

Backups and caring for your hard drive

Losing data, whether it's a school assignment, business report or family photos is a stressful and potentially expensive experience that can happen to anyone. For this reason it's important to regularly back up your data. A back up is a copy of your file. A back up file must be accessible if the original file becomes lost or damaged. Generally the original file is stored on your computer and a back up is on an external drive. It is important to have several backups of your data, to store these backups in various locations and to use multiple types of storage to minimise the risk of losing all versions of the file. There is no point keeping backup files on a single thumb drive in your computer desk. If the building burns down- you will have lost both the original and the backup. A common place to store backups is in a vehicle, in a safety deposit box or at a relative's house. The effort you go to to store backups will reflect the importance of the files. Holiday snaps may not warrant a safety deposit box whereas business's financial records could.

There are several types of storage suitable to backup data; CD/DVDs, external hard drives, flash drives and online backups. The cheapest option is to backup with DVDs or CDs. Always use a quality brand such as Verbatim or Sony and burn the disc on a slow setting; the slower the burn the better the quality and the longer the disk will last. CD's and DVDs can scratch easily so store them in cases and store the cases away from heat or dust.

Flash drives are a cheaper alternative to hard drives, and because of their size they are very portable. Always store your flash drive in a static free environment as static can damage the drive. Flash drives can store up to 256GB which is plenty of storage for the average home user.

A one terabyte external hard drive will store 213 times as much data as a DVD. I strongly recommend all computer users source an external hard drive for backups. Although the cost of an external hard drive may seem prohibitive, consider it an investment as it may end up saving you much more in the long run.

Although online backups aren't for everyone they are an ideal way of storing files off premises. Backing up files online is beneficial when widespread bushfires are a risk, as your home, business and vehicle could all be destroyed. As online backups are stored on servers, the files can be recovered once you are online again.

An Australian company which offers free online storage is Webcity www.webcity.com.au/online-storage/. You receive 10GB worth of storage (equivalent to 2 DVDs) on Australian servers. The significance of using Australian servers is it means faster access to the backed up files and better telephone support if you have a problem. If you require more than 10GB of storage you can purchase 100GB of storage from Webcity for \$89 a year. Another company Carbonite www.carbonite.com.au/ offer a free 30 day trial, then charge \$71.99 per year for unlimited storage. Individual files must be under 4GB and the more files you upload the slower the upload and download will be. Speed isn't affected with Webcity. Carbonite offers an automatic backup of your computer, whereas with Webcity you have to manually backup. If you want to try online backups I recommend Carbonite for business computers as it supports programs including MYOB and Quicken. For the average home user I recommend Webcity.

If you are backing up manually it is important to have a routine to ensure they happen regularly and that they are stored in a 'safe' location. I suggest making it a specific person's task to back up at a certain time of day. Murphy's Law suggests the one time you will need a back up will be on the one day you forgot to do it!

Many computers are currently experiencing problems related to a failed hard drive. Often owners are unaware how easily they can extend the life span of a hard drive. Hard drive errors are caused by incorrectly shutting down the computer, by power failures, power surges or by viruses.

When a computer isn't allowed time to shut down properly the hard drive will still be running programs or copying data. If copying of data hasn't finished when the computer is turned off it can cause an error. Over time errors compound until finally the computer will no longer start up. This can often be avoided by checking for disc errors with a program such as Microsoft's Check Disk. If the number of errors gets too bad, checking for errors may require the Windows Installation CD. By adding a simple disk check to your backup routine you can prevent many problems and keep your computer in top condition.

When there is a blackout you do not have the opportunity to shut your computer down. An uninterruptible power supply (UPS) allows the computer to run temporarily giving you time to save your work and shut down the computer. Good UPS offer surge protection, so you will also be protected from the surges and spikes in power which are common in Grenfell. I can currently

source UPS with surge protection for around \$200. Consider your UPS an investment; it will help prevent you losing files and minimise avoidable repairs.

Even with regular hard drive maintenance and the installation of a UPS there is still a chance your computer may lose data. The only guaranteed way to ensure your data is with regular backups combined with storing the backups off premises, having an antivirus program (I recommend AVG-\$105 for 2 years protection) and regular maintenance.

URGENT UPDATE As discussed in the past, online scams are becoming increasingly sophisticated. In the last couple of weeks I have had two experiences worth sharing. I received an email from the "Webmail Support Team" asking me to confirm my email address, password and date of birth. Despite the email looking legitimate, experience tells me companies never request these details. If you receive emails like this never reply and always delete them. I also had a phone call from "Virtual PC Doctor" who told me I had programs on my computer that could be damaging my files. The person offered to instruct me over the phone in how to remove the damaging files. Suspecting this as a scam I played along. I told him I had two computers and asked which one I needed to remove files from. He couldn't answer and hung up very quickly when I explained I was a computer technician and knew exactly what is on my computer. This was a case of 'do as I say not as I do.' I would never encourage anyone to engage in conversation or follow instructions from an unsolicited phone call. These two experiences demonstrate that just because we live in a small town we are not immune to online scams.

If you are having any problems with your computer, give me a call on 6343 1720 or drop in and see me at the Internet Centre and I will help put you on the right track.