



Minimize the risk of losing it all

It might not be the end of the world for everyone, but for some of us, to lose the contents or the use of our computer can be an absolute pain, and if you rely on it for work or running your business, an absolute nightmare. So, below are a few simple and relatively inexpensive basic steps to minimise the risk of losing it all.

There are 2 main areas to protect, the data and the hardware. Data includes all the obvious from Office documents to photos, but also email accounts (such as Outlook/Outlook Express), address books etc. The hardware is your PC, Laptop, printer, scanner, router etc. Of the two, the data is undoubtedly the most valuable, because if you lose it, it's gone forever, particularly the irreplaceable such as your family photos from the digital camera. If you're running a business then it's your work documents, contacts, accounts, invoices etc. So first and foremost you need to backup your data files:

- either you know where the files are and you know what you want to backup, then you can select the files manually and copy/burn them to an external media. There is even free software on the internet that will allow you to automate this, as long as you tell it what it is you wish to save
- or you are unsure where all the files are, in which case the easiest option is to backup the lot, though you will need software to do this – usually paid for, but inexpensive, such as Acronis True Image for under €30, and sufficient capacity on the external media – typically only another hard drive. This type of software also has the advantage of allowing you to restore all the data, as well as the software to a replacement machine/drive.

You will also need to select an external media to backup to, all of which have their pros and cons:

- the cheapest is to burn your data to a CD (under €0.5 each) or DVD (under €1 each). These have capacities from approximately 700 MB on a CD to 8.5 Gig (8500 MB) on a dual layer DVD. These type of media will conservatively last 5-10 years, but you need a burner, stack of blank disks, and to remember and to do it
- the easiest is to use a USB memory key, with capacities currently up to 8 Gig, but more commonly available in 1-2 Gig capacities, with 1 Gig being found for under €40. Just plug it in and copy the files over. However they are susceptible to damage over time if knocked about too much in the bottom of a drawer for instance
- the greatest capacities come from external Hard Drives, capacities currently up to 500 Gig for 1 drive, and commonly found in the 250 Gig capacity for approximately €100. Just drag and drop files to copy them, or use it to backup the whole computer using backup software. If you want to take the data with you, buy the smaller (but more expensive) external pocket drives, or even buy something like an IPOD, use part

of the disk for data backup, and the other for listening to your music. I even know someone who uses the 1 Gig SD card in his digital camera as storage, but I wouldn't necessarily recommend that

- the newest option is to back up to an online storage facility (accessible on the web), something I have yet to investigate, and the use of which is highly dependent on your internet access speed

- if you're running a small business, and the data is critical, then use a tape drive, have a tape for each day of the month, archive off one tape every month, and use professional backup software. It's an investment, but much cheaper than trying to recreate all your business files, contacts and accounts in the event of a disaster. PS – don't forget that in the event of a fire, flooding etc, you need to have a backup copy off site!

Protecting the hardware is a little more straight forward. Vital down here in Provence is a surge protector, which will protect your PC and accessories from lightning strikes. It is also best to buy one that will allow you to plug the phone line through it, thus protecting your broadband modem/router too (which is more than likely also connected to your computer). These products are relatively inexpensive, and widely available (under €40), but I recommend you buy a branded product that offers insurance for anything that is plugged in should the surge protector fail to do its job.

The second alternative is to use a UPS (Uninterruptible Power Supply) which should contain a surge protector, but also a battery to allow the PC to carry on running even though the electricity supply has been cut. However these will not typically keep your PC running more than 5-10 minutes, but do give you time to save what you are doing and then shutdown. Most will also come with a USB connection and software that will save and shutdown for you should you be away from the machine at the time.

A few final thoughts:

- Surge protectors can also be used for other electrical equipment, such as a HiFi, Plasma TV, etc.

- Unplugging phones and electrical appliances when you hear a thunder storm on the way is good, but unlikely to work if you are woken in the middle of the night by a surprise clap of thunder just outside your window!

- Read the small print on your household contents insurance, as some insurers will only cover IT equipment if it is less than 2 years old, and other electrical goods if they are less than 5 years old, after which they are deemed to have a value of €0.

- Backing up regularly (weekly or monthly for the home user) is better than just once a year, whereas backing up just once is better than never at all.

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