

There's no perfect way to back up your hard drive

October 7 2009, By Troy Wolverton

If there's one thing to keep in mind about computers, it's this: Hard drives fail. I relearned that lesson recently when one of my laptop's external hard drives stopped working and then my 4-year-old iPod died.

Fortunately, the failures weren't disastrous. I had recently moved all my personal media from the external drive that failed to a newer, smaller one. That new hard drive also has copies of the music and photos I had on my iPod.

Still, the drive failures left me worried because I could have lost irreplaceable photos and videos of my kids, as well as much of my music library.

The external drive that failed had the only recent backup copy of my laptop's internal hard drive. My new external drive is now the only functioning one on which I have stored most of my pictures, videos and music; those files aren't backed up elsewhere. Some of my other documents and data are now preserved only on an [external hard drive](#) that's even older than the one that failed.

So I've been struggling to figure out how to back up my data. But picking the right solution hasn't been easy.

I basically have three options -- another external hard drive, a network-attached drive or an online backup service. None of those options is ideal.

The easiest solution would be to buy another external drive. I could get a portable hard drive with a capacious 1 [terabyte](#) of storage space for about \$200.

But with two functioning external drives and one broken one already occupying space on my desk, I'm loath to buy yet another one. External drives are little better than paperweights if they aren't plugged into your computer. You can't access any of the data on them and you can't back anything up to them.

That's a particular issue with laptops, because having an external drive attached can limit their portability. What's more, constantly having a drive plugged into one of your USB or FireWire ports can make it difficult to plug in other devices, such as [iPods](#) or digital cameras.

Also, external hard drives can be difficult to access from computers other than the one they are attached to, an important consideration if you share data or use the drive to back up more than one computer. And unless you have a large enough internal hard drive -- which I don't -- you face the prospect of needing two external hard drives attached to your computer: one to supplement your internal drive and one to back up everything.

So instead of buying an external [hard drive](#), I've been thinking about getting a network-attached drive. These drives address many of the failings of external ones.

As the name suggests, network-attached drives are connected to your home network -- via a cable to your router -- rather than to a particular computer. That means you don't have to have a drive tethered to your computer. It also means you can back up more than one computer and can easily share files among a group of computers.

Many network-attached drives have bays for up to four individual hard drives. That can provide you plenty of space -- up to 8 terabytes in some cases. And through a drive technology called RAID, you can use the multiple drives to create mirror copies of the backups. If one drive fails, the data stored on it will still be preserved on the other drives on the device.

Unfortunately, network storage devices, particularly those that offer multiple drive bays, are expensive. The one I've been looking at has 3 terabytes of storage and costs about \$1,000. That hefty price has kept me from buying one just yet.

Perhaps more troubling than the price is that a network drive won't fully solve my backup problem. Because network drives are located inside your house, they are vulnerable to the same types of disasters and dangers that threaten your computer, including theft, fire and earthquakes.

So I've also signed up with Mozy, one of a number of online backup services. Unlike network drives, Mozy is cheap; it costs just \$54 a year for unlimited storage space. And because Mozy stores data on the Internet, it will still be there even if your house is destroyed.

But Mozy's not perfect, either. Uploading data to it can take days or even months, depending on the volume of data and the speed of your Internet connection. And while Mozy doesn't cap the amount of data you can store, your broadband provider might cut off your service if you send more than a given amount in a particular month.

What's more, Mozy's nominal price can understate the service's actual cost. In some cases, the only way to restore your data from Mozy is to have the company send it to you on DVDs, for which it charges fees that can run up to hundreds of dollars, depending on the amount of data you

need to recover.

All of that leaves me in a quandary -- and hoping against hope that I don't have a third failure anytime soon.

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