

What to look for when choosing an online backup service

Online data backup has proven to be useful for ensuring critical data is backed up with greater protection, lower cost and less hassle than traditional backup methods but which service do you choose?

Introduction

Although online data backup is more widely known now than ever before and has grown with the advent of broadband access, many don't really know what if any differences exist between the services on offer. Useful features and price are key differentiators.

This article aims to help those considering online backup make a more informed decision rather than opting for the cheapest service they can find and suffer later.

First a high level recap on how online backup works. Users download a "thin" client (a small computer program) onto their PCs, laptops and/or servers and configure it to select files they want backed up. These selected files are then backed up by clicking a "back up now" button or by setting a schedule to automatically backup the files at a given time.

Simple and straight forward. However, as a recent national PC magazine pointed out, the services available aren't all the same and have very different features and levels of support – which is normally critical for most products and services. In the following paragraphs we highlight some of the key differences so you don't get caught out with a "good deal" that doesn't offer you the protection or hassle free service you expected to receive.

Reliability and Software Client handling

The software client (used to select files etc) is a good place to start as it is the "control centre" for online backup operations. The client should be easy to use and intuitive. A single click "backup now" button should exist and it should

be just as easy to restore / delete files as required.

Fundamental options in the thin client should enable users to trade off the level of file compression against the speed of compression and include options for controlling the maximum size of files allowed to be backed up.

Not all services have clients that are easy to use and some are likely to cause you to want to return to more risky traditional backup methods. Make sure you choose a service with a no obligation/free trial to test out the client.

Also aim for a well supported client if you want the best protection for critical files. For real peace of mind you'll need to know the client is always being updated, improved and debugged / tested with new operating systems.

File Selection

File selection should be simple and straight forward and is one of the most important aspects of the service. Users should be able to select a whole folder without having to select each individual file. This is very important as some of the cheaper services don't offer this. When a folder is fully selected, all subsequent files placed in the folder should automatically be included in the backup set. Conversely it is extremely useful to be able to select a whole folder and then deselect certain files.

Imagine the hassle of having to select all new files individually before backing up? This would be far more hassle than using a CD or Tape backup. Due to human error users are more likely to miss files and be mal informed about which files are backed up. Individual file only selection providers are not suitable for backing up servers (see overleaf).

Finally it should be possible to select multiple groups of files (backup sets) and set a different schedule for each of them if need be. For example, group files that don't change much

“Several features are essential for a reliable service offering a good level of protection“

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into file set A and those that change each day into set B. Run an automatic daily schedule for group A and a weekly schedule for group B.

Account Sharing

Can two or more users share the same backup account? This can be extremely useful if some staff are frequently mobile or occasionally work from home. An office server backup account could be used by other staff members giving excellent value.

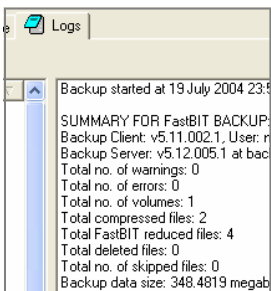
Not all providers offer multiple account user services. Others charge extra beyond a certain number of users.

Exclude / Include Filters

Filters are really a sub topic of File Selection. Exclude filters enable users to specify which files they don't want backed up even if they would have normally been selected automatically in a folder.

You can save vast amounts of space using exclude filters by automatically excluding files of a particular type (eg. all ".tmp" files). This feature is important as it will save you money. Other common files excluded are mp3 files and some of the spurious "~*.*)" files produced by windows.

Include filters perform the opposite function. They can be used to specify, for example, all *.doc and *.xls files to include all word and Excel files respectively.



Log Reports and Progress Notification

One of the key benefits of an online backup service can be the peace of mind one gains from knowing all files have been backed up. A service which provides log reports for each

individual file is essential if you want to be reassured of the status of your backups. Many have backed up onto tape, CD, DVD, etc only to

find some files weren't copied properly – despite receiving a general "OK" message when files were copied.

Notification by email is the most common form of alert. Services which enable email notification on error only, or on failures give more flexibility than the low end services that don't offer notification of any sort.

Some providers also proactively monitor all accounts and contact users if there hasn't been a backup for a given period.

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Support Servers or not?

Some of the top names in online data backup have a different pricing structure for server support. Many don't publish prices for backing up from servers and others show tiered pricing. Server backups are priced higher by providers who offer separate server pricing. The best value is obtained from providers who offer a single client suitable for Desktops, PCs and servers. After all you never know when the use of a computer might change.

As some online backup services are not suitable for supporting servers it is important to understand your needs at the outset. The online backup providers who don't offer automatic file selection will not be suitable for supporting servers so watch out!

Support, Support Support

Once up and running, a good reliable service shouldn't need much support if any. However, the service must be set up correctly in the first place and users' circumstances change so support is of tantamount importance as with most, if not all, products and services.

Some providers only offer email or "web" support. Others don't offer phone support beyond a certain level of expenditure. The better providers offer web, phone, email and remote dial in support. It is easy to see why remote dial in support is the best – an expert is

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at hand to ensure the best possible configuration and problem diagnosis.

Make sure you find out whether support is extra or is included and the level of support offered. Some providers do charge extra which can be a way of showing an artificial storage price – support is recommended for all users to ensure your service isn't compromised and your peace of mind remains intact.

Finally as users are charged for the amount of data they are backing up, it is very useful to know how much space you have on the server. Providers will automatically move users to the next charging level so keeping in contact with the amount of data stored will help users manage their accounts. Does the provider you're considering offer this facility?

Contract – how long are you tied in for?

As with all subscription based services, users will either be tied in for a minimum period or will be able to cancel with one months notice. Not much more to be said than make sure you have read the small print and understand the terms and conditions.

If you are not happy with the service or your situation changes do you really want to be tied in for 12 months?

Incremental backup

This feature is also essential and most providers offer it. However, not all providers offer the latest Fast Binary Incremental Technology (FastBIT) for incremental backup. Using FastBIT will ensure you receive a highly efficient service rather than a clunky inaccurate operation.

Being able to configure how the FastBIT incremental backup operates is also highly desirable. Flexibility is key for tailoring the service to your requirements.

Retrieving Several File Histories

This feature really separates professional from low end services – the ability to retrieve a file

version from a previous backup session which you no longer have on your PC/laptop/server.

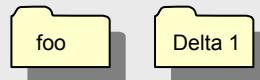
File Histories Explained

The ability to retrieve several file histories is the hallmark of a professional online backup service. We explain here how this works in a little more detail.

Day 1—file foo.doc is backed up



Day 2—file foo.doc is changed and backed up



The backup server contains the original compressed version of foo.doc PLUS the delta

Day 3—file foo.doc is changed again and backed up.



The backup server contains the original version and the TWO deltas.

This continues to a maximum number of days known as the **restore window**. Each delta is compressed but takes up space on the server. The larger the restore window the more server space consumed.

Several backups on one day can also occur creating more deltas for that particular day.

On the day after the restore window the first delta (delta 1) is discarded, after the second day the second delta is discarded (delta 2) and so on.

A good provider will enable the restore window to be set to your specific requirements.

For example, suppose you create a file called "joe.doc" and save it on day 1. You then make changes on day 2, day 3 and day 4 – each time

saving the file under its original name.

A professional service offering multiple file history retrieval will enable users to recover copies of joe.doc as saved on day 1, day 2 up to and including day 4. As a large amount of data is deleted accidentally or corrupted by viruses etc this feature is extremely useful for ensuring maximum protection and minimum disruption.

Do be careful of providers who store file histories for long periods in order to charge more for storage. Each file history takes up a finite amount of storage – the more you store, the more you pay. Fourteen days is a good compromise. A good provider will enable this figure to be tailored to individual needs.

Web Based Restore

This feature allows users to restore their data from any computer connected to the internet in the world. It has proved to be very popular for travellers and those who work from home or various different offices.

Web based restore works by downloading users data after correct entry of username and password. It's that simple. A group of users or a department can share an account and hold common files in one place with common access.

Others have used web based restore to transfer data from one place to another without copying onto more risky media such as CD/DVD/etc.

Some providers don't offer web based restore at all while others charge extra. Make sure you know what you are or are not getting at the outset and any additional costs for web based restore.

Encryption

Encryption is performed on all your data before it leaves your PC/server/laptop.

Encryption is pretty standard although some services don't offer the highest level of encryption at 448 bits.

Back Office Storage Centre

You won't normally get to see the back office but you should ask where it is and be confident that physical security as well as multiple storage industry standard disks are being used. The chances are that the back office is an order of magnitude less likely to suffer loss than your own PC/laptop/server.

Also ensure that size of the data link into the server isn't going to be a bottle neck. This shouldn't be an issue but it is always worth checking.

An acceptable back office will be equipped with uninterruptible power supplies and environmental control mechanisms such as temperature and humidity etc.

CD / DVD Archiving

Archiving is an additional service which enables CD / DVD copies of your data to be mailed to you. Many users who have web based restore don't need to use CD / DVD archiving or they can produce the CD/DVD themselves. This service is normally always an additional cost – around £15 - £20 for the first CD. Subsequent CDs should be a few pounds less.

We hope this comprehensive article is of use. Whilst "good value" and "bad value" services always exist, in the end you'll probably get what you pay for. The purpose of online data backup is to offer a higher level of security for your data than traditional CD/DVD/Tapes/etc – without which you, your business or your customers might suffer. Having read this article you should be more aware of what to look for in order to choose a reliable service that meets your needs.

**Contact us for more
information on
0870 116 7676**