Tech Savvy: Backup Your Data!

It seems like a mantra spouted by technical people everywhere; "Back up your data". I have said it time and time again. What I didn't do is plan for the unthinkable, and I paid the price. You may have noticed the absence of Tech Savvy and crosswords from the paper recently. This week's Tech Savvy is about backing up your data, and some hard lessons learned.

I did regularly back up my data, but there was a lot of it. My email alone would fill three CDs, and the rest would have taken forty. I didn't burn them to CDs, but rather copied them to another drive. This was quicker and much more economical than any other solution, but had a risk. The drive in question was on the same physical device as my original data, so if there was physical damage to the equipment or my computer was stolen, I would loose it all. I was willing to live with this after I took certain precautions to reduce these to acceptable levels, but I missed a very basic factor: I had given Murphy the opportunity to strike. He had his sights on me and it was just a matter of time.

I reinstalled Windows on my laptop to quickly and efficiently get rid of years of crap. Keeping only what I wanted in my backup, I set to work. When I rebooted, nothing worked. In troubleshooting, I discovered a glitch and Windows had overwritten part of my backups. With much time and effort I was able to recover all my data, but it took me nearly 2 weeks, and there were some harrowing late nights that ended at dawns early light.

What did I learn? First, back up your data religiously and on a schedule. It doesn't matter if you back up the book you are writing after every 20 pages, or you back up every week on Friday after 4. Set it in stone and make it happen.

Second, backups must be kept physically separate from the original device to be effective. Consider: if you backed up a computer and had a house fire, would the backups go up in smoke with the computer? If so, the backups would be useless in this context.

Third, verify the backup files. Digging into the backup file and making sure your data is there may seem a little excessive, but I have seen a Fortune 500 company's IT director reduced to tears when he discovered that the backups he was relying on were blank tapes. The backups had failed for the last six months, and no one checked.

Finally, periodically review your methods of backing up your data. Do a little mental exercise and figure out what you'd loose under the worst case scenarios. Create a process, then break it. Improve the process and do it all over again. You can generally stop once the scenarios include killer asteroids or alien invasion.

That's it for this week's Tech Savvy. Hopefully next week's article won't be written from such personal experience!