



# Data (mis)Management

While I wrote this column, I was at an altitude somewhere around 34,000 feet, flying from Albuquerque to Houston. I was working on a briefing I will be presenting, and started looking for a support file that had critical information (translation: I am looking for a Dilbert cartoon I used in a previous briefing). As I search and search unsuccessfully, I started thinking about the large amount of data that I carry with me, and the entirety of my “electronic life.”

The 1980s: I was running the Control Program for Microcomputers (also known as CP/M), then the Commodore OS, then MS-DOS 2.11. My “life” consisted of no more than a dozen 160, then 180, and, later, 360KB 5 1/4-inch floppies. I probably carried 100-200 files with me when I changed jobs.

The 1990s: UNIX, SunOS, Windows 3.1, Macintosh OS Version 4.0, and Windows 95. My “electronic life” could be carried on several boxes of 1.4MB floppies, or maybe an eight millimeter tape, and eventually a few CDs. I actually found “Backup of Dave Cook’s life” CDs from 1997, when I retired from the AF. Two CDs contained all that I felt worthy of keeping: 1,344 files, taking up about 1GB.

Now: Windows XP, and then Vista. I carry a 250GB portable hard drive when I travel, plus a few 8GB thumb drives with critical files. A complete backup of my “electronic life” (minus the music and videos) takes 12.5GB, and spans 11,218 files. Of course, that does not include 8GB that my more than 11,000 pictures takes up. Nor does it include the 7GB of music (1,334 songs) and 154GB of videos (27 movies that I will definitely watch ... someday!) If I converted all of this, it would take 286 CDs, or almost 130,000 of the 1.44MB floppies. Wow!

And, of course, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find a single file when I need something. I tried organizing my music into “Artist” folders. But then I ended up with “Misc,” “Misc from my daughter,” “Comedy,” etc. It’s the same with business files. I started out with Word documents and PowerPoint presentations ... then I realized that some should be grouped under

a specific customer ... then some are sort of miscellaneous, based on a presentation or work from the past. I tried organizing them by date (“Files from 1998”), and then by job (“Stuff from STSC 1997-2003”).

And now we have distributed data to worry about. I have an office machine, a home machine, a laptop that I travel with, and a spare laptop I keep in the living room (so I can surf and watch TV at the same time!). I have to occasionally worry about syncing my office and traveling machine. I often work on files at home. I try synchronizing everything, but occasionally, I have to panic and search frantically before a trip to find the latest copy of something. I DO have a process: I try to remember to send an updated file to myself (from home) in an e-mail, and I use various tools in trying to keep the data “in sync.” I “officially” use my office machine as my “main” machine (and just clone a virtual volume to my laptop when I travel). The problem then revolves back to finding a single file on one computer. And that’s where the current suite of tools occasionally fails me.

Nothing works perfectly. With Vista, I can just type in a phrase I want to locate (“STSC 2006”) and get lots of hits—none of which really helped me find that perfect Dilbert cartoon. Oh well, I have lots of Dilbert cartoons to choose from (173 in the “Dilbert” folder). Luckily for me, they all have helpful names (“Dilbert Cartoon June 1999”). Let’s just face the facts: It’s getting harder and harder to organize and arrange data so that you can easily find what you need.

Of course, I am sure you already know the BEST way to manage your data, right? If not, let me explain how to do it the RIGHT way so that you don’t lose anything! Wait ... hold on ... I wrote it down ... I’ve just got to find the document on my computer ... I know it’s here somewhere ...

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