HOW TO RECOVER DATA FROM A DEAD HARD DRIVE

One of the most dreadful feelings that you can have is having a **pc computer** or **laptop** die that hadn't been backed up recently; especially if you have valuable pictures, music, videos, documents or other files on it.

In this Tech Tip we'll take a look at how to recover your valuable pictures from a dead computer.

Where to start

Computers are complex machines and when they work right, they are fun to use – but when something goes drastically wrong, it can feel as if your world crashed down around you. If your **hard drive** is still in working order, there is a very good chance that you'll be able to recover your pictures, music, videos and valuable documents (and other data) simply with another computer; a specialized cable, a screwdriver; and a little time.

To start off, your best bet it to get a specialized USB cable that can plug directly into your hard drive that you'll recover from the dead computer. There are several types, and I'd recommend getting one that can handle both PATA (IDE) and **SATA hard drives** (the two most common used in consumer computers) as well as 2.5″ (laptop) and 3.5″ (desktop) hard drives (Geeks.com **sells several** that run in the $13-16 range). You can also use a **hard drive dock** or **external drive cases** as well - but personally I find the specialized USB cable to be the easiest and most flexible option.

Next, remove the hard drive from the dead computer. On desktops it is usually held in with four Philips screwdrivers and on laptops it is usually under an access panel on the bottom of the computer. Remove any cables and caddies that the drive may have – all you need is the bare drive. Then plug in the USB cable into the hard drive (and a power cable if it is a desktop drive – also provided with the USB cable kit) and then plug the other end of the USB cable into a working computer. The computer will then set up the drive ad an external storage device and voilà! you'll now have access to the files on that drive (provided that the drive is not encrypted or using some type of security feature).

Where to look

OK, so the drive is now plugged into your computer and seen as an external drive, now what? You have several options. **One option is to simply look for the files on the drive from the dead computer that you plugged into the USB port and copy them onto the working computer. This is my preferred method personally**. I like to "brute force" my way through the drive with Windows Explorer (or a similar file browsing tool) and manually copy/paste the data from one computer to the other. Another option is to follow a Windows dialog box (that usually pops up when you plug in an external drive) and have it help you copy your data from one computer to the other. If you are manually choosing to "brute force it" personal data is usually stored by default in the computers operating systems "home directory" for users.

Common Locations

for home directories *(where <root> takes the place of the drive letter)*:
1. **Microsoft Windows 95-Me** *<root>\My Documents*
2. **Microsoft Windows 2000/XP/2003** *<root>\Documents and*Settings\<username>
3. **Microsoft Windows Vista / Windows 7** *<root>\Users\<username>*

Other "What ifs"

What if the files on the drives are erased? If they are, you can use a free recovery program such as **Piriform's Recuva** to look for and (hopefully) restore the files. This simple, easy-to-use tool is terrific for recovering pictures from a camera's memory card that have accidentally been erased as well!

What if the hard drive is the reason that the computer died (actual hardware failure)? If the hard drive is the part that caused the computer failure, then you may be out of luck. Yes, there are specialty recovery services that will pull apart the drives data platters and attempt to recover data (and they are usually successful - such services were used, for example, to recover data from the hard drives that were used on computers from the space shuttle Columbia after it broke apart in 2003) but such services are usually very expensive.

A word to the wise

Backup, backup, backup! Whether using one of the **Internet based cloud services** or a separate **external hard drive** – if you make it a habit of backing up regularly, chances are good that you'll keep the loss of such a failure to a minimum if a computer fails. Of course one of the benefits of using cloud-based backup services is that you can have access to your pictures anywhere you have Internet access.