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*From the Sept. 2008 Issue*

Have you ever received that “blank screen” stare back from your trusty laptop? You know, the one where no images appear and your heart seems to momentarily stop at the thought that the laptop might not come back on. So you reboot and, if you're lucky, you're right back at it. If you're not so lucky, you've got plenty of company. Ask any long-time laptop user about their unique war story from the time their laptop died.

### **One Company's Laptop Best Practices Plan**

For Huntsville, Alabama executive John B., laptop failure came two days before a big presentation out of town. His laptop was always at his side as he traveled the country. The presentation was loaded on it and ready to go. When it died, John didn't panic; he remained calm. It was exactly the event he and his company had anticipated in their “Laptop Best Practices” plan. Although not a large company, they found their plan easy to execute.

**Step 1:** Call back to the office. It didn't take long for John's IT resource to pronounce the hard drive dead. “Not to worry,” said IT. “All your data is backed up according to plan, so we can get you back up and running quickly.”

**Step 2:** Order and overnight a new hard drive to John in the field or find one locally for John to pick up.

**Step 3:** With new hard drive in hand, reload software and set up. (Ah, Step 3, the key to Laptop Best Practices and good mental health.)

## Reloading Software & Reconfiguring the Workstation

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With a Vista boot disk and his backup data, it was quick to get his new hard drive back up to speed. For those still using XP, the company chose to use “disk imaging software” or “ghosting,” a term made popular by the widely used Norton Ghost software. It makes a ghost image or snapshot of the software and data loaded on a laptop, and when that bad time comes you can quickly restore that original image back to your laptop.

The best ghost image is taken when the laptop has all the standard company programs installed, but before the user starts adding their personal data. IT can quickly restore the ghost image to a laptop. So when there is a problem, Ghost gives a big return on investment. Programs like Ghost have grown even more sophisticated with new releases and now include features like backing up to an FTP site for easier off-site management and differential backups.

### Restoring Personal Tools & Documents

With the basics back on John's laptop, the next step was to restore his personal tools and documents, starting with e-mail. In the olden days, before the “Best Practices” plan was put in place, John's company had individual copies of Microsoft Outlook on each person's machine. A year ago, they adopted Microsoft Exchange Server to improve the management of their e-mail communications companywide. It opened up communications by giving them access to shared calendars and folders.

But most important was that everyone's e-mail now resided on the company server, which was part of the regular backup regimen. John had his Outlook synchronized to his laptop so he could access it at any time, even when he was not connected to his corporate network. This meant all of John's e-mail was intact since

it was stored on the company server. As part of Step 3, John re-synced his Outlook

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on desktops. One more tip: Like John, be sure you save your Instant Messenger list and your favorites for Internet software to your My Documents. You don't want to lose them.

So what about the restoring of that data? For company employees who had desktops, their work was automatically backed up each night. Not so for John and the other road warriors, although laptop users were encouraged to copy their My Documents folder to the server at least once a week or when they were next in house. When they were on the road, they had several options for backing up data in their My Documents to a portable media source, including the following:

- **Recordable CDs and DVDs built into laptops.** The best practice is to regularly backup the My Documents folder and note the date. For historical information, you can have old copies cataloged at the office.
- **USB flash drives or thumb drives.** These are very popular since you can get large size drives for a small investment. These tools offer both benefits and risks in a business environment. If you choose to go this route, the "best practice" plan is to make the added investment for a drive that comes with encryption software to protect your information if the drive is misplaced, lost or stolen.
- **Small portable hard drives.** Some now come with as much as 320GB and weigh less than 4 oz. They work just like another hard drive and hold a lot, allowing you to store multiple versions. They are easy to transport and big enough to keep them from being easily misplaced.
- **Remote backup services.** The newest addition to the company's Laptop Best Practices plan was the use of remote backup services to address the needs of traveling businesspeople. I'll explore those options in a future column.

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too valuable to be spent doing work that could have been avoided. Take the time up front to ensure that your laptop users can have positive war stories that always end without a “shout” being fired.

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