All about external hard drives

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QUESTION: I'd like to purchase an external hard drive. There are so many choices what should I look for and do they come with backup software?

PC CLUB: Not all external hard drives are created equal. For example, the HP Simple Save does not behave like a traditional drive. HP states the following about its drive: "What automatically starts backing up your PC the minute you plug it into your USB port? It's our SimpleSave 1TB Portable Hard Drive. This practically hands free device comes with software that runs directly from the drive (no need to install anything". The term 1TB means one terabyte which is equivalent to 1,000 gigabytes.

During my initial encounter with this drive I attempted to simply back up a client's Internet Favorites and could not. This is because the drive only runs in a fully automatic mode. This mode allows you to configure which file types to back up but it does not allow you to choose a specific folder. The drive is not meant to be used as a traditional external hard drive.

However, this may be just the ticket for novice users who want to leave total control up to the drive. It will back up hundreds of file types, which should cover most users. Just don't ask it back up a folder of your choice.

Conventional drives on the other hand can be used as follows:

- In the manual mode where the user copies files and folders of their choice to the drive.
- In conjunction with the software bundled with the drive, which varies with the manufacturer.
- In conjunction with any third-party backup software of your choice.

External hard drives also come in a variety of capacities and 1 terabyte drives are becoming more prevalent. This could be overkill unless you want to back up many, many videos, pictures and lots of music. The average user can get by with 300 to 500 gigabytes. It also may be safer to not put all your eggs in one basket and invest in several smaller drives.

When you purchase one of these drives, free backup software is usually included. A CD is normally not included since the software is pre-loaded on the drive. When the drive is first plugged in, a wizard will open with step-by-step instructions. This software may be easier to use than other third-party software but may lack the custom features that you need. I recommend using the bundled software initially so you can learn more about the process before spending more money.

External hard drives are available in several configurations including a small portable size that requires no external power and a book-like size that does utilize AC power. I have found that the smaller ones are slightly less compatible with all PCs and that the larger ones are compatible 99% of the time. Regarding the software that comes bundled with these drives, some programs are better than others. The program is usually easy to set up and can be scheduled to backup your data daily if you wish. When you're ready to move up to more advanced third-party software, Genie Backup, available at http://www.genie-soft.com/ for $49, is one of the best programs. It is compatible with Windows XP, Vista and Windows 7. The product is called Genie Backup Manager Home 8.0.

Some drives are password-protected and this feature can be annoying. The drives also come with a variety of interfaces or connections including USB, Firewire and eSata. I don't recommend paying any more for anything other than a USB connection since it is

quite fast. Both Firewire and eSata will be phasing out in the near future, especially with the new USB 3.0 starting to show up on newer hardware.

One of the best features of these external drives are that they are plug-and-play, which means that they can be connected or disconnected without turning off your PC's power. You should use the "Safely Remove Hardware" feature to safely disconnect the drive since if you unplug it while data is being backed up, some of the data is likely to be corrupted. Many new drives have no power switch but they do go into a sleep mode after a period on being idle to save power.

~Ed Schwartz, NOCCC member. View his Web site at www.edwardns.com*.*