Review: Prepare for the crash: Synology box keeps your data safe

June 2 2017, by Jim Rossman, The Dallas Morning News

Synology might not be a company you've heard much about. The technology firm makes network attached storage appliances that can make your computing life easier and safer.

As our homes and lives become more connected, we find ourselves with some pretty specific needs - like a place to back up our hard drives, or store our photos, movies and music.

You can use cheap external hard drives for most of those tasks, but what if you want to take a step further to safeguard your data against drive failure?

Synology network attached storage, or NAS, boxes are a fairly inexpensive and easy first step for solving these and other problems you might not even know you have.

Synology sent me the DS416play, a small black box that holds up to four hard drives.

A BOX FOR EVERY NEED

There are Synology boxes in a variety of sizes, from small consumer-oriented boxes with one drive, up to rack-mounted systems that hold 16 drives with expansion chassis that can bring the drive count up well over 100.

Why do you need more than one drive? More space and data security.

Synology uses a technology called RAID (redundant array of independent disks) to combine multiple smaller drives into very large volumes.

You can't go to the store and buy a 50 terabyte hard drive, but creating a

50 TB volume on a Synology system is quite simple.

There are different RAID strategies that can help you build faster volumes or volumes that can withstand a disk failure or two without losing any of your data.

On the DS416play, I have four 6 TB drives installed, but after choosing Synology's Hybrid RAID setup, the space available is 15.71 TB. The other space is used up to keep the data safe.

If any of the drives fail, the Synology box will alert the user so the drive can be removed and replaced without losing data or even connection to the box.

If you want more protection, you can set up RAID that can withstand the failure of up to two drives at a time, but you'd lose more of the available space for storage.

Users can expand their storage space by adding drives to empty drive bays or by replacing an existing drive with a larger one.

The drives don't have to match; you can use drives of from different manufacturers and of differing sizes.

The Synology boxes do not connect to your computer directly. They have ports for you to connect via Ethernet cable to your home network. Some Synology boxes have multiple Ethernet ports that can be bonded together so you get faster data transfers.

DISK STATION

All the Synology boxes run their own operating system called Disk Station, which you access through a web browser.

Disk Station has an interface that's not unfamiliar to Windows or Macintosh users.

The Synology operating system turns the box into a server that has dozens of apps available.

Consumers will be interested that they can use Synology as a backup destination for computers on the same network.

There is a package called Photo Station that can archive and catalog all your digital photos. You can store all your home video clips in Video Station and store and play back your music in Audio Station.

The DS614play has a front-facing USB port you can set to automatically import files. Connect a card reader and, when you insert the card out of your digital camera, you can configure the Synology to upload the photos to Photo Station automatically.

A package called Cloud Station allows you to access the storage from anywhere online, like your own personal Dropbox.

You can install an iTunes server to have a central place to store your music library, and there is a Plex server package so you can store and play back movies, TV shows and other media.

I have the DS614play set up using Plex to share my ripped movies on my home network for playback on my Apple TV.

The DS416play can transcode 4K video for high-quality streaming to your TV.

You can also set up Synology to be a server to record and play back video from all your IP home security cameras.

Small business or IT users will be interested to know Synology has software to be a mail server, chat server, Active Directory server, DNS server, calendar server and proxy server.

Synology also has Python, Ruby, Apache, Perl, PHP and Wordpress apps.

It's a very robust operating system that's very customizable and easy to use and maintain.

The heart of the Synology system is storage. You can configure the storage to be available both inside and outside your network.

SPECS AND PRICING

The DS416play has a dual-cord 1.6 GHz Intel processor with one gigabyte of RAM and four storage bays. Maximum raw storage capacity is 40 TB with 10 TB drives, but capacity will vary depending on RAID type.

Drives are hot swappable, meaning you can pull a failing drive and replace it without turning off or losing connection to the box.

It has two Ethernet ports and three USB 3.0 ports so you can connect a printer, to create a print server or an external hard drive, to copy its contents to the internal storage, or to share up the external drive to connected users.

The DS416play is 6-by-7-by-9 inches and weighs 4.5 pounds without drives.

The DS416play costs $416 without disks. Filled with four 2 TB disks, it'll cost just over $750 if you buy from Amazon.

For full specs and features, go to www.synology.com.

If you'd like to dip your toe into Synology for as little money as possible, the DS115j is a one-bay box that costs just $117 without a disk included. You can use any 2.5-inch or 3.5-inch SATA hard drive you like.

You can get all the Synology Disk Station server functionality and at least you'll have one drive to store your data.

A smarter choice would be a two or four drive box, so you can expand as the need grows over time.

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Pros: Not too expensive, expandable, security for your data

Cons: None

Bottom line: Very versatile little server that's easy to set up, use and expand, and it will keep your data safe from even hard drive crashes.

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Citation: Review: Prepare for the crash: Synology box keeps your data safe (2017, June 2) retrieved 27 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2017-06-synology-safe.html