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By Guest Blogger, Gary Parker
If someone asked you "Did you backup today?", your reaction might include:

Getting a little personal, aren't you?
No problem – the reverse in my car's transmission works fine.
I'm macho, dude – I don't back up or down for nobody!
Do you mean my computer system?
Well, I've been meaning to get around to it, but I don't really want to think about it.

Let's discuss why and how you should backup your computer systems.
Why? First, we tend to treat computers like the electric utility, our bank or our car – we expect them to be there and available whenever we need them. Our computers are the same and they resemble our bank because they maintain
very valuable or needed information. On a personal level they may have our tax returns, our budgets and financial data and important letters plus files that we like such as songs or movies. Our business computers are even more critical. They will usually contain extremely important information like payrolls, general ledgers, accounts receivable, contracts, customer lists, calendars that could actually cause us to go out of business if we lost them.
So, what types of losses could occur? There are basically three types of losses that we are concerned about.
First is the "O fiddlesticks!" event. This is when we do things like making a serious mistake and then saving the file so that it is permanently set with the incorrect information. This is so named because you end saying "O Fiddlesticks" or maybe even words that are a bit more graphic.

The second is that something happens to your computer. The most common problem

so backups don't actually do any good. They will simply be backups of bad information. In order to be prepared for that, you will need software that can remember several versions of your documents. If after hours of work, you finished the only copy of notes from your meeting with your boss at 10:00 in preparation for an 11:00 review and then made a mistake at 10:15 which ruined everything, you normally would have a serious problem. However, this type of software keeps copies of older versions, so you simply go back to recover the 10:15 version. You will hear the computer geeks call this CDP, which stands for Continuous Data Protection.

In the second example, the hard drive on your local computer broke right after your hours of work. The computer itself is dumb and does not know anything if the disk drive is not feeling good. In order to retrieve valuable data such as your Romanian Tossed Salad recipe, you will want software that keeps your key information on a tape drive that is connected to your computer. Then, when the problem occurs, you will need to repair your computer, buy a new one or see if cousin Freddie still has that left over machine in his closet. You will need to reinstall the software that allows the computer to do work you need such as writing letters or balancing checks. When that software has been re-installed, you load the data from the backup tape that had been attached to the original machine. That is a bit of work, but is far less effort than having to re-create every thing you lost. Your computer friends will call this direct attached storage backup.

The third example is a bit like the first, but with one major difference. In this case, the whole house or office was destroyed, which meant that you not only lost your computer, but that little tape drive with all the backed up data is now a piece of burnt or soggy toast. You now have bigger problems than just the lost data, so you need a plan on how you will recover your business and

personal life. Once you use that preparation to work through the slight problem

using your business's computer network. When you talk to your computer friends, they will call your overall preparation a Disaster Recovery plan and your backup is a remote backup.

Ok, so what should you do? Well, the first step is to figure out your exposure by asking what will happen if I lost this information and then pick a course of action that is the easiest way to meet those needs.

If your Romanian Tossed Salad and other recipes could be recovered by going to the local library, maybe nothing.

If you only had a very few files that are critical, then the simplest approach would be to email them to yourself so that your email service provider would then have them on their system.

The next step up is using data storage that may be offered by your email service provider.

If your data is more critical, but you don't live on the San Andreas fault, in Kansas along tornado alley or on the Florida coast and you are right next to the local fire department, then you may think about simply acquiring an extra tape or disk drive and some backup software. Incidentally, there are ways to make the backup very efficient by only backing up changed information, but we will save that for another discussion.

Finally, if you do live in a higher risk area or you just want to feel safer, you can look at setting up systems to ship your tapes to a remote location or use your company network to send the information there.

Don't forget that the first problem of being able to correct your own mistakes requires a different type of software (see CDP above), not backup software, so be sure to consider whether or not you need that.

If you are thinking about the backup options and don't have computer experience, it would be a very good investment of time and money to have a

professional with storage experience help you select the right solution for

You want to take a level of response that is appropriate to your situation, so your options are to:

Do nothing.
Email files to your self or store them with your service provider
Buy backup software and a tape or disk drive
Set up a system to send tapes or data to a remote location.

In all cases you will need to decide whether to get software that also protects against mistakes (real-time data protection) and you should definitely ask for help when acquiring new systems.
Gary Parker is the Sr. Product Marketing Manager for BakBone
NetVault: Backup solutions. He has over 25 years in storage marketing and sales experience. Prior to BakBone, he was a top sales rep and sales manager, setting all time company records while at Sterling Software's storage management division. As a product manager at StorageTek (Sun), Mr. Parker tripled product sales, received numerous commendations and set up StorageTek's user group as marketing manager. He has a BS in Business with honors from University
of Arizona and an MBA from Golden Gate University. Mr. Parker has also had executive
marketing training at Harvard, Wharton and Columbia.

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