FOUR WAYS TO BACK UP AND SHARE FILES IN "THE CLOUD"

The Web has become an integral part of the lives of millions of people, and not just for browsing or shopping for computer parts, either. More and more people are using Web applications for a variety of tasks.

There are Web applications for doing just about everything. You can create documents, balance your books, invoice customers and clients, keep track of tasks, plan events and much more. One area in which Web application developers are really pushing the boundaries is storing and sharing files. And why not? The Web is just a big collection of servers with big hard drives. With the price of hard drives dropping, it's easy and fairly inexpensive to add more storage.

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A previous TechTip looked at one online storage solution: Amazon's S3. But S3 can be difficult for the average person to use. Luckily, there are simple online storage and sharing options galore. This TechTip will look at a few storage and sharing services which are easy to use and can integrate nicely with your workflow. Most of them hook right into your operating system's file manager, making it easy to back up and share files.

DropBox

One of the more popular online storage and sharing services isDropBox. To say that DropBox is easy to use is an understatement. You sign up for an account, and then download the DropBox client. The client – whch is available for Windows, Mac, and Linux – enables you to quickly upload files to your DropBox account. If you have DropBox installed on multiple computers, the client will also synchronize any changes or additions.

You can also share folders and files with people from the DropBox Web site. Just click on the name of a folder, and then click the**Share this** link. You'll be asked to enter the email addresses of the people with whom you want to share the files, and you can enter an optional note.

From the Web site, you can also view with whom a folder is being shared, whether or not those folks have accepted your invitation, and you can even download the files in a folder in a ZIP archive.

With DropBox, you get 2 GB of storage for free. If you refer someone to DropBox, you can get an extra 3 GB of free storage. There are also two pay options: 50 GB for $9.95 a month, and 100 GB for $19.95 a month.

drop.io

drop.io is something a little different. It's not for long-term storage of files. Instead, drop.io is sharing and collaboration tool. Someone I know described it as *something like a way station for files*. And I think that's a pretty good description.

To use drop.io, you head over to the Web site and create what's called a *drop*. This is just a folder that will contain the file or files that you want to share. The drop has an address like drop.io/myDrop. Then, you upload your files using your Web browser. You can also set options on the drop like an expiry date (which can be a day, a week, a month, or a year away) and what the people with whom you're sharing files can do – like delete or download files, add files to a drop, or leave a comment on a file.

Each free drop has a 100 MB limit. If you want or need more space, or need multiple drops, then there are for-pay plans available from $19 a month. And there are a number of applications that make it easier to work with drop.io, like an add-on for the Firefox Web browser, an application for the iPhone, and a desktop tool that works with Adobe AIR.

SugarSync

SugarSync reminds me a lot of DropBox. The biggest differences, though, are that SugarSync is a lot flashier and a bit more flexible.

SugarSync enables you to backup, share, and synchronize files on your desktop computer or laptop computer with the SugarSync site using something called a *Magic Briefcase*. You download and install a piece of software and it links the The Magic Briefcase folder on your computer with the SugarSync site. It's literally as easy as copying and pasting files.

As well, you can share your files and folders with others. If you use a Web-based email service like Gmail, you can import your contacts. Or, you can manually enter the names and email addresses of people with whom you want to share files.

What sets SugarSync apart from its competition is that it has extensive mobile phone support. There is SugarSync software for the iPhone, the BlackBerry, and for phones that run Windows Mobile. I tried the BlackBerry edition of the software and it worked quite well. But unless you have a good data plan, I'd only sync important files. Otherwise, moving files around can get expensive.

For me, though, the main drawback is that SugarSync only supports Mac and Windows. If you're a Linux user, there's no desktop client. You can, though, upload files and share them using your Web browser.

Like most other online file storage and sharing sites, SugarSync offers a free 2 GB account. There are paid plans that range from $4.99 a month for 30 GB of storage to $24.99 a month for $250 GB of storage.

Box.net

Box.net is aimed at businesses, but it's easy enough that anyone can take advantage of the service.

Box.net is centered around collaboration. In fact, a key concept in Box.net is the *collaboration folder* (or

folder). Each folder can be an individual project or a portion of a project. You can upload files to a folder, and invite others to collaborate. You can even specify whether or not each collaborator can edit or just view the files in a folder. On top of that, each folder has an area for short comments. It's simple, but can be effective if used properly.

The plans that Box.net offers aren't as flexible as some other online storage and sharing services. The gives you 1 GB of storage, and the ability to create only five folders. The next plan up costs $7.95 a month, and gives you five folders and 5 GB of storage. The business plan will set you back $15 per user per month, but gives you an unlimited number of folders and over 30 GB of storage.

That said, Box.net does offer some useful collaboration features. One that impresses me is called **Tasks**. Tasks lets you assign a collaborator to review, approve, or replace an existing file. Running a close second is **Web Documents**, which is like a Web-based word processor. You can use Web Documents as a way of getting a project started – create a task list, write drafts, share notes, and more. There's also a mobile version of the service, and a mobile version that's made especially for the iPhone.

Anything else interesting?

As I mentioned earlier in this TechTip, there are a number of interesting options in the area of online backup and file sharing. Here are a couple of other ones that you might be interested in.

A previous TechTip discussed Ubuntu One, the service started in April, 2009 by Canonical (the company behind the popular Linux distribution named Ubuntu). Ubuntu One enables you to upload, share, synchronize, and store files. The Ubuntu One client, which only works with Ubuntu at the moment, integrates with the Nautilus file manager. You can copy files into the Ubuntu One folder in your /home directory, and the client synchronizes them with the Ubuntu One Web site.

On the Ubuntu One Web site, you can indicate which folders to share and with whom. At the moment, you get 2 GB of free storage, which isn't too shabby. There's also a 10 GB plan in the works, which will cost $10 a

month.

Another option is a Web Disk. This is a feature offered by some Web hosting companies. A Web Disk is just a secure directory on your portion of one of the company's servers. You give the directory a name (don't make it too obvious!) and assign it a password. Once it's set up, you can drag and drop files from your desktop computeror laptop computer to the Web Disk, right from your operating system's file manager. The best part of a Web Disk is that it's bundled with a Web hosting plan – you don't have to worry about paying extra.

Reasons not to use these services

There are a few, and these are a couple of the most common:

First off, do you want your data (whether it's sensitive or not) in the hands of someone else? Many people are borderline paranoid about the safety of their information on the Web. For them, putting that information out there will seem like a bit of a risk. And, let's be honest, no matter how safe something may appear to be there's always a way around security.

Second, you might not always have access to the Web. Your Internet connection could go down, or a piece of your hardware – like amodem or a wireless router could suddenly go belly up. On top of that, the kinds of sites that are discussed in this TechTip could be knocked offline. If that happens, then it's just as bad as if your hard drive crashed and you didn't have a backup.

Conclusion

Online file sharing and storage services are powerful tools. They can make it easier for you to exchange documents, photos, videos, and other files with friends, colleagues, and clients. And those tools can be a component of a good backup strategy. Best of all, many of the services out there – like the ones described in this TechTip – are easy to use, and often free. Or, at least, very inexpensive. You'll get flexibility and peace of mind without breaking your budget.

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