Backups (15):
Homes, Safes and Banks

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This is the fifteenth in a series of short articles reviewing the theory and practice of making backups.

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It is normal to store backups away from the computers and buildings where the primary copies of the backed-up data reside.

Care During Transport

When sending backup media out for storage, operations staff should use lockable carrying cases designed for specific media. If external firms specializing in data storage pick up media, their staff will usually supply such cases as part of the contract. If media are being transported by corporate staff, it is essential to explain the dangers of leaving such materials in a car: in summertime the cars can get so hot that they melt the media, whereas in winter they can get so cold that the media instantly attract harmful water condensation when they are brought inside. In any case, leaving valuable data in an automobile is asking for theft.

Homes

The obvious but dangerous choice for people in small offices is to send backup media to the homes of trusted employees. This practice is a very bad idea:

Although the employee may be trustworthy, members of that person’s family may not be so. Especially where teenaged and younger children are present, keeping an organization’s backups in a private home poses serious security risks.

Environmental conditions in homes may be incompatible with safe long-term storage of media. For example, depending on the cleaning practices of the household, storing backups in a cardboard box under the bed may expose the media to dust, insects (e.g., bed-mites), cats, dogs, pet rodents and damage from vacuum cleaners.

In addition, temperature and humidity controls may be inadequate for safe storage of magnetic media.

Homeowner’s insurance policies are unlikely to cover loss of an employer’s property and will surely not cover consequential losses resulting from damage to crucial backup volumes.

Legal requirements for demonstrable chain of custody of corporate documentation on backup volumes will not be met if the media are left lying around a private home where unknown persons may have access to them.
Safes

There are no fire-proof safes, only fire-resistant safes. Safes are available with different degrees of guaranteed resistance to specific temperatures commonly found in ordinary fires (those not involving arson and flame accelerants). Sturdy small (one or two cubic foot) safes are available for use in small offices or homes and can withstand the relatively short time required to burn a house or small building down. They can withstand a fall through one or two floors without breaking open. However, for use in taller buildings, only more expensive and better-built safes are appropriate to protect valuable data.

In the next article in this series, we'll look at data vaults and online backups.

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