

When Things Go Wrong, You'd Better have a Plan B (and B is for Backups)

by Allan Naguit. May 2005.

"Al, you have to save my life. I've accidentally deleted a Client List!" It was Saturday morning. Michael Crouch, the Managing Director of Human Synthesis (a Leadership Development Training company), rang me begging for help. He'd gone to his office to do some catching up. Maybe it was too early. Maybe his caffeine-hit hadn't kicked in yet, but for whatever reason, he'd mistakenly deleted a file that he needed desperately.

He had to get his trashed Client List back and it wasn't in his Recycle Bin.

Organise Your Documents and Files

Luckily, we'd set up a **Backup System** for his company. Part of that process was to organise their business data to make it easier to back them up. Instead of having important data (usually, documents) spread willy-nilly across one's hard drive (spread all over the Desktop, Favourites, and personal folders), Michael enforced a policy of structuring their business data. For each staff PC, a parent folder was created (let's call it the "Business" folder). Important documents were then organised to reside in sub-folders stemming from this parent folder. This made it very easy to back up (most) business data by simply backing up the parent folder and all sub-folders, in one swoop. Unfortunately, in this case, the deleted Client List wasn't some Word document sitting in some sub-folder. Instead, it was part of a database of a special marketing application.

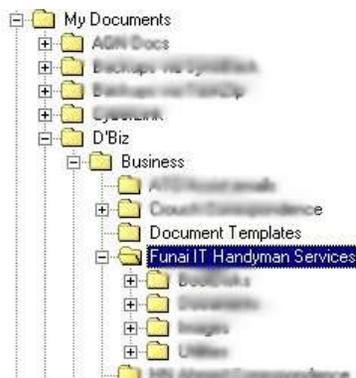


Illustration 1: Sample of centralising business data under the Business Folder

Decide What Needs to be Backed Up

Business documents (text, spreadsheets, presentations etc.) are obvious items to include in the "must save" category. **Personal Stuff** should also be included (e.g., photos, downloads). But some items are easy to miss.

It was just a couple of weeks ago when Michael realised that his special marketing application's data weren't being backed up. Unfortunately, it was another mini-crisis that identified that hole in the backups, but the lesson was learned and that hole was plugged. Two weeks later, here we were finding out, in crisis mode, how well that hole had been plugged.

When deciding what to include in your backup system, don't forget to consider the following:

- **Email** (e.g., Outlook, Outlook Express, Mozilla)
- **Database programs** (e.g., MYOB, ACT!)
- **Internet Browser Settings** (including Favourites)

Most of these applications store their data in their own subfolders, so they won't be part of the "Business folder" structure we proposed above. Don't forget to include them in your backup system!

Have a Backup Schedule (Backup Regularly and Often)

"Don't tell me we have to go to the backups. I worked till one this morning. The backups didn't run!" - Michael.

Michael's business backups are automated to run nightly, busily working away after-hours and unattended. The system has been tested many times. They've successfully

recovered lost data on several occasions. In some cases, they were able to revert to older versions of documents, when necessary.

Don't forget, "backups" can also mean you making frequent Saves of your text or spreadsheet document as you're working on it. It's so painful to lose a document you've been slaving over for hours when, in Windows, you inexplicably get the "Blue Screen of Death" or other crash before you manage to save your work. So, make it a habit to make frequent saves. Most office suites allow you to switch on a feature that does automatic saves every so often. Do the same for your "database" programs, where possible.

Back to Michael's crisis. After I survived the adrenaline spike caused by Michael's declaration that the backups hadn't run, on investigation, we proved that the backups had in fact, run.

It's No Good if it Just Looks Pretty (Test Your Backups Actually Work)

As I said, we'd added Michael's marketing application to his backup system. Over the phone, step-by-step, I talked him through the restoration of the lost Client List from a backup copy. Just before he took the final step to restore his missing Client List, I reassured Michael:

"Don't worry. It's there, you'll get your list back."
"Are you sure this is going to work?"
"No problem."
"Will you bet your house on that?"
"Absolutely!"

Freeware Third-Party Backup software

PC World has an Editor's Pick page for "Best, Free Back-Up Utilities" here:

<http://msn.pcworld.com/downloads/collectio n/0,collid,1352,00.asp>

They mention the following programs:

- SyncBack v3.2.4
- EZBack-it-up v2.0.1
- Back It Up! V5.4.9.125
- Cobian Backup v6.1.1.264
- Back4Win

I've recently started testing **SyncBack** and am liking it. For those who want more features and don't mind paying, the paid version is called **SyncBackSE**. The claim is that **SyncBackSE** can "copy locked/open files". I'm very interested in this feature and will be looking into it!

If you'd like to look around some more, you can try **Download.com**, a popular download site. I mention it here because, on the 3rd of May 2005, Download.com announced that they had banned adware from their site. In my opinion, it's now safer to assume (although it's still not guaranteed) that what you download from them will be clean from adware. They mention a couple of caveats at their site:

"... Download.com is not deciding what is and what is not adware. We are using a variety of antispyware tools to scan new programs for adware. If [Spyware Doctor](#) or [Spy Sweeper](#) says that it's adware, then we won't list it."
(Source: <http://blogs.download.com/Spyware-Confidential/post.php?p=374>).

Anyway, you can look for more backup software there.

Other Backup Software

I've used **TaskZip** (on Windows 98SE) extensively, and it's saved **my** data many times. You can get it from Pierce Business Systems ("Simple Software Solutions").

<http://www.pb-sys.com>.

You could also try **Keep-It**. The website for the software says "**Keep-It** is like a real-world archive; it allows you to keep everything without cluttering up your system, or consuming valuable disk space." Available from:

<http://www.keep-it.com/default.asp>

Do I really need Third-party Backup Software?

Maybe not. If you're on Windows XP, you can have a look at this Microsoft article titled "Windows XP Backup Made Easy". It talks you through creating your backup procedure. Read it at:

http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/setup/learnmore/bott_03july14.mspx

Epilogue

As I wrote this article, I typed CTRL-S frequently – it forces my word processor (OpenOffice.org) to make a snapshot-save of my work. I also double-checked that I had AutoSave set to run every 15 minutes. I wasn't about to suffer lost work writing an article about the importance of making backups!

"You are the man!"

As for the end result of Michael's crisis, he got his Client List back. My feel-good reward was his heartfelt, "**You are the man!**"

Oh, and I still have my house.

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