

# Random Thoughts

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from William Blinn Communications

TECHNOLOGY • MARKETING • COMMUNICATIONS

## The Importance of Being Up to Date

One of the songs in the musical *Oklahoma* is called "Kansas City" and it's about how up-to-date everything is there: "Everything's up to date in Kansas City! They've gone about as far as they can go! They went and built a skyscraper seven stories high, about as high as a building ought to grow." That was laughable even when the musical first played Broadway in 1943. Based on a 1931 play called "Green Grow the Lilacs", it depicted an Oklahoma territory town in 1906.

Until the 1850s, even tall buildings in New York City rarely exceeded 6 stories because that's about as far as people were willing to climb stairs. In 1857, Elisha Otis installed a new kind of elevator in a building at 488 Broadway—an elevator that would safely stop if the cable broke. Fifty years later, a 6-story building in Kansas City would have been considered a skyscraper and a remarkable feat of engineering.

Today, even suburbs and small towns have buildings that tall, but construction trends evolve slowly.

Web standards, on the other hand, work on what's called "Internet Time". Something that's remarkable today will be routine 6 months from now, passé next year, and hopelessly out of date within 2 years.

That's one of the reasons that I revamp the TechByter Worldwide site every year. My goal is not to position the site at the cutting edge of website design, but to make sure that it keeps up with the current technical standards. If I can also update the design a bit to make the site more vibrant, I'll do that, too. But the primary considerations must be ease of use and compliance with standards.

### Toss the Tables

HTML tables are intended, as you might guess, for tabular data. However, a decade ago they were the only way website designers could create sites with reasonably accurate positioning of graphics that would

display more or less the same in most browsers. But tables lack the flexibility needed to render a site in all browser sizes and the designer would be forced to choose between a narrow design that would leave a vast amount of blank space on large screens and a wide design that would force visitors with small screens to scroll repeatedly from left to right. Both choices are bad.

The most important development in the past 10 years has been version 2 of the cascading style sheet (CSS) specification and the simultaneous development of browsers that actually comply with those standards. Current versions and most recent (back to about 2007) versions of all major browsers do.

This is a particularly welcome development for those who are blind or have a vision impairment that requires the use of screen reader technology. A screen reader is an application that reads the underlying HTML

code and converts it to spoken words. Tables have been a serious impediment for screen readers; CSS is not.

The TechByter website and its Technology Corner predecessors were mostly based on tables. The Technology Corner website went live in 1996, less than 3 years after the Web became a part of the Internet. I no longer have any of the pages from 1996, but an article I wrote in 2002 described my finding pages from 1996 in the Internet Wayback project. Although CSS technology wasn't widely supported in those days, Technology Corner used the primitive CSS along with tables.

In 2008, for TechByter Worldwide, I finally eliminated tables except for tabular data and began using CSS for most positioning. The primary change in 2009 involved using CSS that permits the visitor to modify the text size. Those who prefer tiny type can have tiny type and those who want the large print edition can have it. The change also makes the site work acceptably on handheld devices.

### Bill Blinn's Technology Corner

Newsradio 610 WYFH - Sunday's starting at 8:25 a.m.

WebStock and Internet utilities  
Sunday, January 4, 1998

#### Weather on your computer

A programmer in British Columbia has made it easy for me to keep an eye on the weather — particularly when I'm at the office, where my computer has a continuous connection to the Internet. WetStock is a program by Locutus Software of Vancouver, British Columbia.

You can obtain the program for free from <http://www.locutussoftware.com/> and use it for a month before registering it. The cost is just \$12 for home use or \$25 for business use. Tell the program which city to watch and a small icon in the Windows 95 tray will keep you up to date on what's going on outside.

Allow your mouse to hover over the icon for basic weather information. Click it for current condition. Click a button on the conditions screen for the complete Nat



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#### Another Year, Another New Format

Every year starting in November, I put on my designer's cap and my graphic-design-professionals daughter starts laughing. I doubt that I'll ever design anything as creative and compelling as she would but I've managed to avoid creating too many designs that are unbearably ugly. So now that it's January it's time to tell you about the new features and the new look.

This year, I had three goals in mind: Soften the appearance a bit, reduce clutter, and make the site more accessible to those who might need larger type or smaller type on the screen. These are the main changes:

- Fuzzy ("grunge") type for the banner. The faces used are called Malapropism, which visually seemed to represent the kind of sound that comes out of a megaphone, and Calamity Joe, which just seemed to fit the theme. The megaphone is a stock image from iStockPhoto that I cropped and rotated.
- The top-level menu is now on one line and the program date shares a line with information about the program's podcast to conserve vertical spacing.
- The headlines are lighter and smaller this year, and level-one heads are on a light contrasting field to make the beginning of each article easier to find.

## Graphical Changes

Not being a designer, I do the best I can to avoid creating something hideously ugly. Some efforts are better than others.

Between 1998 and 2009, I modified the design in 1999, 2000, 2004, 2005 (the year I put significant emphasis on CSS), 2006, 2007, and 2008. Although I've always created sites with an emphasis on being standards compliant, the major efforts in that regard occurred in 2008 and 2009.

To keep up with the trend to larger screens, site width has grown from less than 800 pixels to 1000 pixels. Giving users the ability to modify the size on their own makes the situation better for everyone.

For many businesses, the website serves as an advertisement, an introduction, and a point of contact. For that reason alone, keeping a current look and feel is nearly as important as creating a site that's easy to use.

Have you examined your website lately? [β](#)

## Sync or Swim

You probably have a backup system in place for your data, but recovering a file from a backup tape, an off site backup drive, or a disc stored in a safe deposit box can take a lot of time. I use an inexpensive application to back up current work to a local hard drive that sits beside my computer.

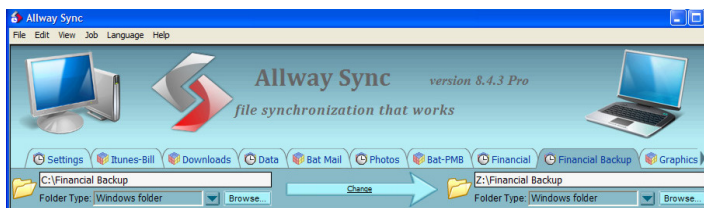
No, this doesn't take the place of backup, but it does make it possible for me to immediately recover a file that I've accidentally damaged or deleted without having to resort to restoring from backup.

It also means that I can unplug that drive from the desktop computer and plug it into my notebook computer if something bad happens to the desktop machine.

Yes, I have had to do that and because of the external drive with all my current work, I was back in business within 5 minutes.

## AllwaySync to the Rescue

AllwaySync is free for personal use, but if you use it as much as I do, it will soon begin bugging you to license the "pro" version, which has no additional features, but it will then stop nagging you. Given the application's low cost (\$20), it was easy enough to fork over the money.



The easy-to-understand interface allows you to define "left" and "right" folders. The folder on the left is the source folder and the folder on the right is the destination. In setting up the relationship, you tell AllwaySync what to do when files on either side are changed or deleted. Because I set up the application to be a safety net, I want

changed files to be copied from left to right and deletions not to be mirrored on the right.

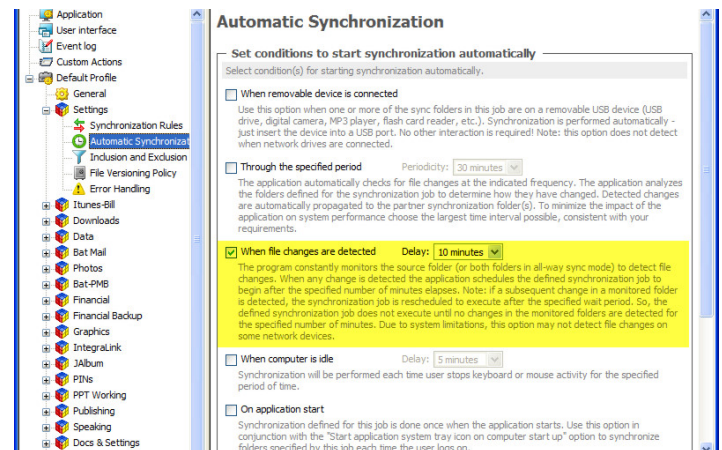
This means I can delete a file on the left (desktop computer), but it will still be available on the right (external USB drive).

Each job becomes a tab on the interface and, in manual mode, right-clicking the tab offers the opportunity to analyze or synchronize the folders.

As the synchronization process runs, AllwaySync logs every action it takes: Creating new directories on the right, copying files, and such. And you're not limited to just the drives that are attached to your computer. AllwaySync can back up files to a network folder, an FTP site, Amazon's Simple Storage Rules Service, OffsiteBox.com, or a WebDAV folder. I don't recommend using AllwaySync instead of a full backup application, but if you don't have a true backup strategy in place, this would be a good start.

## Always Watching

The real power comes from starting AllwaySync when the computer starts so that it can watch the directories you have specified. For each defined job, you set up rules for file synchronization. In nearly all cases, I simply copy new and changed files from left to right without mirroring deletions.



You'll need to tell AllwaySync whether it should watch the directory for changes and how long it will wait before starting to copy new and changed files to the right. To avoid constant disk activity, it's a good idea to set this to 10 minutes or more. 10 minutes is the default. For directories that change a lot (e-mail, for example) you may find that waiting an hour or more is a better choice.

You can also determine what should happen to files that will be deleted when new versions are copied. Currently, I have AllwaySync send the old versions to the Recycle Bin, but I may decide to use a more robust option so for some directories where I might want to go back to a previous version of a file even after the latest version has been copied to the sync drive.

AllwaySync doesn't replace a real backup application, but it can save you from the occasional "oops" moment. For more information, see [www.AllwaySync.com](http://www.AllwaySync.com). [β](#)