Synchronizing Computers (3):

iFolder

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In my last article, I discussed the peer-to-peer software called BeInSync that allows one to synchronize up to three computers easily through persistent Internet connections. In this article, reader Bert Plat from The Netherlands contributes an interesting review of a client-server solution called iFolder. “Dank u wel” to Bert for an excellent overview. [Don’t you wish we could write Dutch as well as he writes English?]

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I [Bert Plat] have read Prof Kabay’s article on “Organizing and Safeguarding Information on Disk,” (HTML and PDF versions available from <http://www.mekabay.com/methodology/index.htm>) and noted with interest how he uses LapLink to backup files to and from several machines. This works perfectly for those who’re as organized as Prof Kabay. The rest of us should do themselves a favor and take a look at a backup-and-synchronizing tool called iFolder (see <http://www.novell.com/products/ifolder/overview.html> and <http://www.ifolder.com>).

With this product you can simply designate any folder on your disk as an iFolder, and everything that happens in and beneath it will be automagically replicated to an iFolder server. The iFolder server will then replicate that change to all other machines that happen to use the same user account – which is great for those of us switching machines every now and then. It is also possible to share an iFolder with others, on a read-only or read/write basis. iFolder uses the HTTPS protocol over port 443 to copy files to and from the server, so it can be used from anyplace where you use a browser.

The synchronization mechanism is pretty smart. Changed files, for instance, are first chopped up in 4 kilobyte blocks, and only those blocks that have changed are synchronized to the server. This is good news if you’re on a dial-up line and have just changed one slide in a multimegabyte presentation. I have even used iFolder successfully over a GPRS (General Packet Radio Service) connection.

The best thing about iFolder is that it’s totally transparent. It boots up together with Windows (or Linux, or OS X), and then just sits in the background checking for changes. If there is an active Internet connection, any and all changes will be replicated to the server, and if there isn’t, iFolder will simply wait until the Internet connection is restored.

If you happen to work on a computer (or even a PDA) that doesn’t have the iFolder client software, no matter. You can point your browser to the iFolder server, and upload and download files manually.

iFolder, despite its name, wasn’t developed by Apple, but by Novell. The current version is 3.1,
and is included with Novell's Open Enterprise Server on Linux. However, you don't have to replace your current network infrastructure, as an iFolder server simply uses LDAP (Lightweight Directory Access Protocol) to figure out who the users are.

In addition to this commercial iFolder Enterprise version there is also an open-source edition being built at <http://www.ifolder.com>. It doesn't have all the bells and whistles of the Enterprise edition, but can be used freely by any reasonably technically-proficient home user.

We all know that we should create and maintain regular backups of our important files. We also know that this takes time and effort, so doing backups often gets less priority than it should. Although iFolder isn’t a backup solution as such – you would still need to create offline backups every now and then – it can make sure that important files aren’t lost when the one machine they are on disappears from the universe of usable machines.

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