

Information Technology

Click... Click... Click...

Of all the sounds a computer can make, the most ominous is a steady click... click... click... when you turn it on. This is followed by the message: "Boot disk failure. Insert system disk." If you hear this sound, it's time to reach for the Excedrin, because it means the hard drive has failed and that you will soon find out how good your backup procedures are.

And how good were the backup procedures in our office? Not as good as they should be, it turned out. Nothing absolutely critical was lost, but some valuable information is gone, and it took several hours to recreate two months of Quickbooks transactions. (Gosh, I could have sworn I ran a backup a week or two ago.)

How did I get into a situation that I warn others against? By assuming that a machine only 6 months old wouldn't have a catastrophic failure. While electronic components usually fail within 30 days or after 5 years (rarely in between), hard drives are subject to mechanical failure, which is far more likely. Still, some of the hard drives in the office are 9 years old and going strong, so it's surprising - as well as annoying - to have a fairly new drive fail.

Recovering from a total failure of the hard drive requires replacing the drive and rebuilding the system either by restoring from backup or by reinstalling everything from scratch. Doing a postmortem, I counted the backup alternatives available in the office: copying files to another computer; backing up to tape, to CD, to Zip disk, to external hard drive, and for small files, backing up to floppy disks or a usb-attached memory device. Too bad I hadn't used any of them recently. (We don't have a server; if we did, no data would have been lost, because we normally install multiple drives with mirroring, so the system will keep running even if a drive fails completely.)

How can you avoid this? Create sound backup procedures, and follow them diligently. We now have an external hard drive with one-button backup; it protects against most kinds of problems, but not a fire or flood. For less than \$200 it provides great peace of mind.

What can you do if you have a computer meltdown and you have no backup? There are services which will disassemble a failed hard drive and recover some or all of the data. If the alternative is losing everything, then \$100 to evaluate the drive and several hundred to several thousand dollars to recover your data may well be worth it.

So, what's the answer to click... click... click...? Backup... backup... backup...!

(Denis Williamson is with MacLamor Computer Consulting, which provides design, installation, training and support for PCs, networks and Windows. Denis can be reached at 845-357-1877 or denis@maclamor.com.)