

Some Google Custom Home Pages Pull Vanishing Act

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Image: Internet search giant Google's logo. Google says it processes more than 200 million searches a day and leads the world for search engine usage with 57 percent of the current market, followed by Yahoo at 21 percent and MSN at just 9 percent.

Google is working to restore its personalized homepage function a day after users worldwide reported online that their settings had been deleted, and the problem has prompted some users to recommend that Google implement a backup function on its site.

Early on Thursday morning, users started streaming onto Google's online help desk forum to report that they had lost access to the links and tabs they had selected for their homepage.

"All my collected links, sticky notes, tabs, etc. – gone," the first post

said.

"HELP GOOGLE!" another user soon posted.

On Friday, however, a Google representative claimed the problem was an isolated one. "This affected a relatively small group of users, and we believe this to be an isolated incident, though we are always looking for ways to improve users' experience," a Google spokeswoman said in an email. "We know our users depend on their personalized homepages to get the information they want when they want it."

The personalized homepage service allows users to customize the search giant's main page to include favorite links, tabs and news stories of interest, among other things. Some reported having worked for months to craft the perfect homepage, while others said they created more than one homepage for different accounts. One user even had a personalized homepage for a fictional character that was part of an online project.

The confusion occurred just hours after Google decided to ax a previously-scheduled Google Apps maintenance plan that could have taken user functionality offline for most of the day.

Some found that their pages were deleted completely while others were reverted back to versions from months ago. Those who tried to recreate their settings found that they too were deleted within minutes of saving.

A Google employee who identified himself as "Google Guide Cameron" soon posted an apology on the forum and said the company was in "frantic-chase-down-this-bug mode here at the Googleplex."

Cameron suggested at the time that the outage might have happened when users changed their homepage themes, and asked users who still had access to not change their themes until further notice.

Many of those without access, however, reported that they had not changed their themes. "I haven't used any themes, and like a lot of people here, I wasn't even using the homepage when it went down. It was simply open on a tab. One minute it was there, next it was gone," according to a user who identified himself as Paolo.

Cameron re-appeared in the early afternoon. "Thanks for letting us know that this problem isn't related to your theme – it's really helpful to get this info," he wrote. He then asked users for their approximate location, but it did not appear to be a localized event. Responses came from people in England, Estonia, France, Greece and the United States, to name a few.

At 9 PM EST Wednesday night, "Google Guide Jamie" posted a message saying that Google was "making good progress." He requested continued patience and asked that users hold off on re-personalizing their homepages.

By early Friday morning, many users took to the forum to report that their homepages had been restored, though a few said they were still waiting. A "Google Guide" has not yet re-appeared with additional guidance.

Those on the forums who had their service restored were generally grateful to Google for resolving the issue, though some said the snafu was a sign that Google needed an easy-to-use backup function to prevent future loss.

"I think it might be a good idea for Google to make a 'backup homepage' module, which would allow users to save and restore to/from a file saved on the PC (or anywhere) in case this happens again," wrote a user known as Mic.

"You get what you pay for," wrote a member who identified himself as Jason. But Google should allow people to "save your setting - sic - locally, and have the option to upload them, in case something like this happened again."

Editor's Note : This story was updated at 11:23 AM PDT with comments from a Google representative.

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