



Key considerations for online backup

Storage pros at small businesses continue to be faced with an array of backup related challenges as they pursue the most efficient backup strategy for their business. This E-Guide will highlight the key considerations to be aware of when evaluating online backup solutions and will also highlight critical questions to ask vendors.

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Outsourcing backup: Questions to ask your vendor

Rick Cook

Outsourcing your backup data can be a convenient and reliable method of handling backups -- if you select the right vendor and ask the right questions. Here are some of the questions you should ask any potential vendor before you sign on the dotted line.

What, exactly, is your backup service provider offering?

Outsourced backup services vary, from simply providing raw storage space, like Amazon's S3, to data deduplication and information lifecycle management from companies like EMC Corp. and Symantec Corp. Others, such as Proofpoint (formerly Fortiva) offer specialized backup and archiving for email or other applications.

What's your escrow policy?

A lot of companies are jumping into backup SaaS and not all of them are going to stay in the business. How will you get your data back if something happens to your backup provider?

How fast is your connection?

The speed of your connection is critically important to a remote backup's performance. However, the connection speed will probably need to be determined empirically at the time when you will be doing your backup. You should check your actual, versus the theoretical connection speed over the network.

What is your guaranteed throughput?

Connection speed is only one of the factors that goes into throughput. The vendor should offer a service-level agreement (SLA) for you to examine. The SLA should include a guaranteed throughput. Note that the vendor will probably only guarantee the output from its server, not the speed of your connection. That's beyond the vendor's control.

How long will it take to back up my data?

Next to price, this is the key number. You need to stay inside your backup window with room allowed for the inevitable growth in the size of backups.

In a well-run IT shop, the user should have this information already since it's a critical metric in managing storage of any sort. The simplest, but not the most accurate, method of figuring storage growth is to establish a historical trend line by comparing the size of your data at different points in time. Most storage management programs will also provide a figure for storage growth that is often more accurate than a simple historical comparison.

How long will it take to restore my data?

Restoration takes longer than backup -- sometimes a lot longer if you're using data deduplication or incremental backups to reduce the size of uploads. Be sure to ask your vendor how long it will take to restore your data, and then make sure that number is in the SLA. Note that the actual time to restore also depends on the bandwidth of your connection, not just how fast the vendor's server can pump out the data.

What range of backup sizes do you handle?

Vendors tend to segment their market by the amount of data to be backed up (or, in the case of a vendor offering deduplication, by the amount of data transmitted and stored). Many vendors offer different size ranges at different prices, but some are specialized in a particular size range. The best way to determine what size range a particular plan is aimed at is to ask the vendor. The alternate method is to study the rate schedule and work out the prices for your specific case from that.

What security measures -- physical and virtual -- do you have in place?

Ideally, the servers and storage used for backup data should be located in a separate, physically secure area and replicated on more than one storage array. Some vendors replicate the data to more than one site. In addition, the data should be protected by encryption or other security measures to prevent unauthorized access, including by vendor employees.

What disaster recovery and business continuity measures do you have in place?

The vendor should have a comprehensive disaster recovery plan and enough redundancy to make sure you can get to your backups if you need them.

In the event of a disaster, what methods can I use to get my data back?

It can sometimes take more than 24 hours to do a full recovery down the same link it was uploaded over. For that reason, some vendors offer alternate methods of getting the data back to you. For example, some companies will put your data on a USB drive and express it back at your request. Because reloading from a local file system is so much faster than downloading the data, this can be faster.

What will outsourcing backup cost?

Finally, what's the total monthly cost for your backups? This almost always varies with the amount of data being backed up, and often with the service-level guarantees, but it often is more than simply multiplying the amount of data by the price per gigabyte at a given level of service. There are often setup fees, minimum charges and capacity charges figured as bands (i.e., 2 GB to 4 GB is the same price)

Although what you're interested in is the total cost, it's important to be sure you're comparing apples to apples.

Don't simply look at the cost per gigabyte. Compare the total price for the amount of data you have now and what you reasonably expect to have in the future. If you're near the top of the band for a vendor's plan, your growth can push you into the next -- and more expensive-- band. (Assuming the vendor uses capacity bands. Some just charge per gigabyte rather than for a range of gigabytes.) Also consider future growth in comparing costs. If you're at the top of a capacity category now, you can expect that your costs will jump significantly when your data grows across the boundary to another category.

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Online data backup and recovery tips for SMBs

Lauren Whitehouse

Online data backup is a good solution for many companies, including SMBs, which are often challenged by many of the same data management issues larger companies face. Mandated reporting requirements and rapid growth, along with remote or mobile locations, mean SMBs struggle with geographically dispersed data and e-discovery requests that can tie up systems and staff. At the same time, many SMBs still depend on tape-based backup systems and often don't have a designated IT staff member who specializes in designing or developing backup and recovery systems.

Sometimes Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) is used interchangeably with on-demand storage, but not all online backup solutions fit the SaaS model. SaaS involves sharing a scalable application (and infrastructure) with multiple tenants while keeping data separate. Applications such as Hotmail and Salesforce.com are great examples of SaaS. There are plenty of ways SMBs can benefit from online and on-demand storage backup and recovery, including pricing, protection, archiving services and bandwidth.

Service-level agreement (SLA)-based pricing (combined with reporting to monitor trending) means fewer surprises for growing companies. Operating-level agreements (OLAs) used by on-demand providers describe the responsibilities of the vendor's internal support group. OLA definitions may be simple, but they are important. Service contracts help set policies for volume limitations (how much can be transferred within a set time frame) and retention periods. Recovery point objectives and recovery time objectives for various data classifications are typically spelled out.

In addition, on-demand services can provide the sort of 24/7 monitoring that many smaller shops can't afford. Additional benefits might include application-specific protection and expertise, or a built-in disaster recovery (DR) plan. Archiving services and electronic data discovery may also be offered. Finally, many providers have certification in storage processes and methodologies and may be better equipped than your own IT team to set up storage policies, compliance requirements and audits.

Of course, companies considering on-demand backup and recovery have to consider bandwidth, which dictates how much data can be transferred. Some SMBs may have to make an initial investment here to reap the benefits of an on-demand investment. And because most organizations cite backup or recovery performance as a major problem, there will be some apprehension about sending data over a WAN connection to a third-party site. A few vendors in this space now have "quick start" and "quick recovery" programs where full backup sets can be physically delivered on disk for initial setup and rapid full recovery.

Finally, online backup involves more than the hosted backup application. You need to consider the vendor behind the service offering. Ask yourself, "how many data centers does the vendor have?", "what experience does the vendor have with delivering a managed service?" and, most importantly, "how well have they performed for companies with needs similar to mine?"

Online data backup shopping list

There are other issues that should be taken into consideration when evaluating an online backup vendor or product. Here's a checklist SMBs should use when shopping:

- **Transferring and storing data efficiently.** In addition to incremental backup, look for some form of capacity reduction, especially if pricing is based on capacity of data stored.
- **Speed.** Look for a vendor that offers an alternative to WAN-based transfer to accelerate the initial full backup or full recovery.
- **Matching scalability.** A partner with a provider or vendor that can match your firm's growth in terms of capacity, nodes, sites, etc, is crucial.
- **Disaster planning.** Look into the vendor's DR strategy, how many data centers exist and how geographically dispersed they are.
- **Meeting industry regulations and compliance requirements.** Make sure the vendor is equipped to meet Statement on Auditing Standards No. 70 (SAS 70) and Sarbanes-Oxley (SOX) audits. The vendor also needs to be able to comply with an electronic data discovery request.
- **Clarity in service commitments.** It's critical to have a handle on SLAs and OLAs. You'll want to make sure service objectives are discussed and benchmarks set.

Resources from 3X Systems



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