Radio Days – 2012-02-04

Discussion – Data Backup & Recovery

Today is close to the third anniversary of the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria on Saturday 7 February 2009. Many people lost everything in these fires: all their possessions and all their memories. This is, perhaps, as good a time as any to ponder on these matters and see what we can do to prevent this happening to us.

The only way to ensure that your computer's data survives a disaster is to have a backup plan, to put that backup plan into action and to keep your backup away from the disaster or to take it with you when you flee. Please ensure that you do not leave your computer's vital data to be swept away or burnt in the next disaster to hit your home or office.

I remember well the Monday mornings at MYOB when we got call after call from people who had arrived at work to find their computer stolen. Then, to add insult to injury, they also said that their backup floppy discs, next to the computer, had also been taken. They asked what they could do now. We had to let them know that there was nothing that we could do to help.

The Chinese have a saying: *A journey of a thousand miles starts with the first step.* This is true as far as it goes, but what would happen if the first step was in the wrong direction?

What is the Right Direction?

Starting with the end in mind is good. I am defining the *Right Direction* as being able to recover from disaster. For that you need to be able to:

- prepare for the disaster
- have the tools and skills to recover from the disaster
- then perform the recovery tasks

Prepare for the Disaster

This is in the context of recovering from a computer catastrophe. For most people, the most important part of a computer is the data stored on its hard disc, even if they do not yet see it. The computer can easily be replaced: this is just a matter on money which can often be supplied by an insurance company. Also, the programs on the computer can usually be replaced easily: again, this is just a matter of money and, again, this can often be supplied by an insurance company.

The other part of the equation is your data. This is unique to you, and this is the part which you have to keep safe through the disaster.

Most people do not realise just how important their computer data can be. One caller and her husband had been on a twentieth wedding anniversary trip to the Blue Mountains in New South Wales. She had really enjoyed the experience and had taken many digital photographs to help them remember this wonderful time.

She rang me because she had lost all her photographs. She had checked all her computer files to no avail. This was when she rang me but I was not able to give her any help because she had been looking for her photos for the last three weeks.

The point of this is to help you recover from a lost computer without adding any more trauma to an already traumatic situation should you find yourself in the unfortunate situation of losing your computer in a fire or flood.

What to Backup

This is the easy part. Knowing what to backup is simple: all the data which is important to you. If you are not sure just what is important to you then stop and do an inventory of all the data which you have stored on your computer.

This is easier said than done, but it needs to be done.

If you are running a business it may be your accounting data plus all your quotes and other communications with your clients. If you have a family computer it will probably include all the family's photos and music, plus any homework which is still relevant. Please remember that the excuse *My dog ate my homework* went out of fashion when I was a boy over half a century ago!

You may also have emails and email addresses which are important. These are often hidden away in remote places where only an obsessive person would bother to check, but most email programs allow you to change the storage location to somewhere more helpful. I like to make a folder called *Emails* inside *My Documents* then move the emails there. This means that a simple backup of *My Documents* includes documents, emails, music and photos: just about everything that a responsible backup needs.

Moving all your data to one area also makes it easier to check and see just how much data needs to be stored on your backup medium. This means that you can easily see how big a device you need to store all your data.

Where to Backup

You will need at least one dedicated backup device. I prefer my clients to have a minimum of two devices because sometimes your only device will fail at the most inconvenient moment. This is called *Murphy's Law*.

The two types of device that I suggest are USB sticks and external hard discs.

USB sticks are slower that external hard discs and more expensive for the same capacity, but they are also more robust and smaller. Many USB sticks nowadays will clip to your keyring so that they are taken with you when you leave your home or office. I recommend USB sticks for backup capacities of up to 8 or 16 GB of data. This is more than enough for many people and many families, but not for a dedicated photo or music person.

For these people I suggest an external hard disc. These discs have a much larger capacity than USB sticks, and are faster, but they are more bulky and less robust than USB sticks. As the old saying goes, there is no free lunch!

Please do not make the mistake of keeping all your important data on a backup device. Many people mistakenly think that if making a backup to a USB stick is good then storing that data on a USB stick is better. The idea of a backup is that you have a number of copies of your data in case something goes pear-shaped. If you lose the only copy of your data then you have lost everything!

Another reason that many people give for storing data on a USB stick is that they do not want to waste the space on their hard disc with photos, etc. This is precisely what a hard disc is designed to do: hold your important data! For most people, there is so much spare space on their hard disc that they will not fill it in their lifetime.

If you are not sure just how much space you have on your hard disc you can download and install a free program called *TreeSize Free*. This program tells you how much free space there is on your hard disc and where all the large files are. On my hard disc it tells me that I have 36 GB free of 117 GB. This means that one third of my hard disc is empty!

Backup Software

My favourite backup program is called SyncBack. There are two versions for home and small business use: *SyncBack Free* and *SyncBack SE*. I prefer SyncBack SE because it allows me to keep versions of my documents and accounting data, but SyncBack Free is more than enough for most people.

Both versions of SyncBack can be downloaded from the website and installed quickly. It is then a matter of creating a backup to copy all your data to your backup device automatically, and this is where the fun comes in.

Create a SyncBack Backup

If you moved your emails to a folder inside (or underneath) *My Documents* then you will find that you only need to backup that folder and everything under it will be included. If you store vast quantities of documents, etc, on your desktop than you will need to include your desktop as well. If there are other places where you store data, perhaps company files in old versions of QuickBooks or MYOB, then you will have to include those storage areas as well.

For each area you intend to backup you will need to create a SyncBack profile. If you create more than one profile (perhaps *My Documents* and your desktop) then the easiest way to do a backup is to create a group profile which will include all you other profiles. If you intend to backup to an external device (USB or hard disc) then you will need to connect that device before starting to create your profiles. This is because creating a profile needs to have the source and destination devices online both when the profile is created and when it is run.

After you have created all your backup profiles (if there are more than one) then you can create your group profile. This sounds hard, and it takes some time the first time that you create SyncBack profiles, but it does become easier with practice.

How Often to Backup?

This is another easy question to answer: whenever you have added or changed data which is important to you. Programs like SyncBack are easy to run and usually take just a few seconds to run after the initial long backup. This is because there is less data to copy as the program only copies new or changed data.

This means that there is now no reason not to do a backup every day!

What does the Future Hold?

When the NBN has been completed in your area you will be able to do online backups in a very short time. At the moment, online backups take forever because of the slow speed of our ADSL networks. If you are using mobile wireless or satellite then your speeds will usually be even slower.

The speeds provided by the NBN network will mean that online backups will become an important item of choice in the future. I recently did a quote for a client which showed that it would take about twelve weeks to backup all their data and another twelve weeks to restore that data if needed. These times, obviously, are quite unrealistic. The NBN, with its much higher speeds, would reduce these times to just a few days. This will now become viable when the rollout has reached your area.

This might present an option for you to start a business providing online backup services to your clients!

Further Information

TreeSize Free   www.jam-software.com

SyncBack   www.2brightsparks.com