

Ask SCORE

My commercial refrigeration sales and service business has been doing well since we started last year. In addition to our own customer and financial records, our computer system holds the service information on our customers' equipment. I worry about something happening to this data. How can I protect it?

Quick question—have you backed up your small business computer files today? This month? Ever?

If the answer is no, you're putting hours and even years of hard work at risk of being damaged or lost entirely due to a computer malfunction, power failure or other unforeseen problem.

Damaged or lost data files have cost many small or home-based businesses weeks, months or even years of work. It can happen in an instant, for many reasons. Suddenly your hard drive starts making loud grinding noises and stops working. Your laptop might be stolen or maybe you simply push a wrong button. Computer viruses also can make files vanish. And chances are these digital disasters will occur at a deadline or other time when you absolutely have to retrieve that information.

Technological dangers are common and you must be prepared to avoid them. Having backup files available in the event of trouble could be the difference between staying open or having to shut down.

There are several ways to backup your business files. One simple method is to copy or "burn" your files to CDs. This works if you don't have large amounts of data to protect. You also can keep a secondary computer or external hard drive around to serve as your backup center.

Another option is to use a service that lets you back up your data over the Internet. Depending on the amount and type of data you need to save, you can use any one method, or a combination. The key is to make certain at least one set of files is kept in another secure location.

It helps to have a specific plan in place to protect your files. First, decide which files are critical to keeping your business operating. Choose a backup method and perform a full backup at least once a week. Backup any critical data daily to a removable device. To make sure the backup systems really work, test your backup files at least quarterly. Keep a full backup on site for convenience, but be sure to store one set far enough away so a disaster won't strike both locations.

You can also take advantage of a wide range of products designed to help busy small business owners safeguard their data. For example, HP at hp.com, Symantec at smallbiz.symantec.com, and Imation at www.imation.com, each offer a line of backup hardware and software solutions. Their websites are also full of tips and guidance to help entrepreneurs match products and practices with their data storage needs.

This column is brought to you by the Southern New Hampshire Chapter of SCORE, with more than 65 current and former business executives available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one business counseling and training workshops for area businesses. Call 603-666-7561 or visit www.score-manchester.org for information on counseling, upcoming workshops and volunteer opportunities. SCORE is a national, non-profit organization and a resource partner of the U. S. Small Business Administration.

Have a question you'd like answered in this column? E-mail it to info@score-manchester.org, with "Ask SCORE" in the subject line.