

From The TechnoManor

Uh oh, my Inbox is empty. Well, last week's work prompted a question of my own:

What can I do when my computer's hard drive crashes?

Maybe I should answer this unasked question, first:

What's a hard drive crash?

You're probably thinking of the word, "crash," in terms of an automobile accident. Well, it's not quite so dramatic.

Basically, a hard drive "crash" occurs when you try to use your computer and the hard drive stops working. Here are some symptoms you might experience:

- You hear a clicking noise coming from the computer cabinet. You've never heard this before.
- Your computer was behaving normally. Then suddenly it froze or the various windows stopped working or stopped opening.
- Your computer won't boot up. The lights are flashing and you hear the fans running, but Windows or the Mac OS don't start. You don't see your familiar starting screen.
- You see some very unusual (and sometimes disturbing) messages like:

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Pri Master Hard Disk:S.M.A.R.T. Command Failed
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WARNING: ...has detected that drive 0...is operating outside  
of normal specifications. It is advisable to immediately  
back up your data and replace your hard-disk drive...
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- Your computer screen turns totally blue (often called the "Blue Screen of Death") and you see some "techno-glyphics" like:

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Stop C000021A [Fatal System Error]  
UNMOUNTABLE_BOOT_VOLUME  
STOP: 0x000000ED
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You won't see all of these symptoms, and there are others. But you get the idea. (I should point out that some of these symptoms occur for other reasons, too.)

So what should you do next? Well, panic and anxiety are good reactions. Not-to-be-repeated-here words are often muttered (I've used some myself with no success). Turning the computer off and on are often tried. Sadly, none of these will fix the problem...or won't fix the problem for long.

Let's face the problem square on. Your computer is now unusable. How do we get it back?

First, be clear in your mind: the hard drive cannot be repaired. With luck, it might be revived long enough to get information off. I stress the words *luck* and *might*. My success rate with clients is about 30%.

Here are the general steps of what must happen to get your computer back to a working state:

- Find the installation CDs for the operating system (Windows or Mac OS) and all the software that you used. This will be a test of your organizational skills!

Don't have the installation CDs? Then we have a problem. If you cannot find your Windows installation CDs, you may be better off buying a new computer. I just looked at the cost of Windows XP Home Edition on amazon.com: \$190.00. You will have to buy a copy of installation CDs, plus buy a new hard drive (\$70 - \$130). You are well on your way to the cost of a new computer.

- Buy and install a new hard drive (assuming you have your operating system installation CDs). Surprisingly, this will be the easiest part of the project.
- Install Windows or Mac OS X. Here you will need the installation CDs.
- Apply all of the patches for Windows or Mac OS that have come out since those installation CDs were minted.
- Install (then update) all of the programs you were using. Here you will need the other installation CDs.
- Copy all of your data from your backups. No backups? Uh oh, we're in trouble. We must assume all the data is lost on the crashed hard drive. So, you need to have a duplicate (or backup) of the data. If you don't have that, your data is forever lost.

So how long will all this take? For one client who is a CPA: 2 ½ days. We had to buy a new computer. He did have his data backed up, though. For my wife: 2 days. I had the installation CDs, the data backed up, and I take copious notes!

I'm telling you this now because it's better to complain that I'm long-winded, then to be terrified when the inevitable happens. In my house, a computer fails every two years!

How can you prepare? Do these things now:

- Find all the CDs related to your computer, especially the operating system installation CDs. Keep all these CDs in a central place.

Some computers have a "recovery partition" (Hewlett Packard computers are noted for this). If so, check the computer's manual or online help. There is typically a tool to burn the recovery partition to CDs. Do This Now!

- If you can't find the operating system CDs, either buy new ones from a retailer, or mentally steel yourself to the fact you'll probably have to buy a new computer.

- Make a copy of your data. Either burn it to CD, copy it to a little USB thumb drive (a.k.a., flash drive or memory stick), or upload it to one of the free disk space services from Google or Microsoft. Do this regularly, too!
- Write down a quick inventory of the programs on your computer and special settings (like for your DSL connection, cable connection, or email program). Do it while the computer still works. Put this inventory in the same place with those CDs for your computer.

And may you never need this stuff! But now you're ready if you do.

Just a reminder. Send your computer, email, Web, or related questions to me at frenchygrey@gmail.com
I'll attempt to answer one each week in *The Link*. If you don't send me questions, I have to make 'em up!

Dave Gillen