

PC stopped working How to save or recover important files

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*Stump the PC Club is a free tech-advice column written by members of the **North Orange County Computer Club**, which has been in existence since 1976. Visit the club's site at noccc.org. And don't forget to stop by the Gadgetress' home for the PC Club, at ocregister.com/link/pcclub, to find out how to ask a question and read past answers.*

QUESTION: I have HP-Pavilion PC running Vista Home Premium with 3GB memory and 400 GB hard drive. One day my computer didn't start and I tried to restart it and nothing worked. I had an extended warranty and I brought the PC in for service. They performed diagnostics and without my knowledge they used System Recovery to reinstall the factory-shipped operating system. I didn't have a backup of my files and I lost everything that I had on my hard drive. Is there a way I can recover my lost files from the hard drive?

PC CLUB: In a word, no!

The System Recovery restore process formats the hard drive and overwrites it with the original factory files and settings. This frustrating situation is a result of several issues. One, users do not always know the right questions to ask before allowing someone to work on their PC and two, PC repair personnel frequently do not warn users of the consequences of such a restore procedure. I would put more blame on the service company which should have known better. I'm not letting you off the hook either. You should always back up your data before letting anyone touch your PC. Of course you know that now.

When a PC gets to a state where it will not start, your first concern should always be "How do I save my data and e-mail, etc." If you already have a backup program backing up your data you should be in good shape. However, if you are like many PC users, you may not have your data securely backed up.

Should you ever find yourself in such a position, always ask the person that is going to repair your PC what the plan is to save our important data. There is only one situation where you may not be able to recover your data and that is if the hard drive itself experienced a mechanical failure. Even then it can be done but it is extremely costly

and the drive has to be sent to one of several companies that can recover data from a failed drive.

This is not usually the case, however. When a system will not start up, the data can still be saved by connecting the proper cables to the hard drive and restoring the data to another PC. In addition, the hard drive can be removed from the PC and connected to another PC making it possible to recover the data. Any reputable repair person should know how to do this and offer this service.

Let's talk a little more about what to do when a system crashes and will not start. There are several options but make sure that your data is backed up before attempting any of these solutions. If you do not know how to do this, find someone who does.

1. If you have a Windows disc that came with your PC, you can boot from it and attempt a recovery by reinstalling Windows. This is the easiest to do and the least likely to succeed. Also, many manufacturers have discontinued the practice of shipping a Windows disc since it saves them a few dollars.

2. You can use the System Restore or System Recovery facility that came with your PC. This restores your PC to the state it was in when you purchased it. This must be followed by a lot of work including restoring your data, updating Windows and reinstalling all of your programs. Some PCs flash a message on the screen that states "Press F11 for System Restore". This is the step that restores your PC to its original state and destroys your pre-existing data also.

3. You always have the option of reinstalling Windows from scratch assuming you have a Windows disc. This step requires that you download all of the drivers from the manufacturer's web site and install them. The advantage of this method is that you have a clean system without any junk software that came with your original PC. This is a lot of work but results in the cleanest system. You will have to restore your data, update Windows and reinstall all of your programs, of course.



So, how do you avoid this mess in the first place? One way to avoid it is by backing up your entire system with a disc imaging program periodically using software such as Acronis True Image, www.acronis.com or Shadow Protect, www.storagecraft.com. There is also a free trial program at www.macrium.com, just click the [download link](#) at the top. The image is stored on an

external hard drive and can be restored after a crash in roughly 20 to 30 minutes on the



average.

The secret is to make an image every month or so to limit your data loss to one month's worth. Of course you can also backup your data as frequently as you like. ~Ed Schwartz, NOCCC member. View his Web site at www.edwards.com.