

# Computer Corner

## Increase Efficiency, But Always Work With a Safety Net

“Seems like there oughta be a better way”. If this thought comes up frequently while performing daily tasks on a computer, rather than grumbling and suffering through a tedious chore over and over again for fear of trying something new, it’s probably time to place a call to tech support. When it seems like there should be a better means to an end – investigate; there probably is! One of two things will happen: 1) either it will turn out there is a better way and life will suddenly get a little easier or, 2) if there isn’t a better way, then the software company will have heard from yet another person that some improvement may be called for and life may still get a little easier in the near future thanks to a simple inquiry.

### Know the most efficient means for getting the job done

Often computer users take advantage of only a fraction of what a software program is capable of, wasting hours of time to accomplish tasks that could be performed with the push of a button or two. The recent hard winter offers up a perfect example in the form of estimating bills. Clerks who are accustomed to typing in hundreds of readings from a meter reading worksheet often just assume their only means of producing bills when there are no meter readings is to study the historical usage of each customer and type in a reading that advances the usage by their “guess” for each customer.

Besides software having an automatic means for producing estimated bills, it is likely that it may also have a variety of logical choices on which to base those estimated bills like last usage, annual average or no

usage (causing only a minimum bill). Hopefully, the software will also provide a chance to troubleshoot in advance those customers who might get hit with unusually high charges using the selected criteria. For example, if estimated readings are to be based on last months usage, persons that had an outrageous usage last time, due say to a leak, should be singled out and their bills based on another criteria that doesn’t risk a vast over read. Again, there may be a mechanism built into the software for identifying these people without having to look at each and every customer. All this can usually be accomplished in a mere fraction of the time loading in individual readings takes.



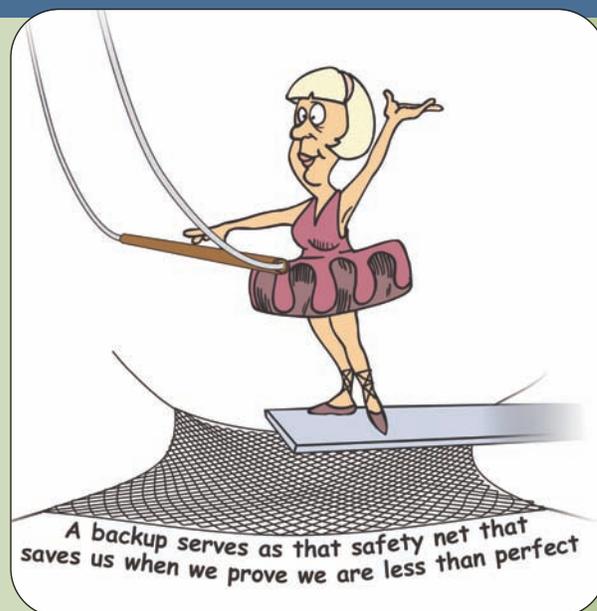
This is only one example of things that are not always handled with the most efficient or accurate method because the user doesn't realize there are better options, yet that little voice in their heads is probably whispering, "Seems like there oughta be a better way."

### Don't avoid improving procedures out of fear of making a mistake

Sometimes computer users are required to draw information out of a program in order to fill out government forms. Sometimes the board or council may want particular data to study usage, charges, payments, late customers, etc., over a specified period time to help them in their decision-making. Before spending only mildly productive hours scrutinizing customers one at a time, check to see if there is a better, faster, and more accurate way to draw out the needed data. For both those common daily activities and for those once in a while special situations, learn what reports and choices are available, what power is offered to the user for customizing reports and what procedures should be followed for the most efficient and informative means of applying the software.

If there were a book entitled "Confessions of a Utility Billing Tech Support Provider", undoubtedly it would identify phrases sometimes heard after a data entry disaster that would go something like, "It didn't look right so I thought MAYBE hitting the month end reset button AGAIN would fix it." Generally any action involving the word MAYBE is not a good idea. When in doubt, don't do it. Stop and find out what is the right choice.

If help is not available either in print or from a knowledgeable tech support person (not the computer expert neighbor that has no knowledge of the utility software), or, when even with help uncertainty still prevails, play it safe; back up first. Garner the needed information from the available sources and before implementing a new technique; create a backup so any misstep can be rectified immediately.



### Backup, backup, backup

Backing up data should be a regular component of any billing department task. Some folks back up daily, some weekly, some only monthly. The answer to the question "how often should I do a backup?" is found by

asking the question "Do I want to do all the work I have done since my last back up over again?" If the answer is no, it's time to do a back up. Many people think that the sole reason for backing up is fear of the computer crashing, i.e. the hard drive going bad. Much more frequently data needs to be restored thanks to human error, so a backup serves as that safety net that saves us when we prove we are less than perfect.

There are a number of good options for backing up data. Regardless what other backup

methods are used throughout the month a permanent archive in the form of a non-multi-session compact disk (CDR) should be made at least once a month at the end of each billing cycle. This monthly disk can be marked with the date and stored off site or in a disaster proof vault. For an investment of around a dollar or so, twelve CDR's per year can provide a clear unchangeable record of each month's activity.

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## Mirror backups

While it is fine to have a second hard drive that is set up as a mirrored drive, also known as RAID 1 (redundant array of inexpensive drives) meaning that the moment something happens on the main hard drive it is duplicated on the other, such a setup should not be the only backup method employed. Mirroring effectively protects from data loss only in the case of the main hard drive crashing. If we have one of those “dumb human moments” and do something regrettable, that regrettable action is simultaneously written to BOTH hard drives! What’s more, if the building burns down, or probably more likely, burglars make off with the computer, all the data, original – and mirrored, is gone.

The old fashion tape backup has given way to far superior forms of protecting data like external eSATA hard drives (the fast choice), external USB hard drives or, for smaller chunks of data, USB thumb drives (also known as flash drives). These methods can be applied hourly, daily, weekly or “as needed”, i.e. those moments when the computer user says, “I’ll try that button, MAYBE that will fix it”. A backup performed before an uncertain choice is made provides that aforementioned “safety net” and can save a great deal of heartache.

## Quickie backups

Another form of “safety net” back up is creating a folder on the main hard drive where a duplicate of the data can be copied and pasted before making a change that might cause some harm. Having a place to duplicate the data on

the same hard drive WILL NOT protect the information in the case of hard drive crash, burglary or act of God – but it can protect from acts of humans. If the hard drive goes bad, the data is gone, but if this is to be an extra backup, one to augment the usual schedule simply because the user wants to try a choice they are unfamiliar with or unsure of, then it is a quick and easy way of providing that temporary safety net. Then, if disaster strikes resulting in a mournful call to tech support and the voice at the other end of the phone says, “When was your last back up?” The cheerful answer will be, “Five minutes ago.”

Most software puts up warnings that help people decide if they are making good choices or not. Sometimes thought, a misunderstood warning may keep someone from doing something or looking at some part of the software that could be helpful. If a user wants to thoroughly explore the product, including advancing past pop up warnings to better understand a particular function, a solution might be to ask the software provider if it is acceptable to install a practice version of the program. The issue is software licensing. This way the inquisitive computer operator can experiment worry free. Sometimes that is a great way to get to know a product inside out. A cautionary note: It is a good idea to clearly label the experimental version as a practice edition with its own unique icon. If possible, it is also a good idea to create some obvious difference once the program is open to avoid confusion.

In conclusion, there are a number of ways to experiment and seek out the best means to accomplish the tasks at hand while protecting data. Maintaining current backups is at the top of the list. With that safety net in place, the computer operator is free to try new and helpful techniques and features without fear. When concerned that something may cause an undesired result, STOP and perform one of the methods for backing up data. This includes those moments when that little voice inside says, “Are you sure you want to do that?”

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