

# RANDOM

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COMMUNICATIONS WITH A PURPOSE

# THOUGHTS

## Dealing With The Helpful Disaster

I've just made a nearly 3-year-old computer feel brand new. Since the beginning, my relationship with Vista has been severely bifurcated. I liked some of the new security features (even the ones that garnered the most complaints) and I liked the overall appearance of the operating system. But I detested the sluggish performance, the long boot and shutdown times, and the fact that two years down the road some programs still don't work properly with Vista. I had been thinking about formatting the drive and reinstalling Windows XP, but decided it would be too much work and take time I didn't have. I'd wait until next year's Windows 7, I thought. Then a helpful disaster stepped in.

Sunday evening (November 23), Diskeeper reported that it needed to perform a boot-time defrag operation. This is something I've done before, so I approved the request and rebooted the machine. Everything seemed to go well, but then the machine wouldn't boot. To make a long and somewhat tedious story short, the master boot record had been damaged (I was able to fix it) and the file allocation table was a mess (no chance of repair).

Oops. Well, as they say, this is what backup is for. I would have to reinstall the operating system, but I had to make a decision: Vista or XP.

### Panic? Sorry, Not Today

There was no need for panic. The drive with the problem was drive C, which holds the operating system, applications, some configuration settings, and personalizations. The data drives (D, M, and N) and the local backup drive (Z) were all fine. And I knew that my Carbonite backup was safe and secure hundreds of miles away. So instead of worrying about lost files and missing data, I could concentrate fully on reinstalling Windows.

The installation hit a snag on step 1, when I booted to the Windows XP disc. The installer showed only the 3 attached external USB drives because two SATA drives were installed internally and configured as RAID (even though RAID wasn't in play), they would need a driver. The driver file was on a floppy disk and the computer has no floppy drive, but I do have a USB floppy drive.

This time, I was able to get all the way to step 2 before running into a problem. The installer could read the USB-

based floppy during the start-up phase, so it loaded the drivers and the SATA drives were visible. But later, when the installer needed to read the driver disk again, the USB device was unavailable.

On Monday, I purchased floppy drive to install in system box, but when I opened the computer, I found no data cable for a floppy drive and all of the smaller power connectors were in use. The power problem would be easy to solve and I might have been able to find a data cable somewhere around the house, but there was another problem: The hinged flap on the floppy drive was broken.

I called the owner of the company that had built the computer and discussed the situation with him. What he told me was welcome news: I wouldn't need the RAID driver if I configured the SATA drives as IDE in the BIOS. He also suggested that I disable the D drive to avoid having Windows decide to install itself on the wrong drive.

I disabled D, but the Windows installer saw one of the USB drives as C and showed what should have been the C drive as D. To resolve that problem I removed all of the USB drives and rebooted. With only 1 drive, the installer had no choice but to see the first drive as C. Windows can be reasoned with if you're holding a large enough hammer.

Installing the operating system was uneventful and took about 30 minutes. Then I reattached the second internal drive and the 3 USB drives. A quick check of all the drives showed that all files were present, as expected. The drive letters were all wrong, but that was expected, too, and it's easy to fix. Next I hunted down the Ethernet driver so that I could connect to the Internet and activate Windows.

### Security First

After activating Windows, the next order of business was to install AVG Antivirus and then to connect to the Windows Update site to download and install XP service pack 3. That took about 30 minutes. Then I returned to Windows Update to obtain and install 30 security, hardware, and driver updates, including IE7. This consumed about 15 minutes.

The Windows XP firewall is inadequate, so I downloaded and installed the Carbonite firewall and fixed the drive letter problems by assigning new designations with the Windows Disk Manager.

With the computer beginning to resemble an operating machine, it was time to start pulling back files from my Carbonite backup. After downloading and installing Carbonite's software, I identified the most important files I wanted to restore to drive C. In all, about 14,000 files.

The restoration process took just a few hours, but I left Carbonite in recovery mode because I hadn't restored all files yet. By the time I finished, I would ask Carbonite to restore 83,433 files. About 60,000 of those were files I didn't even need.

Why restore them? Because I knew the Vista Users directory would contain files I would want. I just didn't know which files they were. One example: The Adobe Lightroom database. My most recent local backup of the database was nearly a week old and I had added hundreds of files since then. The Carbonite backup was current. Time saved: Probably about 6 hours.

## The Disaster that Wasn't

Some might say that I should have maintained an image of C, and they're probably right, but that wouldn't have helped in this case because I'd already decided to go back to XP. With no more than about 4 hours of effort, I had the most critical applications (e-mail, Web, Office, and time billing) running again.

I think of backup the way I think of brakes on a car: If you don't keep the backup system well maintained, you're going to be in a lot of trouble sooner or later. My primary computer has 5 disk drives: 2 built-in serial ATA devices and 3 external USB drives. Files are distributed this way:

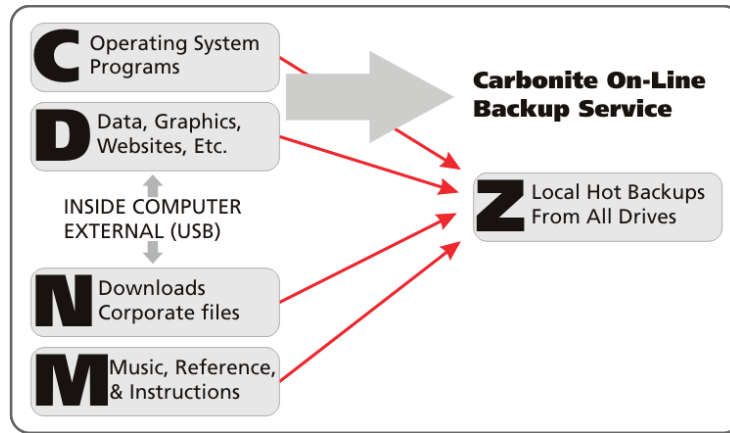
**C:** Operating system and applications. This is the drive with the boot sector for Windows.

**D:** Database, programming files, websites, graphics, publications, and the like. Work that I do for myself and for clients. The GRUB boot manager is here, too, and Linux boots from this drive.

**N:** Downloads (freeware, shareware, and commercial applications), along with certain corporate files that I have at home to work on. The downloads would be easy to replace and the corporate files are already on at least two other computers and will be maintained by the corporate backup system.

**M:** Music that I have downloaded from iTunes or Emusic, or that I have ripped from my own CDs. This drive also holds reference materials and instructional programs, most of which are available for download or are on CDs or DVDs that are in my possession.

**Z:** Local hot backup of current working files from the other 4 drives. In the event of a catastrophic disk failure in the desktop PC, I can attach this drive to the notebook computer and be back in operation within 60 seconds.



I keep the local backup because restoring from any on-line backup (mine is Carbonite) will be limited by the speed of the Internet.

I could restore critical files in just a few hours, but it would take at least a week to restore everything from backup. The local backup violates the primary rule of backups by being in the same room with the computer it's protecting, but the backup is safeguarded

by Carbonite (drives C and D) or I consider the files to be expendible (losing all of my music files would be a gigantic annoyance, but I have much of the music library backed up on DVDs that are stored at the office.)

Websites are a particular concern for me. The sites and the development files used to create the sites are all on my D drive. They're also backed up to the Z drive and to Carbonite. And there's one more copy squirreled away, outside the webroot on the server that hosts the website. There is no such thing as "too much backup".

So once again, and for more times than I can recall, backup turned a potential disaster into nothing more than an annoyance.

## Speedy Delivery

I had forgotten how fast this computer is supposed to be. Boot time can now reasonably be measured in seconds, not minutes, and shutting down the computer no longer takes up to 10 minutes.

But the best improvement from my perspective is that the disk drives are no longer constantly and continuously thrashing. Under Vista, some application always seemed to be doing something to the disk drives, even after I turned off most of the Vista services that might be responsible for the activity.

I'll miss Vista's pretty face, but XP is like an old friend who knows what I like. Maybe Windows 7 will be a big improvement when (If?) it ships in 2009. But for now I'm more than happy with XP.

And by Thanksgiving day, nearly all of the applications I use were installed and configured. I had taken Carbonite out of restore mode and put it back in backup mode. Total number of files lost: **Zero as far as I can tell.**

So I guess I should thank Vista for making all this possible. **B**

## CORNER on the market by A.J. Stinnett

*"When you develop work groups, ensure that you have provided enough employees to do the work efficiently, that you have organized the group to accomplish your goals, and that you have eliminated unnecessary controls."*