

NIGHTMARE on Elm Street

IT Insight by Jill Barson Gilbert

My story begins in late June, while visiting family in the greater Los Angeles area following A&WMA's 2008 Annual Conference & Exhibition in Portland, OR. My brother and I took off for the Getty Center that Friday morning for a bit of art, architecture, and inspiration in a Los Angeles mountaintop setting. I left my notebook computer to charge its battery. After returning from our outing, I decided to check my e-mail and upload dozens of photos taken that day for safekeeping. I powered on the computer and it began to boot up... then it emitted a ghastly electronic scream as it shut down, not to be brought to life by any normal means. Thus, my nightmare began.

IT Support: Not Always There When You Need It

As the owner of a small business with limited IT support, I had purchased an extended computer warranty. After returning home to Houston, I took the computer in for warranty service. At least three technicians verified at different times that the computer did not power on. They promised to call me within 24 hours, and offered me a loaner computer if they could not diagnose the problem quickly. Since this was my primary business computer, I could afford to wait only a day or two before retrieving data stored on the hard drive.

The Suspense Builds...

The wait began. The service department did not call as promised. With no ETD (estimated time for diagnosis), I checked out my computer to recover the data. Since the computer did not power on, this was a challenge, but one I could take on. As a kid I was curious about how things work and have moderate mechanical skills—all I needed was a steady hand, a small screwdriver, and a few uninterrupted minutes, right?



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Definitely Not for the Faint of Heart

The user guide provided with every computer is valuable in pointing out the location and purpose of every conceivable part that a computer *user* should need. If you misplace it, you can easily download a user guide from the manufacturer's Web site. Then again, the user guide does not show how to disassemble a computer, upgrade it, or replace parts without causing damage and/or voiding the warranty. This requires a more elusive, model-specific maintenance and repair manual, or technical manual. You can find a technical manual with a good Internet search engine and a bit of patience. The technical manual provides clear, easy-to-follow, step-by-step instructions for computer *technicians*.

As with many subcompact computers, the hard drive sits in the middle of the computer, and is difficult to access. Armed with illustrations and a small screwdriver, I safely removed the hard drive, ready to put it into an external housing to access the data... but the housing had connections for an older technology ... Agghhh! A trip to an electronic parts store yielded a USB-powered enclosure compatible with my 18-month-old notebook drive. Back at the office, 30 minutes and a few dollars later, I attached the (now external) notebook drive to another computer, and... not so fast! Agghhh!

The Suspense Is Killing Me!

Most offices use network storage, tape drives, external hard drives, online storage, or a combination of these. Each of these options provides adequate capacity to back up an entire notebook computer. In general, backing up an entire computer is neither recommended nor required. As a computer gets older, it accumulates a lot of instructions and programs that slow it down, though periodic house cleaning can help improve performance. Also, backing up *all* data can cause unintended risks (See E-Discovery Rules Reach Beyond Litigation; *EM* August 2007, 24–25). Finally, backing up a high-capacity hard drive takes a lot of time,

much of it wasted if you take the first and second points to heart. What should you back up to protect from future data losses and downtime?

Let's assume that your organization has the software installation files for the programs installed on your machine. If so, then trim data backups to critical information that you could not otherwise replace, for example:

- documents, spreadsheets, and small databases—your “work” or project files;
- any special templates you use frequently; and
- e-mail, if not backed up on a server or online—remember the consequences of saving everything.

Goopy, Not Icky

Once I reassembled my notebook and returned it for service, I received a loaner computer loaded with Microsoft Office 2007 and Windows Vista. But my computer had Office 2003 and Windows XP—I was waiting for the first Vista Service Pack (issued just about the time this story began) before upgrading my own machine... Agghhh!

I found Vista Service Pack 1 and Microsoft Office 2007 pretty easy to learn. Occasionally, I had to use the Help files to find my way. I like Vista's new graphical user interface (GUI, pronounced “goopy”) and find it runs well on 2 MB of RAM; 3 would be even better. While Vista has its critics, it is said to be more secure than Windows XP. With the latest Service Pack, Office 2007 works like a dream. It offers a selection of templates, formats, and designs to make work easier. You can save your work in a format compatible with Office 2003, which much of the world still uses.

On June 30, 2008, Microsoft stopped selling Windows XP. Many organizations will leapfrog from Windows XP to the next operating system after Vista. This

will let them phase in hardware and memory upgrades needed for the newer operating systems. Some organizations opt to run Office 2007 on XP while gearing up for the next operating system.

Epilogue

After three weeks in the shop, my notebook computer mysteriously powered on and came to life, so I brought it home. This nightmare taught me to use a more reliable data backup utility and to check backups often, that Web-based e-mail can cure a host of evils, and that learning new operating systems and software can be pleasant, not ghoulish. To this date, the freakish problem with my notebook never has been diagnosed... some mysteries cannot be explained. em

