

Irish Computer

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KeepITsafe MD
Eoin Blacklock

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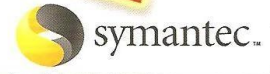
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WHEN two bright computer science students at Trinity College Dublin came up with an idea for an IT business back in 2003, their dilemma was what to do about it. The marketplace still resounded with the echoes of the dot com implosion, and attracting venture capitalists interest was a challenge.

Eoin Blacklock, now MD of KeepITsafe and then an undergraduate, had come up with the idea of an online backup service for businesses, underpinned by a software product which the two students had developed themselves.

"We had two choices," Blacklock recalls. "We could raise funding and use it to advertise the product and service directly to customers, or we could go to market via existing IT companies and have them offer it to their existing customers. We decided the second option was the easier one; it made perfect sense for us. It allowed us to test the market to find out whether the model would work and resellers would make a margin on what they sold."

KeepITsafe has had customers since 2003, although the company was not officially set up and registered until 2005, by which time the two principals had left college. The strategy of using the contacts available to existing IT services companies has proved successful and the company maintains a rigid focus on selling through channel partners rather than encouraging potential customers to download their software and set it up themselves.



Sheer magic: KeepITsafe's Eoin Blacklock has taken the pain out of backups and disaster recovery



How can one company charge a fee for a service that others are giving away free? To find out, **David D'Arcy** spoke with KeepITsafe's **Eoin Blacklock**

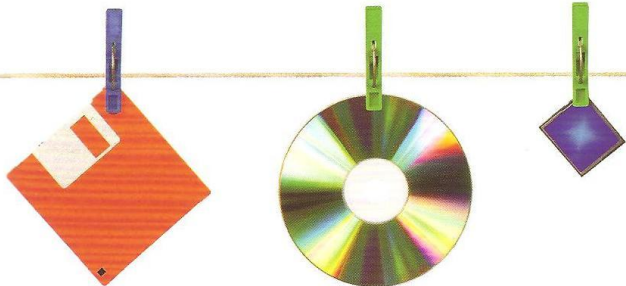
Money for (getting out of a) jam

Blacklock says that this is because the firm is focussed entirely on the business market and that it therefore has to concentrate on selling a service rather than a neat technology tool in which people can indulge on an impulse. After all, if they want to do that, there is no shortage of free online backup systems available from such large companies as Google, with its Gmail service, and others.

So how can KeepITsafe charge good money for something which other companies are giving away free? "There is a huge amount of free online storage and backup around now," he concedes, "and there were even a few such services beginning to emerge when we started off,

standard template. "About 95% of Irish businesses will have a mail server such as Exchange or Lotus Notes, a database server such as SQL and a file and print server," he says. "Depending on their size, some will have all three functions on one server, whereas others will have separate servers for each of these applications."

Backing up this data so that customers can get speedy access to individual files if they are inadvertently deleted – or in more extreme cases so that they can recover their entire e-mail system without losing any of the



but it is important to remember that there are some major differences between what we offer and what they can deliver."

In essence, those providing free online backup tend to offer simple file-transfer services which allow people simply to copy files – which could be anything from documents to photographs to music or video files – to a remote storage facility. However, most businesses require a service that is just as easy to use but which is by necessity more complicated to put into effect.

Most SMEs, according to Blacklock, have an IT infrastructure which follows a fairly

structure or organisation of the messages contained within – is a task that requires specialist knowledge.

"You have to plan for an effective backup of systems like that," says Blacklock. "These are complicated databases and you have to know how they work. SQL has to be backed up internally; Exchange has to be backed up via its own APIs. Backing up is not just a simple matter of transferring files from one location to another."



At your service

Despite basing their business on an innovative software tool, the key to KeepITsafe's future is the quality of service it provides to customers. With a tried and tested way of performing backups already dominant in the market, KeepITsafe has to convince customers that its method is not only cheaper but also every bit as secure, and even better, than storing backup tapes off site.



It's a responsibility the company takes seriously. "We monitor our clients' systems constantly," says Blacklock. "If for some reason a backup didn't run properly the night before, we will tell the client that it did not and then we can go onsite with a removable drive and fix the problem."

Reasons for backups not going through are many and varied. There could have been a power cut or a server crash during the night. Sometimes the broadband line might have been disabled temporarily because of an upgrade, or maybe even the client decided to upgrade their systems internally without thinking to advise their backup service provider that the systems would be inaccessible.

"Another reason is sometimes that employees use the evening to upload their iPod data to the server," says Blacklock. "This can cause the backup to run on because it suddenly has an extra 20 or 30Gbyte to take care of."

KeepITsafe's systems also receive an automatic warning flag if more than 5% of a client's data is deleted overnight. This can be an indication of an employee who is just about to leave taking some of the company's data for their own purposes. "People love to receive these calls," says Blacklock. "It makes them realise that we are providing a complete data management service, rather than just simply backing up their data."

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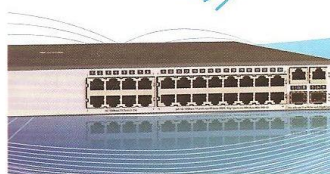
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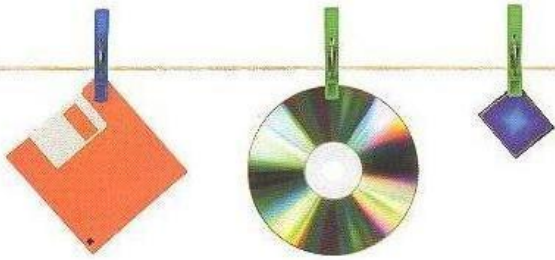
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The Data Protection Act requires in some cases that corporate data be backed up externally to the company premises but that it must still be held physically in Ireland

Blacklock says KeepItSafe has the expertise to organise a properly configured backup for the typical IT infrastructure found in Irish businesses. Once that is set up, the software does the rest.

"Our software backs up all these complex databases to our data centres every night," says Blacklock. "There is no manual or staff intervention involved. It gives companies the peace of mind of knowing that they don't have to worry about changing tapes or giving them to employees to take home, with the attendant risks that they may be lost or stolen in transit."

KeepItSafe offers other advantages, not least compliance. The Data Protection Act requires in some cases that corporate data be backed up externally to the company premises but that it must still be held physically in Ireland. This happens as a given

Backing up is not just a simple matter of transferring files from one location to another

with KeepItSafe's service, which automatically replicates the data to a data centre – or sometimes several. Blacklock maintains that many of the free backup services host data in data centres outside the country and are therefore not suitable for storage of business data.

The fact that backup data is held inside the country also makes for faster and more reliable restoration of data in an emergency, he claims. Despite the fact that the backup data is transferred online in the first place, Blacklock insists that recovery often requires the physical dispatch of a hard drive containing replica data to the company premises.

"If somebody inadvertently deletes a single file and needs to recover it, we can find it very quickly and send it via a broadband connection," he says. "But if you lose a mail server like Exchange, you might need to recover 20 or 30Gbyte, which is contained in a single file. That would take a very long time to recover over a standard DSL broadband connection. It is much quicker to send over a hard drive and recover the data that way."

As is often the case with an innovative way of carrying out a traditional function, KeepItSafe's main competitors are not companies offering similar online services but instead those who provide backup services in the traditional way.

"Our main competitors are those people who sell tape drives and come around in vans every day collecting their clients'

backup tapes for secure storage off site," says Blacklock. "Typically, they have been around for a long time and have well established marketing budgets and relationships with customers."

Such companies are themselves facing the challenge of gauging when the industry at large is going to move from tape to online backup. "Sometimes we get calls from these companies saying that their customers are enquiring about online backup and can we help them provide such a service," he says. "But the reality is that they are making too much money as things are to consider changing to online. We know of some people who are paying between €400 and €500 a month for tape backup. We could provide a better service online for about €150 a month, but many resellers are unwilling to give up their current lucrative margins to move to a new way of doing things."

So how can KeepItSafe wean IT services companies off traditional methods? Blacklock says it is all about devising a proposition which makes it worth the reseller's while.

"Typically, about 30% of calls to an IT reseller are backup related," he says. "We say to resellers that we can take that headache away from them. OK, so they are foregoing some margin on current tape sales but, in the long run, they will be saving themselves a lot of support calls. In Ireland, many IT services companies are small operations with only two or three people in them. If we can free them up from 30% of their support calls, they will be able to concentrate on other services – which will be more beneficial to them in the long run."

Blacklock says that, despite the reluctance of some traditional players, KeepItSafe currently has about 80 partners in Ireland, ranging from large resellers such as Datapac to the small specialist two and three-man operations. The reseller owns the relationship with the end customer, but KeepItSafe handles all aspects of the backup service. "Many small resellers look on us as part of their own staff," he says. The business is continuing to grow and he expects sales for this year to increase by a third compared to last year. ■

