. Easy enough to do!

The second type of backup is also simple. It consists of copying everything on our E: partition (remember, they are identical on all 5 machines) to a DVD. A CD is too small to hold all the data, unless I split the job into two CDs. So I just burn a DVD, and a single disk easily holds the entire E: partition's worth of data. It takes well under 10 minutes to burn one, which I do about every three months. Once a DVD backup is finished, both Nancy and I can erase any old files that we no longer need to keep on our hard drives.

In either back up scheme, the data (files) are in their native state, just the way they were on the hard drive from whence they came (although there are differences in the way they are written to a DVD platter and hard drive platter). They are not compressed or squeezed into some proprietary format or other and the filenames remain the same. Anything that can read a DVD or a hard drive can get them back. Oh yes. Some of my machines use FAT32 and others use NTFS formats. It makes not a whit of difference and all machines can read data from all others.

Yes, my scheme is redundant. But it is also pretty much the ultimate in safety. Don't forget, those of you who back up your stuff on line over the Internet -- to work, that scheme presupposes that your on-line backup company is still in business, and the Internet is up and running. My scheme depends only on my local network and hardware.

The other day I replaced a laptop with a new one. Once I had Windows up and running, it took only about 10 minutes to copy files and folders from the E: partition of another machine. I could have done it from any machine on my network, or even from a recent DVD backup. It was really easy. Enough said? Happy Computing!