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SmallLaw: My Technology Nightmare and What I Learned — Plus Preventing Your Own Fiscal Cliff

You're reading this issue of SmallLaw on a PC, Mac, iPad, smartphone, etc. Right now it's working well. But someday it will fail. Hopefully, you will have replaced it before then. Below you will read about a cascade of failures (including one involving Dropbox and another an iPad) that beset a radiologist who relies on technology as much as we all do nowadays. After discussing these recent events, she provides some advice on how you can prevent a technology nightmare from occurring in your solo practice or small law firm. In other words, advice for how to ensure sweet technology dreams. Also, don't miss the SmallLaw Pick of the Week for tips on how to prevent your law firm from its own fiscal cliff.

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MY TECHNOLOGY NIGHTMARE AND WHAT I LEARNED

By Rebecca Stein-Wexler, M.D. with Joshua Stein

I've used the "Notes" app on my iPad for the last time. I'll never use Dropbox to back up anything. I'll never trust anti-virus software again. No — I don't have a terminal disease. It's just that after two weeks of computer problems I've lost faith in the infallibility of these machines.

We know all our indispensable computer systems fail, so we back up, increasingly to the cloud. Viruses abound so we protect our computers with anti-virus software. And many of us rely on Apple products, which we think are better protected from viruses, more fun, intuitive, and backed by great customer service. But even Apple products fail, and whenever you have only one copy of any information, it's extremely vulnerable. You need to recognize these vulnerabilities, and figure out how to keep your information safe.

My Saga Begins

First, some context. I am a professor of pediatric radiology at the University of California, Davis. I am actively editing a new radiology reference text, as well as writing five chapters in that text. I write and take notes on my iPad — very similar to the written work my brother Joshua does for his commercial real estate law practice — and probably similar to your work too. (This explains why a radiologist is writing an article for [SmallLaw](#).)

Earlier this year I attended a conference related to my book, where I took notes using the Notes app on my beloved iPad. I tried to email my conference notes to myself, which I do as routine backup, but the iPad refused to send them. I figured I had neglected to install some routine upgrade. No problem: I'd install the upgrade when I got home.

After installing Apple's upgrade, though, I received a nasty warning message: my iPad couldn't sync and I needed to restore and reconfigure it.

When I tried to do that, I received "Error Message 6300," warning me that I would lose everything in my iPad. Perplexed, I called the Apple help desk.

800,000 Rotten Apples

The nice Apple tech support guy eventually told me they were having problems with too many downloads at once. Signals were getting crossed about 1% of the time. Whenever this happened, it destroyed everything in whatever iPad happened to be the victim of "upgrading" at that moment. And no, I hadn't done anything wrong. And there was no point in trying to resuscitate my notes. And I should just restore the iPad to its virgin state, reconfigure it, and set it up all over again. He did try to comfort me with statistics, telling me there are 80 million iPad users. To which I said, "800,000 people could experience the same problem I did?" No response.

I reconfigured my involuntarily like-new iPad and then spent many hours restoring apps. I can also buy a DVD of the conference and spend 20 more hours watching it and recreating my notes.

Life is back to normal. Right? Not so fast.

Why I Dropped Dropbox

In the days just before that conference, as I always do, I made extensive use of [Dropbox](#), the file synchronization and online storage service. I noticed that a few of my Dropbox folders held corrupted, and sometimes conflicted, copies of documents and radiology images that I had not touched for months.

The problem had started almost imperceptibly a few months earlier, when once in a while I would find a handful of corrupted or conflicted images in my Dropbox account. I fixed each problem easily by restoring previous versions from the Dropbox website. But the problem had now exploded. It no longer affected just a few images. Hundreds were corrupted. It was no longer something I could casually fix as problems arose. And I could never know for sure I had caught and fixed all the anomalies.

I looked for clues on the Dropbox forum. I figured out that all the conflicted copies were signed by my desktop at work and all had file-modification dates when I used Dropbox at work. My IT folks concluded that new software on my work PC was encrypting my files and making them unreadable.

I removed Dropbox from my work computer and set about restoring images, documents, and PDF files. My daughter and I rescued some files from backups on my portable hard drive. Too many hours later, we restored most of my files. A few items mysteriously became re-corrupted while being restored, again signed by my work computer. (I confirmed that my home laptop is virus-free, but more on that later.) And a few items just didn't have a non-corrupted version. They were permanently lost.

I have not solved the mystery of persistent new corruption. To stop these problems, though, I removed Dropbox from all my computers, transferred all my files to a portable hard drive, and bought some new 1 TB hard drives for frequent backups. Goodbye cloud. I loved and trusted you once.

More Problems on Terra Firma

Shifting away from the cloud to my house, I encountered another nagging computer problem. For a few months, my laptop at home couldn't establish a wireless connection with my printer. I worked around this by printing at work, or at home from another PC. But I figured that since I was already living a technology nightmare I might as well try to solve my printing problem, too.

I tried the usual fixes. None worked. I've never called in a computer expert at home, but it was time. The Computer Doctor arrived, spent two hours messing with wires and programs, and then — about to give up — disabled my McAfee anti-virus software. Presto! My laptop could talk to my printer!

It turns out that a recent McAfee upgrade had created a barrier between my laptop and my computer. In other words, the software I had installed to prevent problems had in fact created a huge new problem. The Computer Doctor installed new antivirus software ("[Avast!](#)"). My computer should have remained "safe" from viruses, plus I could print again.

About a month after I installed Avast!, though, my computer was brought to its knees by the green dot FBI virus. Fortunately, I had just done my weekly backup, and lost no work. But that computer still needs to be completely wiped clean and rebuilt. Fortunately, I don't store valuable files on any PC; I use only external drives.

That's it. To summarize: I've mostly revived my iPad. Most of my Dropbox files have been rescued and moved to a safer place. Some are lost forever. I've removed my own documents and images from the Dropbox cloud. I replaced McAfee with Avast! I replaced Avast! with Microsoft's [Forefront](#). This entire adventure consumed about 60 hours of my time, turning me into a grouchy and unproductive monster for two weeks.

Lessons Learned: Backup, Backup, and How

So what have I learned? How can you avoid your own technology nightmare?

If systems start misbehaving, take it seriously, figure out what's going on, and fix it. Don't wait for it to get worse. You wouldn't let an unexplained cough go unchecked for years. Same idea.

Don't rely on just one backup system. I still use Dropbox for my authors to share transient work with me, but I don't store my own documents and images there.

Whatever you use, back everything up religiously in multiple places. Don't overwrite old backups with new ones, because that can replace a good version of a file with a recently corrupted version. Create generational backups regularly, maybe once every couple of weeks, using an external hard drive. Keep those hard drives — with current, old, and older versions of your work — indefinitely in multiple locations in case of fire or theft. Offsite storage is easier now because 2.5 inch hard drives, which currently go as high as 2 TB, have much smaller and lighter enclosures (try to use enclosures that are stackable to further save space). Label each hard drive well.

These comments apply to anyone who does any work on a computer, including those in small law firms. And be warned: although I found the "Restore" function in Dropbox somewhat helpful, it didn't restore

everything and was extraordinarily tedious for problems that afflicted many files randomly strewn through many subfolders.

If your work, like mine, involves massive amounts of information (my book will be 1,500+ pages and already has 500 images, with more to come), "mostly reliable" storage isn't good enough. The only way to achieve total reliability is to have multiple, frequent, and well-organized generational backups.

Don't assume you can or should install Dropbox on your work computer if you, like me, work in an organization whose systems don't play well with Dropbox. Some encryption systems seem to be incompatible with Dropbox, and can confuse and corrupt your files. Your law firm might install software without warning you, corrupting your Dropbox files overnight.

How will I avoid losing information the next time I update the operating system in my iPad or elsewhere? First, I'll back it up. Of course, I tried to do that by emailing my conference notes to myself. But I should have backed up those notes first before I upgraded the operating system by backing up as soon as I plugged my iPad into my computer. I just didn't think about it. If you use iCloud for iPad backups, you can easily backup to iTunes as well, which I recommend. If you ever need to restore an iPad, it's much faster locally via a cable than over the Internet.

Speaking of which, information stored in only one place is vulnerable. Eliminate all such vulnerabilities as soon as you can, and definitely before you do anything that could possibly affect your information. Email your information to yourself. If that doesn't work, photograph it. Be creative. Do anything you can think of to back it up! Do you remember the sad story about the grad student who put the only copy of her thesis in the trunk of her car, drove across the country, and had her car stolen? Whenever you maintain any information in only one place, you are just like that grad student. Don't let the cloud eat your homework.

Although my experience with the iPad was incredibly difficult, I still use it — differently now. It's a serious instrument for anyone who does a lot of writing, whether a radiologist writing a new text or a lawyer writing contracts or briefs. I switched to the Evernote app, which updates itself to the cloud automatically and almost continuously. A stand-alone keyboard works best for serious writing (I use the well-regarded [Logitech Ultrathin](#)). And I still use GoodReader to read PDF documents — it has an excellent filing system and enables me to annotate whenever, wherever, and however I want. It also synchronizes and backs up without my doing anything.

The technology we use is powerful, but vulnerable. Things happen. Unexpected events will occur, things you never could have thought of. My own computer problems prove that. Set up your computer life so these unexpected left field events won't totally screw you up. Be more careful, and worry more than may seem necessary. May you have sweet technology dreams, not nightmares.

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article. The primary author and her husband, Anthony Stein Wexler, also a professor at UCD, were the first to introduce Joshua to: (a) the Internet, (b) web browsers, (c) Google, and (d) Dropbox.

How to Avoid Your Own Fiscal Cliff

It's been four years since the start of the great recession (or "lesser depression") and business owners are acknowledging that recovery is going to be a long, slow process. With no springboard in sight, some economists are calling for another dip. Regardless, good business leaders have wisely right-sized and restructured their operations and, by so doing, improved results. Yet uncertainty and apprehension abound. What can you do to jump-start things in your firm in view of a still uncertain economic environment? Plenty ...

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