

Three must-knows to filter out unsuitable backup tools

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There are over 600 backup software listings on Download.com, all having lots of characteristics and abilities. How to choose one to meet all your needs without overwhelming you with features and options? – This article will help you make the right choice.

1. Main types of backup tools: Image-based or File-based to choose? Image backup software makes backup of the entire hard drive, including operating system, system registry, all programs, saved work and program settings. You can restore your system exactly to its state at the moment you have imaged the disk or partition. But you cannot recover single files. File backup software is designed for backing up selected files stored on hard drive. You can recover selected files without need to restore all. Both types have strengths and weaknesses that should be taken into account:

Image Backup Software File Backup Software

Time and frequency Image backup usually takes comparatively more time. That's why you won't be able to backup your data very often. (-) Fast and small backups. You can quickly backup the most important files without wasting time on others. (+)

Completeness Image backup guarantees that ALL the files and settings have been backed up. (+) With file backups there's always a chance to forget an important file. (-)

System restore You can easily restore system state to the moment of the last backup without need to reinstall your operational system. (+) Global system restore is not possible. In case of global system crash, file backups may be insufficient to restore your system to working condition. (-)

Reinstalls "Image" has a copy of everything, so you don't have to reinstall any applications. (+) Registry and applications settings are not saved, so you may need to reinstall applications and reconfigure system settings. (-)

Backups portability An imaged system may not work on other hardware configuration. (-) You can restore your data on a new computer, regardless of its hardware configuration. (+)

Summary: the choice depends on your individual needs and the degree of reliability you wish to achieve. Basically, to be protected from global system crashes and avoid reinstalls, purchase image backup tool; if you work with some frequently changing valuable files and wish to make sure you never lose them, choose file backup software.

You can also have all the strengths and avoid weaknesses if you use both types. Combination of daily file backup for some frequently changing data and monthly image-based backup to prevent serious system disasters will provide complete security of your data.

2. Backup tools for specific data types - When are they useful?

There are backup tools focusing on particular types of data, such as:

- » E-mails and e-mail client settings
- » Windows registry and settings
- » Internet Explorer favorites
- » Hardware drivers

Such tools automatically find where an application stores its data, so you don't have to do it manually. Moreover, they can significantly facilitate your work with these specific files. For example:

E-mail backup tools are compatible with the main e-mail clients like Outlook Express, Microsoft Outlook, Eudora, IncrediMail and others. They offer such options as backing up signatures, stationery, wizard rules, etc. You can also easily transfer them to another computer. Some programs even provide backing up e-mail messages directly from the mail server.

Registry backup tools allow you to quickly find the keys and values you are looking for and provide their easy backup and restore.

Driver backup tools provide easy and fast detection, backup and restoration of hardware device drivers currently installed on your system.

Thus, specific backup tools are much more easy-to-use and convenient for working with particular data types and applications as compared to universal ones. The only drawback is that if you deal with 10 different types of application data, you'll probably need 10 specific backup tools.

Summary: if you are going to backup only one or two certain types of data, consider choosing the specific tools in order to get more adapted features, spend less time tuning them up and sometimes even less money for purchasing.

3. Backup software feature set - What features will you need?

First of all, it's better to define the storage solutions you are going to use for backups and check if a backup tool supports them. The main output features for most of backup tools are the following:

- » Backup to hard drive
- » Backup to removable media (CD, DVD, ZIP Drive, Flash drive, etc.)
- » Backup to FTP locations

Secondly, define the set of other features and capabilities. The table below explains their main benefits, so that you can see what meets your needs better.

I want... Recommended features

My backup processes to be convenient and automated

Scheduling allows you to configure your backup jobs to run automatically every day, week, month, or even every minute or hour. You can schedule your backup operations so that they are performed in the most convenient time, for example, late at night or on weekend.

Incremental backup allows you to backup only those files which have been changed since the last backup without backing up others. This is ideal for those who deal with constantly changing data and need frequent backups.

File filtering will allow you to include or exclude certain file types from your backup. You'll get more flexibility in selection of the data for backup. You can use filters for backing up

specific data categories: music, movies, pictures, Outlook files, computer settings, various application data.

To facilitate my backups on CDs/DVDs

Burning allows you to write or rewrite CD/DVD, so that you won't need any additional burning software.

Disk spanning automatically spreads data across several discs if the data size exceeds storage capacity of one disc.

My backups to be secure Password protection and encryption features allow you to protect your backups with password in order to restrict access to them. It will be especially useful for backup to some remote location or over LAN.

To synchronize my data between different locations

Synchronizing will allow you to coordinate content of two different directories, i.e. if you change a file from one location, the synchronization process will change the same file at another location. You'll be able to keep your files synchronized between two locations on a local machine, between network computers, FTP servers, etc.

My backups to occupy less space

Data compression allows you to compress backup files in order to store more data in less space. With this feature you'll increase data communication speed and save storage space.

My backups to be faultless and complete

Event log will allow you to view the records of all backup activities to see if the backup operations were successful. It will give you more confidence that your backups were made properly.

Backup verification. After the software performs a backup, it compares and verifies the backup to the original. It gives you an assurance that all the files have been successfully backed up.

E-mail notification. This feature allows you to receive reports about operation results.

Summary: define your needs and backup storage methods you are going to use and select necessary features accordingly. Backup tools with extensive feature set often cost more than ones with less features. Moreover, large variety of features can decrease usability of a product, making it too complicated. That's why sometimes it's better to have a backup tool with few features which you know are necessary and well implemented.

There is no ideal backup tool for everyone. And there are no universal recommendations. But after you define the appropriate software type and features, according to your needs and preferences, it will be much easier to choose a backup product for you.

Software vendors often allow you to download and try their products before buying. We recommend to download several backup tools of the type you need and test them out in order to find bugs, check their feature sets and usability.

Good luck in choosing YOUR backup tool!