

## A Timely Idea

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The key here is that busy professionals don't have to trust their own ability to manage their laptop or even give up their time...this strikes me as an idea whose time has come. Because I don't know about you but my relationship with my laptop seems perpetually on the rocks.

– Andrew Wahl, Senior Writer, Canadian Business

How would you describe your relationship with your computer? All business? Collegial? Had some spats recently but working to patch things up — perhaps even seeing a counsellor? Worried that your laptop might be behaving inappropriately without your knowledge, or is maybe just a little too naive about the motives of others?

Perhaps the most telling indication is this: Do you trust it to keep a secret — your secrets?

When it comes to your computer, a little paranoia can save you a lot of grief. Of course, we have to take a few risks and experiment now and then. But the greatest threat to your computer is probably your own overconfidence: that its data is safe, the encryption is strong, your passwords can't be cracked, your anti-virus software is updated and working correctly, that you back up frequently enough and, touch wood, your hard drive won't spontaneously crash.

Considering the extent to which we now operate our lives and businesses on computers that are increasingly lightweight and portable — in other words, easy to drop, break, and even easier to leave behind or get stolen — we are almost certainly not paranoid enough.

What triggered this train of thought was a conversation I had recently with Larry Keating, who has run an eponymous technical support outsource business out of the Toronto area for several years (for a long time it held the contract for Palm handheld devices). But Keating is now taking that expertise to launch a new company that aims to completely change how small and medium-sized businesses buy computers.

To be precise, they wouldn't buy computers anymore at all. Instead, they'd buy a \$130-a-month service from Keating's company, No Panic Computing, and get a top-of-the line business-class HP notebook running either Windows Vista or XP (ironically, offering that old, hard-to-buy operating system could be a big selling point), with automated and secure remotely hosted back-up by Iron Mountain.

The concept is a nice mesh of several big trends in technology today: mobility, security, IT outsourcing, selling traditional product categories as a service, and cloud computing.

It works like this: whenever a client is online, a complete image of his or her laptop's hard disk is securely sent to a data warehouse. Lose your computer? It will be remotely wiped and a new laptop sent to you in two business days — with everything on the computer, right down to the placement of the icons on your desktop screen, exactly how you last saw them. And while clients are waiting, they can access the contents of their entire C: drive online via a secure server.

Yes, other software exists, some of it is even embedded in operating systems (like Apple's new Leopard OS), that automatically backs up your files so you don't have to worry about mistakenly deleting a file (No Panic Computing helps with that, too, keeping all versions of every file for 90 days). But having that image remotely stored is a dream, not only because none of us back up our systems as frequently as we ought to, but because those storage discs or drives are often located in our offices, where they are exposed to many of the same foibles as our laptops, not to mention fire and flood.

Moreover, No Panic Computing will act like concierge IT staff, configuring the laptop for security, and monitoring it remotely for any performance problems, and the help desk is available 24/7.

The key here is that busy professionals don't have to trust their own ability to manage their laptop, or even give up their time to try. Keating says his aim was to create a "RIM-like experience," (giving props to BlackBerry maker Research in Motion) in that the unique technology most integral to making the service work — the automated back up over the Internet to a hosted server, and the remote monitoring — must happen "below the waterline," in a discrete and seamless manner. In other words, it has to just work, in the background, with no effects to the computer performance. "It's a great stepping stone for folks who realize there have to be better ways to manage and store their data," he told me.

The proof, naturally, will be in the quality of service No Panic Computing provides. Now, I am not a client and haven't tested the service, so I can't vouch for it. But the concept is intriguing, and the price is compelling — if Keating can make a real business out of it. In fact, I think it's a model that might work well for a consumer market, too — but only if it can be massively scaled. Keating is wisely limiting his target market, for now, to Canadian SMBs; despite his assurances that No Panic Computing is ready to grow, mismanaged hyper-growth could sink his company in no time.

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