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A Call for Backup

By [Rob Pegoraro](#)

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What do my sister-in-law, my mother-in-law, my colleague Steve, my old editor John and my friend Robert have in common? All saw their computer's hard drive crash. And none had recently backed up their data.

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A Call for Backup

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They could have used any of a variety of backup programs, some free, to copy their files. But those programs, too, have something in common: Most are poorly suited for use by busy people who don't work on computers for a living.

This problem is worst in Windows, where most backup tools commit the same error. They assume you know where your programs' data reside on the hard drive -- even though Windows normally hides those locations.

(Mac users have significantly better options, such as the wonderfully simple Time Machine utility in [Mac OS X 10.5 Leopard](#) and the almost-as-approachable, free iBackup, at <http://grapefruit.ch/iBackup>.)

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I wish I could recommend one cheap and easy backup tool for the PC. But after spending the past two weeks trying 10 Windows programs, I can only offer a qualified endorsement for two.

One, Mozy (<http://mozy.com>), safeguards your data in a secure, encrypted server on the Web. It works in [Windows 2000](#), XP and [Vista](#), plus Mac OS X 10.4 and 10.5, and provides 2 gigabytes of storage free or unlimited backup for \$4.95 a month.

Mozy's online-only setup ensures that

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your data will survive the destruction of your computer or your entire house, but it also requires a long wait or enormous bandwidth for the first upload (after which subsequent, automatic backups go much faster). If your broadband provider imposes usage quotas, you may not be able to rely on this program.

You also have to trust Mozy to protect your data for you, although its backing -- the large computer-services firm [EMC](#) bought it last year -- should allow some confidence. Note also that you don't need a fast Internet connection to recover your data; Mozy will [FedEx](#) a DVD for an extra fee.

Mozy cleverly solves the where-are-my-settings problem with "backup sets" that cover many popular programs, in addition to its automatic coverage of an enormous range of file types. On a Windows Vista laptop, Mozy recognized that I'd set up [Microsoft Outlook](#) and [Mozilla Thunderbird](#) to check my e-mail and provided backup sets for each program's settings and mail archives. Most other backup tools -- such as Carbonite (<http://carbonite.com>), an XP/Vista-only service that charges about \$10 less annually for unlimited online backups -- ignore this thoughtful idea.

Mozy, however, doesn't take this concept as far as it should. Its pre-sets still leave out important programs: On that Vista machine, Mozy ignored [Microsoft's](#) Windows Mail and [Apple's iTunes](#). And when you try to restore your data, you can't do so by choosing one backup set -- instead, you must pick files out of a traditional "folder tree" listing (quick, does your Outlook mail live in Vista's AppData\Local or AppData\Roaming directory?).

The second backup option doesn't require any trust in another Web site, as it consists of an external hard drive with backup software that runs automatically when you plug it into a Windows 2000, XP or Vista computer. Ontario-based Storage Appliance's Clickfree (<http://goclickfree.com>) drives cost \$99.99 for a 120-gigabyte model and \$119.99 for a 160-GB version.

On that Vista laptop, a 160-GB Clickfree unit (which offered 144 GB of free space after the portion taken up by Clickfree's software) required near-zero intervention. After a click through Vista's continue-or-cancel "User Account Control" alert, it inventoried the data on the machine and quickly copied it over to this drive.

Clickfree's software probably grabbed more files than necessary -- not altogether bad -- but helpfully sorted it by category, such as photos and e-mail. A look through these groupings revealed that it had snagged not only the usual suspects but also the files and settings behind such third-party programs as Thunderbird and iTunes.

When Clickfree finishes its backup, you can unplug the drive instantly, without clicking on the "eject" button in Windows. The drive also gets its power from a computer's USB port, so you don't need a spare outlet.

You will, however, need to remember to plug the Clickfree drive back in, since it won't remind you. Restoring a Clickfree backup takes more work yet. If you need to recover a subset of your files, you can't refer to that simple shopping list of data; you're thrown a folder-tree interface.

At least Mozy and Clickfree only require the help of a computing pro to recover a backup, not to create one in the first place. But when you consider how much of the stuff of our lives now exists only as bits of data on disks, it ought to be an outrage that keeping it all safe demands this much tinkering.

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