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Is backing up online OK for your data?

Remote backup services have been gaining ground for individual and small-business users in the last few years and new providers are popping up everywhere. But is having your data backed up to a remote server safe? Kate Craig-Wood, MD at SquirrelSave explains what's involved, the pros and cons and what to consider when signing up.

Few people need to be convinced of how important it is to back up their data, yet 96% of people don't have regular backups set. The way the data is backed up, and how reliable that backup is, is just as important. Imagine trying to restore the one backup copy you have of that irreplaceable Word document or spreadsheet only to find the disk you burned it to can't be read anymore or you only have an old version of the file backed up.

In my case, I don't need to imagine that particular scenario, as I have my entire laptop backed up to an online storage service. The service works by using software that mirrors selected directories on my PC and backs them up in real-time to a remote server. If a file is modified locally then it is immediately updated on the backup server, or as soon as a network connection becomes available (therefore you don't need to wait until you get back to the office to back up your data).

The data is then encrypted, compressed to speed up transfer and reduce the amount of storage space required, and uploaded to the server at the service provider's data centre. The first time you do an online backup it will take a bit of time as the complete data needs to be encrypted, but subsequent backups are incremental (i.e. only data that has been added or changed is backed up) so it's much quicker.

But is it safe?

As well as ensuring that your data is encrypted both in transit and at the service provider's data centre, you should also check that they are using the latest security systems when storing your data, including:

- Firewalls.
- Backup generators to keep servers going in the event of a power outage.
- Various other technologies to ensure your data on the provider's servers is backed up, and that you always have access to it.
- You should also get an account number and password so that only those you authorise can access your data.

Pros and Cons

Online backup is feasible for most businesses and can even be used as an alternative or in addition to traditional methods if you're already backing up. For example if you have some data that you simply cannot afford to lose you might want to use several backup methods including online backup.

As with most things there are pros and cons...

Pros Include:

- Your data is stored securely off site.
- Set up and installation can be relatively quick and simple.
- Backup and data recovery can be simpler and quicker than more traditional methods.
- Access to historical backups are useful if you need restore a file as it existed weeks, or even years ago.
- It can also help out the bottom line, too, as you can avoid having to invest in backup software, hardware and media.

Cons Include:

- Ongoing monthly charges.
- Relies on a working Internet connection. No Internet, no backup!
- The amount of data to be backed up can be limited by the speed of your Internet connection and this could cost you extra depending on your ISP.
- Reliance on an external provider to keep your data secure - If you choose online backup as your sole back up method you'll be entrusting all your

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valuable data to someone else who potentially could go bust or otherwise place your data at risk.

Therefore it pays to choose your service provider wisely...

Choosing a Provider

Factors to consider when choosing a provider might include:

- Cost; there are various services around offering free or limited storage capacities. You need to consider how much data you wish to back up and the number of computers you wish to have access to the service.
- Word of Mouth; get recommendations from someone who has used them wherever possible.
- Availability and extent of support (e.g. if you host overseas will tech support be available when you need it?).
- Will the solution work with your particular set up?
- Can you choose which files to back up?
- Does the service allow automated and unattended backup?
- Is back up of open files and running databases possible?
- Security - encryption of data during transfer and whilst stored on remote server / password protected access, facilities at data centres.
- Is central management of backup / restore from one or more locations possible?
- Will you get notification of any problems with the backup / restore?
- Can you restore your data quickly and easily?

By **Kate Craig-Wood**

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