

Backup your business or you'll be back out of business

By Rob Laird

It has been said that our greatest fears are things like public speaking, heights, sickness, etc. For my money, it is not until you experience a catastrophic loss of your firm's data that you will understand dread in its rawest form. Having once experienced it, nothing is more terrifying than the thought of experiencing it again.

Most would think of the loss only in terms of the last few days' work, or the last matter they have been slaving away at. A complete loss of data in an improperly managed situation is a real possibility and the consequences are dire.

Unless you have proper backup and recovery procedures in place, it is not a matter of *if*, but *when* you are going to lose your data. A complete data loss has caused many a good business to go under for good.

Even the most reliable individual components in any computer network can fail and cause such a loss. Totally reliable systems – those with a guarantee of 100% 'up-time' are not within the financial, infrastructure, or management reach of law firms.

UP TO THE NINES...

The IT industry talks in terms of 'up-time'. This is a very complex subject, but basically falls into three categories:

1. What happens if my computer software fails?
2. What happens if my computer hardware/infrastructure/network/internet fails?
3. What happens if my data is corrupted?

In general, up-time is measured in percentage terms – for example, 99.9%. This sounds great, but if you take 99.9% of 365 days, you are left with almost nine hours of down-time in a year – not bad unless it all comes at once.

These figures are referred to in the industry as the 'nines' – in this case you have 'three nines' – four nines and you have a little under an hour of down time in a year, five nines and you have around five minutes of down-time a year.

Assuming that in the legal profession we don't monitor our systems 24 hours a day, faults are going to occur during working hours (because even if they occur outside working hours, they are not likely to be first detected until the next working day, and will therefore almost always have an impact on our work).

SO, IS THE ANSWER TO GO FOR AS MANY NINES AS POSSIBLE?

Only if you have a king's ransom at your disposal. Supposing it costs \$50,000 for a system with two nines – 99% up-time – a rule of thumb would be that you should budget \$0.5m

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for three nines, \$5m for four nines and \$50m for five nines. Guaranteed 100% up-time is available, but because of the inevitable caveats attached, it is arguably not really 100% and, unless your firm runs a nuclear reactor or a space shuttle, 100% is not really necessary. Even the IT industry's latest buzz-phrase – 'autonomic computing' (computers that fix themselves) – do not guarantee 100% up-time.

Beware of individual IT components that claim these figures – 'a chain is only as strong...'

Outsourced infrastructure offerings allow you to 'rent' space on systems that measure up-time in nines. If your firm is considering a total re-vamp of IT infrastructure, these may be worth examining. This will be the subject of a future article.

The right answer is to forget about the up-time of your primary system and instead make sure you have a solid and tested backup plan.

WHAT DO LAW FIRMS NEED?

The only way you can recover your firm's data in a reasonable time after a computer failure is to fix the problem that caused the failure, and re-load your data from backups (outside help may be required for both steps). If you don't have any backup data to re-load, then you are faced with replicating all your files from the source hardcopy, or from memory... as if you had never done the work in the first place.

Creating rock-solid backups of your data today is a much easier process than pre-2000. Hardware is much cheaper and much more powerful, software is much smarter, and the standard office technology environment is more robust. There are many choices for the buyer, and most are simple, quick, effective and reliable.

The average law firm should consider three backup options. Each has its own merits and variations and hybrids that are being used successfully today.

In-house backup

You copy your firm's data on to a removable storage media/device (for example, a tape/portable hard drive) in your own premises and physically remove the media/device to another location (your home) according to a rotational roster (in case of fire or theft). For example, MaXtor makes a device called a 'One-Touch' that allows you to quickly back up (and, if necessary, restore) data from your local area network at the touch of a button. The unit is small enough to carry in a briefcase.

Pros: Low cost.

Cons: You need to be organised and disciplined to maintain the roster.

Off-site online backup

You copy your data to a server located at another office location on a regular basis via a network (or the internet). Data can be extracted from the remote server and brought back when needed.

Pros: Quick and easy to operate once established.

Cons: Costly – redundant hardware is required.

Backup service provider (BSP)

This is simply a backup over the internet on a service-fee basis. Firms can minimise the capital outlay – no extra servers to buy or maintain. The charges are based solely on the number of gigabytes stored per month at the BSP. The downside, however, is that all data is remote. Small files can be restored remotely; large restores, however, require the BSP to cut a CD, tape, or portable disk and ship it back to the firm.

Pros: Cost-effective and reasonably efficient.

Cons: Dealing with a third party, security and guarantee due-diligence required.

CONCLUSION

Sir Winston Churchill once observed that:

'(People) occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing ever happened.'

When it comes to backing up your data, you ignore it at your own peril. ■

Some interesting contacts:

www.getmydataback.com.au and www.maxtor.com

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