

Best free backup apps

Free utility backs up frequently changed files

Support Alert by Ian Richards, December 13, 2007

Most users have learned to regularly save documents while they are creating them. While this prevents you from losing your work, it has the disadvantage that each time you save you write over the previous version and so can't go back to an early revision. You can get around this by using different file names each time you save but an easier way is to use the free FileHampster program that automatically time stamps and stores copies each time you save. Furthermore, it allows you to annotate each copy so that your revision versions are fully documented. I tried it and it works well though I suggest you watch the quick start tutorial before using. There are some nice plug-ins too, including one that allows you to use a third party dif program such as WinMerge to view the differences between versions. Overall I was quite impressed. Yes, there are other programs around that perform a similar task but FileHampster is as powerful as any yet is among the easiest to use. Freeware, Windows 2000 and later with .NET V2.0 Framework, 1.1MB

<http://www.mogware.com/FileHamster/>

How to back up your data online cheaply

Support Alert by Ian Richards, November 22, 2007

The best course of action you can take to ensure that your important documents, pictures, videos, spreadsheets and other data files are protected, is to make regular backups. Having a recent, trustworthy backup available means that you can recover from just about any eventuality, be it a virus attack, hard disk failure, flood, hacker attack, or the theft of your entire PC.

There are lots of choices when it comes to backup media. You can copy your files to CDs, DVDs, external hard drives, tape, USB sticks, another computer on your LAN, or another hard disk or partition within the backed-up computer itself. While all of these methods offer a great deal of protection against some of the major threats, they won't offer total protection unless you take the backup off-site. Otherwise, floods, burglary, fire or theft could easily mean that you lose not just the original computer but all of your backups too.

There are two possible solutions to the problem. One is to ensure that you always store your backup media away from your main computer. Just take the tape, DVD, external drive etc to a friend or neighbor, or perhaps leave it at the office for safekeeping. You can always turn on the encryption feature in your backup program if you're concerned that your friend or workmates will be tempted to pry into the content of your files. However, carrying backup media around the neighborhood is time-consuming and irritatingly low-tech, and inconvenient if you need to restore a file or refresh a backup and the media isn't at hand.

An alternative solution is to back up electronically to an online location via the internet, so that all your files are instantly off-site but remain permanently accessible if you need access to them.

Specialist providers of online backup services are plentiful, and can easily be found with Google, but they're not particularly cheap. FirstBackup [1], for example, charges more than \$34 a month for

storing up to 10 GB of data from a single PC. Mozy [2] is cheaper, at \$4.95 a month per PC for virtually unlimited storage.

Both services come with client software that's automatic and very easy to use; just install it on your computer, tell it where your important files are stored, and the software will take care of backing them up whenever they change.

Restoring files is just as easy. And crucially, you can easily restore files to a different PC rather than to the one that was backed up. Vital if you're attempting to rebuild your digital life after your PC gets stolen or you manage to drop your laptop down the stairs.

But there are alternatives to the traditional online backup service including some good free options: If you don't have much data to back up, some of the online backup services will give you a free account. The aforementioned Mozy, for example, offers free accounts with 2 GB of storage that never expire. If your key files consist mainly of documents and spreadsheets rather than MP3s and videos, 2 GB might well be enough. If you do have MP3 and video files too, but they don't change very often, you could always keep those files on DVDs or an external drive, kept off-site and refreshed every few months, and just use a free Mozy account for files that change frequently.

Free webmail services offer lots of email storage space for free. For example Gmail [3] offers 5 GB as does Hotmail [4] while Yahoo! [5] offers nominally unlimited storage.

You can use this storage by sending your backup data to your email account as a zipped attachment to an email. To get back your data login to your webmail account and access the attachment directly or resend it back to a mail account on your own PC. Note though, that you will be limited by the maximum email attachment size allowed by your ISP or webmail provider.

Gmail is particularly suited to online backup because of the availability of a freeware program called the Gmail Drive Shell Extension [6]. This is a wonderful piece of Windows software that creates a virtual disk drive that maps to a Gmail account. Just use Windows Explorer or any Windows application to drag a file to your virtual drive, and in reality it gets copied to your Gmail account as an attachment to a dummy message. Drag the other way and you can instantly retrieve a file from its online location.

The only problem with the Gmail Drive Extension is that Google isn't terribly keen on it, because that's not what Gmail is supposed to be for. So it could stop working at any time if Google decides to flex its technical or legal muscles. That said, it currently works really well.

Another option is to rent space on a web server. Such space is normally intended for websites but there are no rules that dictate that you can't use the space for backup instead. It's cheap too: for example, Blue host [7] charges \$6.95 a month complete with a domain name. For that, you get 300 GB of storage, and access via web, ftp and SSH (secure shell).

You can send and receive files easily to your hosted server via a standard FTP program. If you don't have one of those, Filezilla [8] is excellent and it's a free download.

And so long as you store your backup files above the Web document root (htdocs on most servers), your files won't be accessible via the Web and so there's no chance that someone could type a crafty URL into their web browser and access your files.

Hopefully, you're now inspired to re-visit your current backup solution and perhaps consider doing all or part of it online. But before you do, here are two more things to consider.

First, it's always a good idea to encrypt your backup so that, if someone does hack into the server, they can't read your files. You can encrypt simply and easily using the password protection feature in an archiving program like WinZip or use a dedicated program such as the free program TrueCrypt [9]. Second, test your backups regularly. Download a few sample files from your online location and make sure that you can access them. Ideally, do the test from a different PC, just to make sure that everything still works correctly.

If you would like more online storage options check out the "Today's Best of Breed" link [10], which contains pointers to various internet sites that offer free online storage. There are some great ideas in there.

[1] <http://www.firstbackup.com/>

[2] <http://mozy.com/>

[3] <http://www.gmail.com>

[4] <http://www.hotmail.com>

[5] <http://www.yahoo.com>

[6] <http://www.viksoe.dk/code/gmail.htm>

[7] <http://www.bluehost.com>

[8] <http://filezilla-project.org/>

[9] <http://www.truecrypt.org/>

[10] <http://todaybestofbreed.wordpress.com/2007/09/19/dont-forage-terrabites-of-free-storage-online/>

The best free backup program

Support Alert by Ian Richards, May 18, 2006

I've spent the last two weeks trying to locate a decent free data backup program as part of a major makeover of my site www.backup-software-reviews.com. For some time I've wanted to offer some free alternatives to the commercial data backup programs listed at that site so I've been scouring the web for candidates.

It's been a pretty depressing experience. It's hard to find decent commercial backup programs let alone free ones. Most products have glaring deficiencies, the most common being difficulty of use and lack of CD/DVD support.

Difficulty of use is a real deal-breaker for me. If a product doesn't allow an average user to easily set up an effective backup then as far as I'm concerned it's pretty well useless.

Let me explain why by example. Most users want to backup their email but have no idea where on their computer their email is stored. Good backup programs provide check boxes for "back up my Outlook mail" and similar options for other popular email clients. The same comment applies to backing up bookmarks or the Windows Registry. Again, most users simply don't know where these files are located. Well designed backup programs understand this and make it easy by providing check boxes.

But most backup programs are not well designed. They require the user to specify the exact location of files to be backed up and most users don't know where they are located. It's just dumb.

Of the 14 free products I looked at I've only found one program that I feel happy to recommend to average users. It's actually an older version of a current commercial product. The vendor is offering the older version for free with the hope users might later upgrade to the newest version. However, the old program is good enough that most users probably won't need to.

The program is WinBackup V1.86 from Uniblue Systems. It's a pretty good backup program by any standards: it's got a Wizard to help users setup their backups and another to initiate a recovery. It has handy check boxes for commonly backed up items and a lot of flexibility for adding specific data sets to those standard items. It can back up to any drive recognized by Windows including network drives and will backup to a FTP server as well. Most importantly it will backup to CD/DVD without the need for third party packet driver software. It supports compression and encryption and provides backup data validation as well. It has a built in scheduler that runs backups automatically. The feature list goes on and on.

"Well," you may ask, "what's wrong with it?"

A few things. First, it backs up in a proprietary format which means you can't read the data without having a copy of WinBackup on hand. This won't worry many users but I find it an annoyance.

Second, it had trouble reading deeply nested directory structures. Worse still, it reacts to the problem by just hanging which necessitates a system reboot. Many users just won't have data nested so deep as to cause a problem but be aware it can happen.

Third, it occasionally missed a scheduled backup. I'm still not sure why. Indeed, it may be a problem specific to my setup. But again, be aware of the potential.

There are a few other minor issues but I'll leave that to my full review over at www.backup-software-reviews.com.

Reservations aside, WinBackup V1.86 gets my top recommendation as the best free data backup program available. It's not up to the standard of the best commercial products but will still meet the needs of many average users.

Freeware, Windows 98 and later, 4.2MB

<http://www.backupanswers.com/freewinbackup/>

[How to backup Outlook and Outlook Express](#)

Support Alert by Ian Richards, May 18, 2006

Good tutorial covering the most common versions of Outlook. It shows you how to restore from backup as well.

<http://www.sitedeveloper.ws/tutorials/outlook.htm>

[Best free Outlook Express backup utility](#)

Support Alert by Ian Richards, April 20, 2006

This title has been held for some time by Majik's excellent OEBackup, however I've been really impressed by PicoBackup Outlook Express Edition. It's tad more complex to use than OEBackup but offers many more features including integrated CD/DVD burning, disk spanning, encryption, ZIP compression and the ability to backup multiple users. Freeware, Windows 98 and later, 3.37MB.

<http://www.picobackup.com/pboe/index.html>

[Gizmo stands corrected](#)

Support Alert by Ian Richards, April 20, 2006

In the March issue I incorrectly stated that the free MozBackup extension was no longer being developed. This is not the case; in fact, a new version is currently being prepared. I could claim this error was due to over-work, not enough sleep or even extra-terrestrials planting strange thoughts in my mind. The reality is I simply goofed.

<http://mozbackup.jasnapaka.com/>

[How to back up, restore and move Outlook Express email](#)

Support Alert by Ian Richards, March 16, 2006

There's no need to spend a cent on this; just follow this Microsoft Guide. Some of these pages use ActiveX so you may have to browse them with Internet Explorer rather than Firefox or Opera.

<http://support.microsoft.com/kb/270670>