

Online backups with Mozy

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Making backups of data is only half the story. The most complete backup set is useless if it's going to be burnt, stolen or flooded along with the computer itself. A vital step in backing up is to physically separate your backups from the original data – the further the better. How can this be done? Users who commute to work can keep work backups at home and vice versa but, for those of us with home offices, it's hard to find a backup storage location which is remote, secure, and close enough to reach in a hurry when we need it.

Enter the Internet. Experienced users have been making informal backups on the Internet for years, using spare space on Web sites or online e-mail accounts as makeshift storage systems; however, only recently, with the spread of broadband, has it become possible to do this in a systematic, user-friendly way. A Google search for "online backups" now displays over a dozen options, but the Mozy system has a feature which moves it ahead of the pack – it's free.

That is, the basic version is free. Any Web user can log on to the Mozy site, at <http://www.mozy.com>, book themselves two gigabytes of space on the resident server, and download the Mozy program on to their own hard system. Running the program allows the user to specify what files they want to back up – by type (ie file extension), date or location, or any combination of these – and when they want to back them up. Having done this, the user sits back and lets Mozy handle the rest. Users who need more than 2Gb of storage are able to subscribe to a Mozy Plus account for between US \$1.95 and US \$9.95 per month, giving them between 5Gb and 60Gb of storage space.

FIGURE 1 Mozy home page



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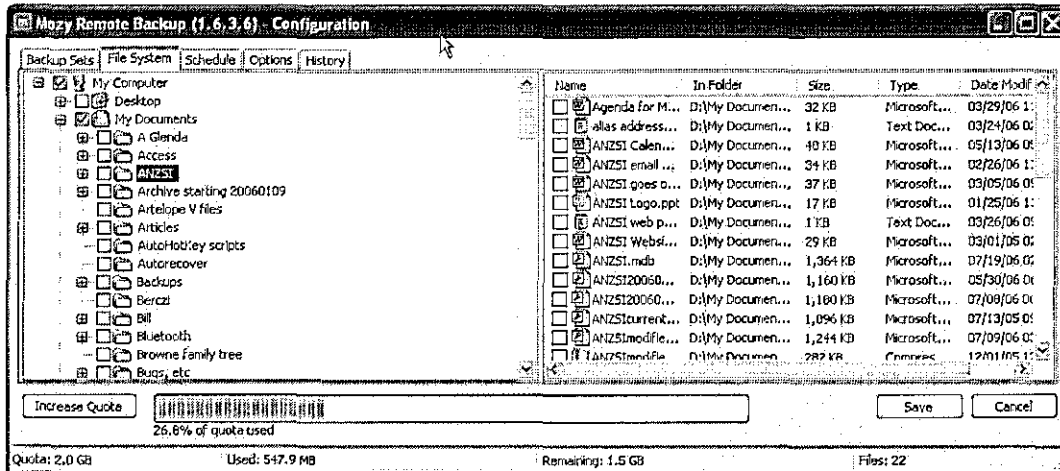
HOW DOES IT WORK?

User accounts are set up with an e-mail address and a password. (As with all passwords, you should pick one you think you can remember but which would be meaningless to anyone else. Then write it down anyway, and put it somewhere safe.) Users should then download the 1.5Mb Mozy program to their own PCs. Backups are done through this program, though it is possible to restore files and inspect your account usage via the Web. Like a virus detector, the Mozy program will prompt the user when a new version is available for download. The current version is fairly easy to use, though there are some quirks to be aware of, if you want to reduce the risk of nasty surprises.

Firstly, running the program at all seems to require an Internet connection. If you just want to check your settings when the connection is down, it may not work. Secondly, the Backup Sets panel, which allows the user to specify files by type, looks for those files in the default Windows directories; which means that, if you happen to have moved your My Documents directory somewhere else, Mozy may not find it. You can right-click on a set name and use Edit to specify a different location, but this is not immediately obvious. Backup Sets can be used to select particular directories, but serious users will probably want to use the File System panel instead and specify exactly which files are to be included in a backup.

The Schedule tab allows the user to specify when they want backups to occur. This can be during idle time (eg when the computer hasn't been used for fifteen minutes) or at a scheduled time each day or week. If a backup doesn't occur at a scheduled time (eg if the computer is off or the Internet connection down), Mozy will skip it and wait till the next one. You can choose to be alerted if no backup has occurred for a specified number of days. Naturally, the Mozy program needs to be running when backups are due, and it will install a shortcut in the Startup folder so that it starts up when the PC is switched on. This will presumably cause a slight drop in computer performance, though this was not noticeable to us in practice.

FIGURE 2 Selecting files from the Mozy configuration panel



An Options panel allows the user to tinker with the program's behaviour – updates, alert windows and the like. Most important is a setting called Throttle, which allows the user to specify what proportion of their bandwidth Mozy can use at a time. Setting this lower will slow down the backup process but allow the user to do other things online at the same time; setting it higher will shorten backup time at the expense of Web browsing and retrieving emails etc. Users who are triggering backups manually during working hours, and automatically outside them, can choose to throttle the connection only during certain periods.

The Mozy FAQ, at <https://mozy.com/support/faq>, provides some information about the backup process. It's not as explicit as it might be -- are there trade secrets involved? -- but it confirms that

Mozy does cumulative incremental backups ie only new material is backed up, and each new backup adds to the previous one. If and when you fill your allotted space, you'll be alerted and given the option to remove some backups -- presumably the oldest ones should be the first to go. For safety's sake you should have an optical media backup arrangement as well but, having evaluated Mozy, you may decide that a full DVD backup once a month is adequate for that.

RESTORING

Backups can be restored without the Mozy program but, if the PC (or hard disk) has perished, the user will have to find a computer with a Web connection and either set up e-mail for the account or change the Mozy profile to point to a new e-mail address. (The Mozy password is required to do this.) The user can then log in to Mozy online and select a backup date; from that date's data set, the user selects the files or directories to restore.

Depending on the size of the files, it may take a while for Mozy to unpack them. When this is done, Mozy sends an e-mail message with a link to a Web page where the files can be downloaded. They are packaged into a single ZIP file with a directory structure matching the original directory locations on your PC where they originated, but you can restore the files to other locations if you need to. Mozy only allows five restores a month -- but if you need more than that, then you're probably doing something wrong anyway.

FUNDING AND SUPPORT

Apart from the Mozy Plus accounts, Mozy derives revenue from advertisements in its weekly newsletter. This is a fairly lightweight production at the moment, but it may change as the company grows. A sample of the kind of material it contains can be found on the blog at <https://mozy.com/blog>. There's also a brief but fairly comprehensive manual at <https://mozy.com/support/userguide>.

IN PRACTICE

Despite the flippant tone of its newsletter and blog, Mozy represents a formidable combination of technological skill and user understanding. Its online and on-disk components integrate smoothly and necessary information is presented in easy-to-digest chunks. New users can keep track of what's happening via alerts and information boxes; experienced users can turn these off. The option to use "dead time", when the computer is not otherwise engaged, means that any interference with the PC's performance is kept to a minimum.

The amount you can backup will depend not only on your Mozy account but also on your ISP account bandwidth; some providers will impose an upper limit on the megabytes you can upload and either block or drastically slow down data transfers after this limit is reached. Users also need to be aware that upload speeds on most broadband connections are much slower than download speeds; thus, it might take an hour to back up a file that you were able to download in ten minutes.

Whether its financial model is a success only time will tell but, at this stage, Mozy certainly looks impressive. Whether it maintains its independence or, as seems likely, is taken over by an organisation such as Yahoo, Microsoft or Google, it should continue to provide users with an important tool for data protection.