Be smart: Back up your data

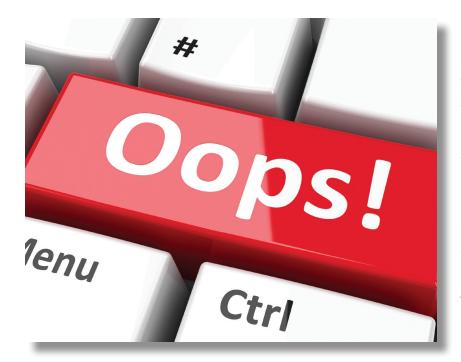What if you lost everything? Worse yet, what if you lost everything while on deadline?

On the heels of three horrific hurricanes, we thought it would be a good time to remind you to back up your data on a regular basis.

Naturally, weather isn't the only factor that can foul things up — fire, theft and viruses are also on the list. And let's not forget everyone's favorite: "fat finger" errors where you accidentally delete important files or move them somewhere that you can't find them.

"I cannot stress enough the importance of backing up," said Nick Pick, owner of Tricom Services,

which is based in Fairbury, Ill. "Some people would rather just pay for the pain, which baffles me. It's so much more efficient and cost-effective to be proactive, and it's so easy to do these days."

Easy yes, but some- how many of us shirk the responsibility. In this article, we're hoping to inspire you (or make you feel guilty — whatever works) to establish a backup plan and stick to it.

Some folks access the cloud via Dropbox, Google Drive or Microsoft's OneDrive. It's an adequate solution, but not ideal because the data isn't encrypted, i.e. more secure. It would be better to use an actual cloud backup service; our experts recommend Carbonite, Acronis and Idrive. (For a complete list of the top providers, Google "PC Magazine Best Cloud Storage.") These services cost about $5 a month.

For the moment, we are just going to talk about backing up your data. And it really is simple. Ideally, you will have one local backup and one online backup.

Local backup

To create a local backup, you should purchase an external hard drive. They come in a range of sizes; the smaller ones are reasonably priced ($50-$100 for 1-3 terabytes). The easiest method is to plug the hard drive into your computer and drag the files you want to back up to the external hard drive folder.

A better idea is to create an automatic backup system. This can be done via Time Machine on a Mac, and through File History on a PC. The programs are relatively easy to use; you set them up to back up your machine on the interval you prefer (our experts recommend daily). (Incidentally, *PC World* magazine has a great tutorial on File History; just Google "PC World File History." The video is easy to understand and very helpful.)

In a perfect world, you would have a backup of your backup. This means you would have one external drive in your office and another external drive at another location. But we're OK if you're not perfect.

Online backup

And now it's time to talk about the cloud, which is not some dark and mysterious tech term that none of us will ever understand. It is literally a bunch of servers that store data. It's a great secondary place for you to back up your data.

It does take a little bit of time and effort to get set up with cloud storage, but it is absolutely worth the investment. Once you are set up, your files will be automatically backed up at the interval you have established.

We also need to talk about creating a full system backup, which can be done via Time Machine on the Mac and via Settings/ Update & Security/Backup in Windows 10 and Control Panel/ System Maintenance/Back up and Restore in Windows 7.

These tools will create a "snapshot" of your entire hard drive, which you will save to an external hard drive. If your computer crashes, you can use this snapshot to restore your data, programs and your system configurations. In a perfect world, it will restore everything just as it was. A full system backup should be done monthly.

Graphic designer Ellen Custer of 2d – A design collaborative learned firsthand how valuable backups are. "I accidentally trashed something from my files, and I just went into Time Machine and pulled the file. It was a real life-saver."

So yes, we know that you're busy, but having a solid backup plan makes good sense. It really doesn't take that much time, and it's a much better option than facing the risk of losing it all.

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Publisher's Corner

Not a smart move...

Editor's note: If you're too young to remember life before the digital age, printed pieces used to be produced using art boards. Waxed galleys of type were cut out and pasted in place on the art boards, which were drawn to exact measurements and had crop and bleed marks notated for the printer.

One morning, Ellen Custer walked into the graphic design firm where she worked and found everyone in an uproar.

"Everyone was asking me, 'Did you hear what happened?'" Custer said. She hadn't, but she was filled in right away.

The year was 1986, and the entire office had been working around the clock to get an annual report done for a huge municipal client. The client was a public company, so there were strict government deadlines that had to be met.

The report was 60 pages, so a pretty good size. The mechanical art boards were in their final stages and were almost ready to go to the printer.

"We were sweating bullets, and everyone was really tired," Custer said. "We all headed home, and someone took the art boards and stacked them on a trash can."

Needless to say, the cleaning crew thought the boards were trash and threw them out.

"Everyone's nerves were completely frayed," Custer said. "The entire office was in a hubbub, and people really were not happy with each other."

But of course, a deadline is a deadline, so everyone got together and redid all the work. Fortunately, the photos hadn't been placed yet, so that saved some time. But all the type had to be reset.

Custer said no one ever admitted to placing the boards on the trash can. It's a safe bet that whoever it was suffered the guilt just the same.

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