

Information Technology

Boring, Beautiful Backup

Think no topic could be as boring as backup? Read on...

For weeks I'd been trying to make an appointment for a free consultation with Louise at Rockland Widgets (all names have been changed), so I was surprised when she called. "I can't get into my Quickbooks file. Can you take a look at it?"

The usual procedure for recovering a Quickbooks file failed, so I contacted tech support: "Yep, it's bad. You'll have to recover from your backup." Louise handed me two tapes. "Is this last week's tape?" "Well, I usually run backup once a month, but I don't think I ran it last month." She was right -- the most recent backup was four months old.

I searched both tapes, but found no Quickbooks files. Further digging revealed that due to a breakdown of communication between Louise and the previous computer consultant, the backup procedure she was using backed up only her workstation, not the server, where the files were. There was *no* backup.

In setting up backup procedures, think about all the ways your valuable data might be lost or damaged. Windows may crash and need to be reinstalled. A program error may cause a file to be corrupted. The computer may be damaged in a fire, flood, or gas explosion. In Louise's case, the file was damaged due to a power failure. Although the server had battery backup, her workstation didn't. She had the file open when the power failure occurred, and when the power came back, the file was damaged.

There's a difference between *file* backup and *system* backup. Clients have told me, "Oh, I back up on Zip disks." That's *file* backup, protecting you if the data files are damaged or destroyed. Suppose the entire system crashes and everything on the hard drive needs to be restored? To recover you need a backup of the complete system - data, programs, Windows settings, everything. System backups are usually stored on tape. One computer with a tape drive can back up an entire small office network.

One client was faithful about running tape backup every night, but kept the tapes in an unlocked desk next to the computer, thus ensuring that a fire which destroyed the computer would also destroy the backup. This week's tapes should be kept in a fireproof box in the office. Last week's tapes should be kept in a fireproof box off site. Once a month, make an extra system backup tape and store it with two previous months' tapes. This is in case you discover a file was damaged two months ago, and is corrupt on all the weekly tapes.

Periodically, you should test your backup procedure by restoring some files from your backup. If Louise had done that, she would have seen that she had no backup of the server. Fortunately, she had just sent the reports for the previous quarter to the accountant. She created a new company in Quickbooks and fed in the information from the accountant, but all the history was lost.

Backup may be a boring topic, but not having a sound backup plan may cause more excitement than you want!

(Denis Williamson is a principal with MacLamor Computer Consulting, which provides design, installation, training and support for PCs, networks, Windows and servers. Denis can be reached at 845-357-1877, fax: 357-8719, e-mail: denis@maclamor.com.)