While the backup needs of small-midsized businesses (SMBs) are essentially the same as those of enterprises, there are some important differences that should be considered. Because budget and technical expertise are frequently strained in SMBs, an effective backup strategy must take those issues into consideration. The following tips can help you make successful backups.

Do it!

The most important habit of effective backup is to make effective backups. "Effective" means regular backups of all the information you need to preserve at the appropriate intervals.

This is especially critical with remote sites and corporate laptops. These systems are harder to oversee and it's easier to let backups slide. But if they contain important information, they need to be backed up.

Keep in mind that mirroring is not backup. Neither is imaging on the same system. Just because your array has two copies of your data doesn't mean it is completely protected.

Also remember to back up more than just the data. If you don't have copies of your configuration files, program patches and system state information, you are, at the very least, in for a lot of work if you need to do a full restore.

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Image it

Today, there's simply no reason not to have a current image of your system instantly available. Most backup software will take images at pre-set intervals. A number of specialized programs offer more sophisticated abilities and Windows does this by default.

A system image isn't the same as a full backup, but it can handle about 90% of the things you need backups for, like restoring files or folders that were deleted by error or somehow corrupted.

Automate it

The more human involvement you have in your backups the more likely they are to fail. Although human error is usually listed as the second leading cause of backup failure after media problems, a lot of problems with media, such as improperly handling tapes, are actually caused by human error as well.

At the very least you should automatically back up your system on a regular schedule. Most backup software will let you schedule backups and you should replace the products that don't with ones that do.

Prune it

At the same time, you don't need to back up everything on your system. Most of what's there, such as .tmp files and browser caches, doesn't need to be saved at all.

Pruning your data reduces backup times and saves media cost, but it does require a little more work to decide which files and folders you need.

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Seven Tips for Better SMB Backups

By Symantec Corporation

Duplicate it

One copy is better than no copies, but it still isn't really secure. The depressing fact is that a lot of backups can't be restored when needed. By having more than one copy of your data in backup, you increase your chances of being able to get all, or most, of your data back.

You need at least two copies, although they don't necessarily have to both be current. One common scheme is to keep the last two full backups as well as the partial backups.

Remember to back up more than just the data..

At the same time, you don't need to back up everything on your system..

Store it -- safely

At least one full copy of your data should be stored securely away from your system. That way you can be sure of having your data even in the event of a disaster.

That means at least one copy of your last full backup is stored offsite in a place where it is available 24-7 (a safety deposit box at your local bank doesn't qualify). For a lot of SMBs, this means the offsite backup goes home with someone. This isn't as good as using a secure, always-available repository, but it's better than nothing. If you use this strategy, be sure the backup is encrypted before it leaves your premises.

If you have systems in two or more locations, another strategy is to send the backup copy over a WAN or the internet to another system.

Test it

In backups, ignorance is not bliss; it's an invitation to disaster. Just because your backup software says it has successfully created a backup, doesn't mean you're going to be able to get that data back when you need it.

To make sure, you need to test your system by restoring all or part of the image from the backups at regular intervals. One good way to do this is to create a separate partition on your system and restore to it for testing. Another way is to restore it to another machine.

This is an important test because if something happens to your computer, you'll have to restore to another system to make sure you can do it without any setbacks. Again, your backup software should provide facilities for this.