

If losing data is getting your back up.....why not try online data backup?

One of the first lessons you learn when starting to use computers is: save you data regularly so you don't lose it. Now, IT service companies are on hand to take on that essential chore. CIAN MOLLOY takes a wry look at the world of online data backup.

Like any company selling some form of insurance, data backup companies use a good helping of scare tactics to sell their product.

The product these companies are offering involves installing a programme on your company server to automatically transfer data, via a broadband connection, to remote data centres, where it will be safely stored and easily recovered should your premises be hit by an IT failure, a fire, a flood or another disaster.

Certainly, the benefits of a backup service appear obvious – all of us have suffered the inconvenience of losing data on a PC at some time or another, either because we have failed to save work-in progress properly or have accidentally deleted a file.

At a company level, most businesses protect themselves against data loss by doing daily, or weekly, back-ups on to some physical medium, most usually tape, but CDs and zip-files are also used. This method is flawed for several reasons, say the companies offering the insurance of automated off-site data backups using software installed on your server that will transfer your data via a broadband connection to at least two differently located remote data centres on a daily, hourly or real-time basis.

The trouble with 'traditional' backup systems, says Fergal Madden, MD of **Arion Online Backup**, is that too often the physical tape, CD or zip-drive is kept in the same room as the server, if not physically on top of the server itself. "If you have a fire on your premises, not only do you lose your server, you also lose your backup tape," he says.

Another problem with having all your data backed up on a physical medium stored on your premises is that the tape or the disc can easily be stolen by a disgruntled employee, who can then take all your company data to a business rival, says John O'Shea, technical director, which sells its services with the motto 'Offsite Protection for Onsite Disaster'

Business failures

Certainly, losing your company data can prove disastrous according to statistics compiled by the Boston Computing Network. Although BCN admits on its website

that it is 'a small technical services outsourcing company', the grim figures compiled by this Massachusetts outfit are much quoted by Irish online data backup companies:

- 60% of American companies that lose their IT data will shut down within six months
- 93% of American companies that lose their data centre for a period of 10 days or more file for bankruptcy within the year
- 50% of American companies that lose their data centre for a period of 10 days or more file for bankruptcy almost immediately.
- 6% of all PCs will suffer an episode of data loss in any given year

Final tape

Computer tape is still the most common method used to backup data. Unfortunately, just as the video recording quality of VHS tapes (remember them?) deteriorate, the more often you record over them, computer tape is more likely to fail to record data properly the more times it is used and there are many, many companies who hardly ever replace their back-up tapes. Also, while your tape backup software may tell you that your data has been successfully recorded on to the tape, there is no way of knowing that the back-up has been successful until you attempt a data recovery.

O'Shea points out that like old-fashioned manual typewriters, tape recorders develop their own individual identity with repeated use over time. He says: "It can happen that a tape recorded by one machine cannot be read by another, even though it is the same make and model. So if your tape machine breaks down, you have no way of reading what has been recorded on to your back-up tape."

Bearing these limitation in mind, outsourcing your data backup to online service, where prices generally start at around €25 a month, seems like a more attractive alternative, particularly when there are ancillary benefits, such as automatic back-up of all deleted files. "Our standard service is to store all deleted files for a two year period," says Gareth Cirillo. "The most common request for recovery is deleted emails. In the case of restoring to other older deleted data files, people usually want to go back to a version from about six months ago."

With all the online backup services, your data is doubly encrypted – so while the service provider might be able to see the name of your files, the provider cannot access the files content. This level of encryption ensures client confidentiality, but allows the service provider to log unusual activity. "We had a case where we notice that more than 1,200 files had been deleted off a client's server one Saturday," says Madden of **Arion Online Backup**. "So we brought this to the client's attention – it turned out that an employee who had handed in their notice had been sending the company's client files and other important information to his new employer. The client contacted their solicitor and the employee was called into the office on the Sunday – needless to say, he didn't work his notice!"

For more information about outsourcing your data backup, see the websites: www.arion.ie , www.mozy.com .