

Cloud backup services offer more than just reassurance

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Your email is likely in the cloud. Your photos and music may be there, too. So is it time to back up all the files and data from your computer to the Internet? Some storage experts and a growing number of consumers say yes. Online backup services have become more practical in recent years, offering consumers protection if their computers are lost or destroyed in a disaster. And in some cases, cloud backup costs far less in the short term than buying an external hard drive.

"We see more and more user interest in adopting the cloud," said Pushan Rinnen, research director for storage and backup at Gartner, a tech consulting firm. "When you put content into the cloud, even if your house burned down ... you have a copy somewhere else."

Online backup services have been around for years. They differ from online storage services such as Dropbox in that they typically offer more [storage space](#) and were generally designed just to archive files and data, not to provide access to that data from multiple locations.

Backup services usually include a program that runs in the background on your computer, uploading new files to the Internet. Consumers usually can choose which folders they want to back up or have the software copy their entire [hard drive](#). In case of disaster, they can simply download their files or, in many cases, have the service send them a physical drive with their files stored on it.

The services typically encrypt data stored on their servers. And most

require little management by consumers after they install the backup program.

"Most of these are set and forget," said Dave Simpson, a senior storage analyst at The 451 Group, a technology research firm.

In recent years the backup services have begun offering additional features that make them useful in more than just [emergency situations](#).

Many services now offer [mobile applications](#) that allow users to view backed up files on their smartphones or tablets. And some, including Carbonite and Mozy, now offer a file-syncing feature that acts much like Dropbox or Google Drive. Users can access files stored in a synced folder on multiple computers. Any changes they make to particular files are reflected in the versions stored in all linked computers.

The biggest shortcoming with online backup services has been the length of time it can take to transfer files to the remote servers. Depending on the amount of data users are trying to save and the speed of their Internet connection, an initial backup can take weeks or even months, even if the program runs continuously.

And even after that, the service can be slow. Don Hoekwater, 49, is an amateur photographer who backs up his pictures to Carbonite. The large files he works with often take days to transfer to the backup service.

"It's excruciatingly slow, he said.

But there are ways around that problem. Faster broadband speeds are decreasing the time needed to transfer data. Some service providers, including CrashPlan, offer users the ability to speed up their first backup by saving it to a hard drive that they mail to the company.

Bitcasa, a startup in Mountain View, Calif., has developed technology that hastens backups by looking for duplicate data already stored by other users; the service only uploads data that's not already there.

Company CEO Tony Gauda likens the service to a dictionary compiled of words from numerous books; a word in the dictionary only needs to be recorded once, no matter how many sentences or books it's used in.

"We don't save the books, we save the words," Gauda said, adding that initial uploads get "faster as we add more users." On average, he said, the company's users are already able to backup their data in a week or less.

Consumers face a bewildering array of options, with dozens of different providers. And there's a wide range of prices. Consumers can find plans that offer unlimited storage for less than \$4 a month or plans that charge twice that for only 125 gigabytes of space.

And while the backup services offer broadly similar services, many have unique features. CrashPlan's software, for example, can back up data not only to the company's servers, but also to an [external hard drive](#) and even to friends' computers over the Internet.

At the same time, many services have particular limitations. Carbonite, for one, will slow down uploads if users are transferring more than 200 gigabytes of data at a time.

Many providers offer free trial periods, noted Donna Tapellini, a senior editor at Consumer Reports.

"I would try it out," she said. "You want something that's easy to get your stuff up and get your stuff back."

Some consumers who have already tested the services are believers. Doug Edwards, 54, a former brand manager at Google, signed up for

CrashPlan last year after having some external hard drives fail. Edwards has lots of photos and music files and wanted to make sure they weren't lost if something happened to his house.

"Once you experience loss of data, you don't want to go there again," Edwards said.

ONLINE BACKUP TIPS:

If you're shopping for an online backup service, you'll find numerous options. Here are some ways to compare them.

-Storage capacity: You'll find plans that offer as little as 2 gigabytes of space to ones from providers such as Backblaze that offer an unlimited amount of storage. In general, the more storage you need, the more you'll pay.

-Number of computers: Many services require users to have a separate plan for each computer they want to back up. But some providers, including Mozy, offer plans that allow users to back up two or more computers.

-Hard-drive seeding: The initial transfer of data to a backup provider can take weeks or even months. Some providers, including CrashPlan, allow users to speed this process by "seeding" their archives. For an extra fee, the providers send out a blank hard drive to users to save their backup. Users then send the hard drive back to the provider, who uploads it to their account.

-File syncing: Some online backup services, such as Carbonite, have taken a page from storage services such as [Dropbox](#). Instead of just allowing users to store their data in the cloud, those services will also allow them to sync particular files and folders with multiple computers

and devices.

-File sizes: In some cases, providers limit the size of files they will sync or force users to sync such files manually. Other providers will automatically back up all [files](#), no matter how large.

-Price: Some providers, including IDrive, offer plans with a small amount of storage-usually less than 10 gigabytes, for free. But you can also pay \$20 a month or more for plans that have a limited amount of storage. Unlimited plans from providers, including Carbonite and CrashPlan, tend to cost about \$4 to \$6 a month.

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