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## **Backups easier -- and more essential -- than ever**

**By Al Gordon**

*Columnist*

Computer users seem to have adopted one of three basic backup strategies: system backup, data backup, and total denial. Sadly, option three seems to be the most prevalent, and too many users too often discover too late it was a really bad choice.

Backup once was considered primarily a defense against a hardware failure -- most often, a hard drive malfunction. Today that's only one issue. There are the dangers of viruses, Trojans (similar to a virus), and worms transmitted via the Internet and networks. There is the issue of software "patches" (repairs) going wrong. As this is being written, for example, Microsoft has rolled out major updates, which it calls "service packs" to Office 2003 and Windows XP, and history teaches us that the company often needs to issue patches to its patches. The Catch 22 is that once installed many patches cannot be uninstalled.

Similar issues exist with respect to software and hardware installations. You try out something. It doesn't work the way you expected. But you can't get rid of it completely because software vendors love to leave some files and settings behind, figuring you will change your mind and want to restore the program. Or the uninstall mechanism is as messed up as the software and doesn't work. Consider it a rule of computing that the most disastrous installations will be the hardest to remove.

Finally, there is the need to purge your computer of chozzeraï (Yiddish for crud). Computers are big time chozzeraï collectors. Over time, you install and uninstall software, add and remove hardware, update and purge data. Even when those changes go normally, there usually is still some residue left behind that eventually will reduce your system

performance.

My personal experience is that hard drive failures and virus, etc. attacks that got through my antivirus and firewall software are very rare occurrences. But recovering from bad installations and removing chozzerai are a constant concern. Accordingly, I do a full system backup daily.

Yes, daily. Sometimes even more frequently than that if I am going to install or uninstall something. I use my computer for business and anything less than that just isn't safe.

A system backup includes everything on your computer, from the operating system to the digital photo of Aunt Mary. This approach lets you roll your system back to the state it was in before it went wrong. The data backup strategy -- protecting only the unique content you created -- is a way to preserve information crucial to your business, but it is more a way to protect against disaster than an everyday system safeguard.

People who don't back up usually say that backups are too expensive, too complicated, and too tedious. Not so. The days of those touchy, snail-paced tape systems are long gone for home and small-business users.

I use Maxtor's "One Touch" external hard drives, which retail from around \$180 to \$275 depending on size and connectivity. They ship with Retrospect Express backup software, and they can also double as extra storage for your data (I keep music, videos, and photos on mine). One touch means what it says: You push a button on the device and the backup process runs. Couldn't be easier.

Maxtor pioneered the concept of external hard drives as backup media; other manufacturers also now make like products. There also is a variety of backup software applications to use. For example, advanced users might want Dantz Development's Retrospect Professional, a more powerful version of the software that ships with the Maxtor drives.

Another strategy is online backup -- uploading you files to storage via the Internet. A number of companies such as Connected Corporation in Framingham offer this service. It can be more pricey and more

complicated than buying a backup drive, but for business users it does give you offsite backup of critical information -- so you don't run the risk that if a fire rages through your office, you lose both the backups as well as the originals. Mac users have access to online backup through Apple's ".Mac" Internet service.

Remember, when you sit down to figure out the cost of a backup solution, you need to figure in the cost of being out of business for the length of time it would take to restore your system and the cost of losing all your documents, contacts, billing information. With that in mind, the price of a backup solution can be very cost-effective.

So when exactly did you last back up your computer?

Al Gordon is a Massachusetts-based media and political consultant who also writes about technology. You can read more of his articles at [www.tnpcnewsletter.com/al](http://www.tnpcnewsletter.com/al) and e-mail him at [eagle@algordon.com](mailto:eagle@algordon.com).

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