

# Microsoft improves backup utility in Vista

Managing data backups at client sites is my most important job. It is also the most challenging.

This has been the case in the computer industry from the start since data preservation and integrity is absolutely critical. One of my responsibilities back when I was eighteen working a Control Data Corporation 27 years ago was to run the backups and hang the nine-track reel tapes that would store the data from huge Cyber 175 mainframe computers.

A quarter century later and I am still basically doing the same thing. The only differences are I backup a heck of a lot more data and I get paid a bit more to do it.

The vast majority of my client sites are configured to use the standard Microsoft Backup utility rather than vendor specific applications like Veritas or Symantec Backup.

Though Veritas has been the industry favorite, it has also become the most expensive and complex solution to use and manage. It basically tries to do too much and often I have had to battle it just to backup and restore the files I need.

The core application of Microsoft's backup which is NTBACKUP.EXE has



John Deans

been around since Windows NT (1995) and has been very reliable and easier to use than Veritas. Plus, Microsoft backup comes free with Windows NT, 98, 2000, ME, XP and Server.

The beauty of Microsoft backup is that the format of the backup file (.BKF) has been a standard for many years. That means I can take

the backup file from a Windows 2000 PC to any other Windows computer and restore files from it. Couple that format and software compatibility with backing up data to external hard drives and you have a very portable and flexible backup solution.

The old way of using expensive Veritas software and backing up to vendor specific tapes locked you down to restoring files just on that specific system due to both software and hardware requirements.

The only draw back with Window's backup is that there is no built-in scheduling mechanism. You can schedule automatic backups but it is configured and run through the Windows scheduler which is dependent on a password. If that password gets changed on the system and is not updated on the scheduler, then the backups stop running.

That has bit me multiple times over

the years when clients change their passwords, but fail to make that same modification on the backup scheduler. My solution to this is basically to keep an eye on the backup files by remotely accessing those computers via Log-MeIn.com and verifying the dates on those BKF files.

Since the first service pack came out for Windows Vista the majority of problems with compatibility and stability have been resolved. The majority of new computers now come with Vista installed and we now have to accept and adapt to it since the "pretty pig" is here to stay.

The thing about Vista to remember is to make darn sure you have at least 2 GB of RAM (memory) for it to run decently.

One of the major changes in Vista is the all new backup utility. It is accessed much the same way as the previous Windows backup by clicking on Start -All Programs-Accessories-System Tools and then start up the Backup Status and Configuration.

As the new backup application starts up the only option you have is to configure the automatic backups. This forces and guides you through a few simple steps with easy questions to backup your files to another location. That other location should be an external hard drive that you can pick up at

Computer Helpers, Wal-Mart or online for very little money.

I just paid only \$80 on e-Bay for a new USB external 250 GB hard drive (HDD) that fits in my shirt pocket and gets its power from the USB cable. These are perfect for workstation backups.

At my client sites I am purchasing multiples of these to have one on site and a second or even third one to swap out every Friday for offsite disaster recovery copies.

During the backup setup walk-through take the defaults on the "Which Files To Back Up" question and leave all the boxes checked. Next on the "How Often" question change it from weekly to daily since it is always a good idea to backup every night. Set the time of day or night to a time that you know the computer will be on but not occupied.

That is about all you have to do for reliable and automatic backups. Since the new Vista backup application has a different scheduling technique it is not vulnerable to stopping due to password changes like we just talked about.

The new Vista backup also uses a different backup file format rather than the old BKF files. Now Microsoft uses ZIP files nested in protected files and date/time named directories that you can browse with the Windows Explorer. This ZIP format is a long-time

utilized file compression format that is readable by most any operating system which makes the new backup files even more portable.

The negative thing about the new Vista backup utility is that it does not restore from older BKF files easily. It can be done but you have to enable "Removable Storage" and download then install the Windows NT Backup Restore Utility from Microsoft.

To restore files from previous Vista backups on that external HDD just choose the "Restore Files" button when you start up the Backup Status and Configuration utility. You will be prompted to pick a backup snapshot being the latest one or any of the previous backups.

This is yet another great new capability enabling you to go several versions back in time in case you messed up a good while ago. The next option set lets you pick and choose the backed up files to restore.

Bottom line: Microsoft has vastly improved the native backup utility in Vista so go get an external HDD and back up your golden files!

Next week's column: Proactive versus reactive.

*John Deans of DeansConsulting.com is a Brenham area computer networking consultant who can be reached at 289-2233 or John@DeansConsulting.com for questions and comments.*