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Tapes Still Best for Backups

Tape drives are still one of the best backup solutions for mid-sized to enterprise level businesses. One of the reasons for their popularity is the relatively low cost and high storage capacity of the media. However, because of the construction of magnetic tape, every time it gets used its reliability is diminished slightly because a small amount of magnetic material is worn away during the reading and writing process. Although this is ever so slight with each use, you must be cautioned that a tape cassette must be retired within a reasonable time before usage and wear renders it totally unreliable.

Problems as Tapes Age

You may be provided some warning that a tape is reaching the end of its life expectancy when it begins to report read and write errors. In some cases these errors will be corrected by your backup software, but if a tape continues to report errors on a regular basis it should be replaced. Reusing tapes that are reporting errors is risky as your archived data may not be retrievable when you need it. Better to have a tape rotation schedule and scheduled retirement plan in place to reduce wear on individual tapes and to ultimately quit using them before errors start to occur.

Replace Tapes Regularly

If you employ a backup scheme that uses a different tape for each day of the week, you should retire these tapes after a year of service. However, if you also use separate month-end backup tapes, systematically switch those to 'daily duty' (assuming they are not showing any signs of errors) at the same time and use them for another year to reduce the cost of having to replace all of your weekly tapes at one time. If you do this at the same time every year, for instance as one of your fiscal year-end procedures, you'll be more apt to do it consistently.

Also, tapes that have been dropped or damaged in any way should always be inspected carefully before being used again. Even a small dent in the case could potentially cause the tape to jam when loaded into the drive.

Maintain Your Tape Drive

Finally, remember that the tape unit itself needs to be cleaned regularly. The material being worn from the tape during each use gets built up on the tape head and will start to affect the unit's reliability if not removed. Head cleaning tapes make this job easy. Cleaning schedules vary from unit to unit so check the unit's reference manual, or with the manufacturer or your vendor, to find out exactly how often to clean your tape drive.

It may seem like an unnecessary expense to replace tapes before they start to fail but in the overall scheme of your technology management it's relatively cheap insurance for the protection of your valuable data.

If you would like information to help you establish a rotation schedule for your backup tape library, or any additional information regarding data backup, please contact us.