

TechTalk: Is remote backup software right for you?

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Backup solutions have long been a bone of contention in the IT world. Everyone knows you need a good, reliable backup, but the age-old question always is this: What's the best hardware and software to use?

Traditionally, on the hardware side, it's been tape drives and magnetic tape media. More recently, inexpensive USB hard drives have become more popular. There are several well-established software applications that are fairly reliable, like Symantec BackupExec for Windows or EMC's Retrospect Backup, but these backup systems, both the hardware and the software, are notoriously unreliable across the board. I have yet to see a tape hardware - and software-based backup system that does not need some near constant baby-sitting and tuning to keep it running well. Even then, the fact you get a successful backup does not necessarily mean you will be able to restore the backed up data. Time and again, I have seen a tape drive fail to read a tape to which it reports a successful backup. I've also seen software corrupt backups.

Now I don't mean to be entirely negative about tape hardware and associated software. I've seen it work well over the years, too. My main complaint with these technologies is the amount of manual intervention required to utilize them properly, from tuning the backup jobs to manually rotating and tracking the tapes or hard drives to insure you have access to the backup you need when you need it.

Over the past several years, remote, Internet-based backup systems have exploded. There are several excellent offerings today, and I won't focus on which brand may be the best; rather I will explore why remote backup may be a very important technology for your business to consider using. Most importantly, these systems remove the manual aspect of running a backup. There is nothing to physically change to ensure your backup runs when it is supposed to. Remote backup systems are mostly agent based. This means they install a piece of software on the computer to be backed up and at the scheduled time, they execute the backup, automatically, without any human intervention. Hardware- and software-based backups can operate in automated fashion as well, but if you do not have the right tape in the drive or hard drive connected, the backup may cancel or overwrite the tape or hard drive. If the tape drive is empty or hard drive not attached, the backup simply will not run.

Remote backup systems back up data to data centers across the Internet. The best systems back up to redundant data centers, meaning the backup is copied to one location and then automatically replicated to a second. The most common model here in the United States is to back up to an East Coast data center and then replicate to a West Coast center, or vice versa. These data centers are typically very secure, with credentialing systems for access and highly secured systems to ensure no one has physical access to your data who should not. In the best designed remote backup systems, the backups are encrypted before they leave your office, via the Internet, so even if the data was intercepted en route to the data center, it would appear to the person who intercepts it as gibberish. This is also true for how it is stored at the data center. Even the engineers who run and maintain the data center cannot see your data. You hold the encryption key that enables the data to be meaningful. Without that key, the data is useless. It's that simple, yet very secure.

Especially in today's very mobile world, if your business has a lot of notebook users or people who work remotely and do not come in to the office, those users should be using remote backup on those systems, so you can ensure their work is being backed up, reliably and automatically, only requiring them to leave their computer on at a certain time to allow the backup to run. Here, too, the best systems will even wake up a computer from sleep mode in order to run the backup, further automating the total process.

If you have not investigated remote backup for your business, I encourage you to do so. They are reliable, automated and cost-effective. Your backup is perhaps your most important piece of IT infrastructure. Don't skimp on it, and ensure it's as reliable as you think it is.

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