

Lost Something?

By Jon Kenton

“You don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone.” I am sure you have all heard this before and can relate to it in many contexts. One area where this applies acutely is with loss of precious files and data from your computer. Does the following story resonate with you?

“I recently experienced a real computer catastrophe. I am not sure exactly what caused it (possibly a thunderstorm) but my PC crashed in a really bad way. I ended up getting a new system, which is great, but I ended up losing most of my files as they could not be recovered from the old disk. How do I stop this happening again?”

I heard this sorry tale from a friend of mine a few weeks ago. I answered, “what about your backups?” I received a nasty glare as he responded, “what backups!”

The most important thing about backing up is that you must actually do it. Whatever scheme you end up choosing, make sure you create a schedule and stick to it. Write it in your calendar, put sticky notes on your monitor, whatever works but do make those backups. There are numerous options to consider, the amount of data, cost, convenience, complexity and portability. There is also the issue of software such as various backup packages. In this article I am going to focus on where to store it safely. I prefer to use a KISS (Keep It Seriously Simple) approach. Create a copy of your valuable data files, documents and media somewhere other than your primary storage so any event that could damage that primary storage won’t do the same to the backup.

If you don’t have that much data and portability is a need then using CDs or DVDs or even flash drives would work. CDs have a max capacity of 800MB, regular DVDs are just less than 5GB and if your drive has the capability to do double layered and double sided the DVD capacity can be as much as 17GB. Blank CDs/DVDs are relatively cheap and you can match the capacities to your needs. For the best portability flash drives work well and are available with capacities as high as 8GB. The size and portability benefit comes at a higher price and doesn’t necessarily meet the requirements for longer term storage.

The fastest, largest capacity and best \$/MB option would be to use another hard drive. There are multiple ways to utilize a secondary hard disk for backup storage. All these options allow you to simply copy the files or directories you want to backup or archive to the second drive and they are instantly accessible. Here are some of the options and pros/cons:

1. Add another internal drive to your system. Speedy and simple but can't be removed and if your system does crash there is a chance that both disks will be damaged.
2. Use an external drive. This option is simply a hard drive in a small external independently powered unit, they commonly connect via USB. There is no need to take the skins off your system and the unit is simply "plug and play." You can either leave it permanently connected (may have similar dangers as option #1) or just attach it when you want to backup or restore files. It also has the benefit of being able to be stored away safely and can be connected to any other system if required.
3. Network attached drives. Rather more complex but does afford flexibility if you have multiple computers on your home network. If you have multiple systems at home you can share your storage across your workgroup (not too difficult to configure). You may then backup system A on system B and vice versa. There are products available that let you add storage as an independent unit on your wireless network. This option offers great flexibility but can be more complex to set up and if your network has problems you can't get to the storage.
4. All of the above options can be configured with removable hard drives. Drive units can be taken out and stored in a safe place. This option is more expensive but means you can isolate the physical unit and the data it contains. Remember to be truly effective you should store the unit away from the main unit. If you just remove the drive and leave it next to the system and you have a fire in your home the backup will be lost as well.

If you are really serious about your backup requirements you can subscribe to a 3rd party service. These options are more frequently used by businesses and are the most costly (monthly subscription fees) but usually the most secure. Data is archived off-site (anything that happens to your system or location won't affect your data) and the companies even offer backups of your backups. Search the web for "online backups" and you will find numerous options.

No matter which of these options you may choose the most important aspect is to develop a process that you follow on a regular basis. First identify the data you want to protect, create a series of folders on your backup media, name them appropriately (include a date), decide on the frequency of backup you need and then make sure you actually create the backup copies. Remember to start with KISS – Keep it Seriously Simple. There is no backup process in the world that will protect your data unless you use it. The three golden rules for protecting data are, make backups, make backups, MAKE BACKUPS.