If you live in a Vista world, synchronizing a laptop has come a long way since the painful and laborious days of Microsoft Briefcase. But since the overwhelming majority of laptops are running Windows XP, and because even old laptops no longer sport a serial port, the issue can be trickier. But that doesn't mean it's impossible.

Keeping a laptop and desktop machine in sync can be critical if you spend a lot of time working at client sites. Of course, you can always set up the laptop as a network node in its own right via wireless or an Ethernet connection and manually transfer the files. But this manual transfer is neither clean nor easy. Nor is the "Microsoft Easy Transfer" program a good solution, since it was built to help upgrade a machine from XP to Vista rather than everyday synchronization.

If you want to sync between a laptop running Windows XP and a desktop running Windows Vista, there's a better solution. Especially if you are looking to sync an Outlook *.PST file, which can run a gigabyte or more in size. Start by buying a USB-to-USB data transfer cable. I prefer the Belkin model, which is available at your nearest Wal-Mart for about $40. But there are others, including some cheaper cables available online. Remember to check that both the desktop machine and the laptop are running the same version of Microsoft Office, if you use that office suite. Microsoft makes this possible by giving a license to use your office copy of Office on two machines.

At this point, you should be able to plug the USB cable into a USB port on each computer and have the two recognize that they are on a network. In Vista, you can now see the laptop machine on the network via a direct connection. But synchronizing still requires another few steps.

First, you need to select the synchronization software. Microsoft has a handy

upgrade to the Pro Version. It's faster than SyncToy and offers the ability to synchronize not only via USB but over FTP, SFTP and WebDAV connections. Goodsync also enables chained synchronizations, as when you sync first to a USB storage device on a PC and then use the storage device to sync a laptop and a home computer.

While SyncToy from Microsoft is an excellent piece of work, more sophisticated offices and those with more demanding synchronization tasks will likely want to upgrade to Goodsync.

This process involves more than a few caveats. First and foremost, there are security considerations. If you plan to sync directly from one *.PST file to another, or from a documents folder, that folder will generally have to be shared on the network. This means if you are hacked when using the Wi-Fi connection at the airport or hotel lobby, your data is harder to protect.

Also, the process won't be speedy if you have a lot of data. This is especially true if your laptop is a little older and has only USB 1.0 ports instead of the newer 2.0 standard. This means you may want to set aside a little time during meetings or at night to do the sync, rather than when you are trying to work on either machine.

For the first time since I have carried a laptop, I have found it possible to simply and easily keep two machines with different operating systems in sync. That's a major advance. Now if we could only solve some of life's other vexing problems, like how to keep the chicken upright when doing beer-can chicken or how to keep your GPS unit from sending you into the middle of a corn field. I guess those will have to wait for another day.

Hello. It looks like you're using an ad blocker that may prevent our website from working properly. To receive the best experience possible, please make sure any blockers are switched off and refresh the page.

If you have any questions or need help you can email us

INTERNET SITE OF THE MONTH
The Mobile Office — http://mobileoffice.about.com