

Backing up your files is a must nowadays



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As the years go by hard drives get physically smaller, hold more data and cost less per gigabyte. Now, I can buy a 250 GB compact pocket drive or a full size 500 GB hard drive — either one — for only \$99. Two weeks ago I bought a 1 TB (terabyte or 1,000 GB) hard drive for \$119!

The downside of these low prices is the data retention policies that are now expected and in some cases legislated. In other words, depending on the business, some companies have to keep copies of data for a minimum number of years. This creates a host of challenges and expenses for both business owners and IT yahoos like me.

Electronic data record retention can quickly become a legal subject and you know how I love and adore lawyers. My respect for their profession is so high that over my dead body will my two girls will attend law school unless they swear they will become and remain criminal prosecution attorneys just to keep the scum in prison.

That said, consult with your legal counsel on any specific minimum data retention period that is applicable to your company's business. The purpose of this article is to get you thinking about this annoying subject of how long to keep stuff.

Here are some generic rules of thumb that you can start with:

Business records: 7 years to permanent

Contracts: 7 years to permanent

Employee records: 3 years

Payroll records: 3-7 years

Other types of records have even longer retention periods like in Texas for example, disability and sick benefit records must be retained for 6 years and claims of employee inventions must be retained for 25 years. You think that is extreme, try OSHA who requires that certain industrial hygiene records and medical records be retained for 30 years.

The first thing every company needs is a data record retention policy. According to the SANS (SysAdmin, Audit, Network, Security) Institute at www.SANS.org, your company's data retention policy should follow this outline:

- A) Purpose of the policy
- B) Who is affected by this policy

C) What type of data and electronic systems are covered by this policy

D) Define key terms especially legal and technical terminology

E) Describe the requirements in detail from the legal, business and . personal

perspective

F) Outline the procedures for ensuring data is properly retained

G) Outline the procedures for ensuring data is properly destroyed

H) Clearly document the litigation exception process and how to respond to discovery requests

I) List the responsibilities of those involved in data retention activities

J) Build a table showing the information type and its corresponding retention period

K) Document the specific duties of a central/corporate data retention team if one exists

L) Appendix for additional reference information

Once your policy is completed and reviewed by your legal beagle, it will be time for your IT person to implement it. Depending on the retention durations stated by the policy, the current and past backup technologies implemented, and the allocated funds to make this all work will determine the complexity of the data retention project.

Hopefully it will be as simple

as taking the last backup tape of a quarter or year end and placing it in a fireproof safe for the specified number of years. Things can get dicey if your business and legal requirements make you store that data in a way that allows it to be searchable via keywords.

Governmental institutions will certainly have that need since they often have to comply with the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act. Ask Washington County about those issues especially with some unnamed retired guys around here that have nothing better to do than sue county and file FOI requests at taxpayer expense.

If your company has all their backups going to hard drives

now instead of tape, then at least once a year, buy a 500 GB or even one of the new terabyte drives, take a snap shot of the server data, and then store it at preferably an offsite facility even if it is the gun safe at the owners home.

As far as data retention of personal data at your home, keep those Turbo Tax files for at least seven years. The most valuable data files we have are our digital pictures of the kids and the retention period for those is simple: FOREVER.

That means you backup the My Pictures folder under My Documents to as many computers, external hard drives, and online backup services like Mozy.com and Carbonite.com

as possible.

I also keep all my e-mail that is not spam which existed in my Inbox and Sent folders for at least five years. On a yearly basis within MS Outlook I export the last year of messages out of those two folders and put them in an exported PST file.

This year's worth of e-mail is named for that year (ie. Inbox-Sent-2008.PST) and copied to several external hard drives.

With the cost of external hard drives drastically down, I recommend every homeowner get one and begin backing up

all your personal data immediately via the native Microsoft backup utilities that comes with both XP and Vista. If you have a Macintosh then just use the

Time Machine backup application which makes it very easy to store your data on external hard drives.

Then the next time prices drop and the terabyte drives goes down to \$89 next year, then use the current one as your data retention drive and put the older one in the safe.

Bottom line: Data retention is not only a good idea, but in most areas of business has become a requirement even mandated by law.

Next week's column: Online job search and resumes.

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