

# Crash Recovery

*Specialized service companies can rescue files from hard disk failures. But at what cost?* **By Doug van Kirk and Patricia Cullen**

Nothing can sink your spirit quite like the message "Hard Disk Failure" beaming at you from your screen. Realizing that your hard disk has crashed, destroying weeks—perhaps months—of work, you begin making a mental inventory of the departed data. Suddenly you are seized with panic: you're missing a report that could mean your job, a spreadsheet that took months to compile, or your all-important client list.

Of course, all may not be lost. If you backed up your hard disk recently, you should be able to quickly reconstruct the lion's share of the lost information. But all too few of us regularly back up our hard drives. If you don't have a backup, data recovery software such as The Norton Utilities Advanced Edition, Mace Gold, and Disk Technician Advanced might be able to rescue your data (see "Disk Crash Rescues," *Help, PC/Computing*, July).

And when all else fails, data recovery services can retrieve the information on your disk and send it back to you. These services go far beyond anything you can do yourself to retrieve lost files.

Many small hardware centers offer data recovery services, but a few larger companies, such as Mace Data Recovery, Ontrack Data Recovery, and Computer Peripheral Repair, have built national reputations for their work. Some of the top outfits even boast data recovery from virtually any brand or size of hard disk.

## Crashed-Disk Cavalry

So what's the catch? Nothing, except the price. Charges vary depending on the amount of work it takes to restore your files and the type of hard disk you have. Expect to pay between \$300 and \$600 to get your data back. Repairs to

the disk drive cost extra, and disks that fail because of mechanical or electrical problems may require a small amount of repair before data can be recovered. Most services charge for these repairs on a per-hour basis.

The steep prices tend to fetch terrific service. Data retrieval companies offer fast turnaround, returning your disk and data (complete with the original filenames and directory structure) within a week, often less. All guarantee the confidentiality of your data.

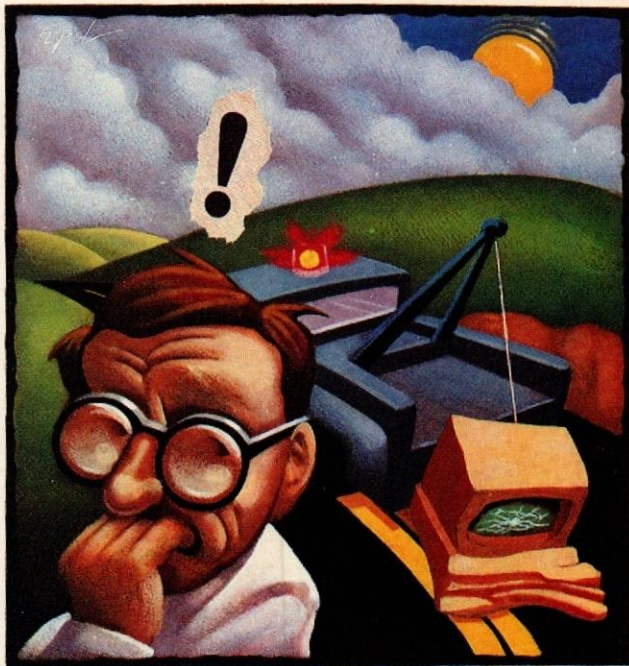
When you call, be prepared to answer several detailed questions. You'll need to know the name and model number of both your hard disk and hard-drive controller, as well as the model of your computer. If possible, try to recall exactly which programs you were running immediately before the hard disk crashed, and also note if you used any recovery utilities afterward.

If the company you call can service your disk, they'll have you pack up the drive and send it in. Once the experts receive your disk, they'll test it and call or fax you a prognosis.

Data recovery services use custom-built disk controllers, special software, clean rooms (a dust- and bacteria-free environment) where disks can safely be assembled and disassembled, and a lot of know-how to analyze and repair your disk and recover your data. Some problems, such as a

corrupted file allocation table (FAT), can be fixed with software alone. More complicated failures that involve electrical or mechanical components require disassembling and repairing the disk before attempting to recover data.

Technicians may have to replace bearings, heads, circuit boards, and motors to get a drive operating. Some services will completely repair or rebuild a hard disk; all will make frank recommendations about whether to trash or repair your storage device.



## Disk Wizards

No one is immune to disk crashes, not even *PC/Computing*. Recently, two staffers lost their hard disks. Two of the better-known data recovery services charged as much to recover the data as it cost to replace the drives, but the



## CONSUMER WATCH

staffers got their files back within days.

We sent one of the failed drives to Paul Mace Software, a company best known for Mace Utilities. For \$200, the Ashland, Oregon-based company will evaluate a crashed hard disk and issue an estimate both for recovering the data and for repairing the disk. Although Mace never told us exactly what plagued our disk drive, the firm was able to recover 100 percent of the data. We got it back three days later at a total cost of \$399.

Mace sent a package of floppy disks

### **Hard disks are more reliable than ever, but disasters still occur—too often.**

containing all the files from our hard disk, as well as a copy of Mace Restore and a Readme file that explains how to return data to the hard disk. Mace returned the hard disk only after we had received the floppies and were certain they contained the correct data.

A complete data recovery job from Mace averages about \$500 and takes five to seven days, according to the company. If the disk requires repairs, a separate department at Mace will perform them at extra cost. Mace plans to open authorized data recovery centers in several major cities next year.

Our second crashed disk went to Ontrack Data Recovery. Ontrack takes a more formal approach to data recovery. Before any work begins, the Eden Prairie, Minnesota, company requires \$200 (half of which is refunded to you if Ontrack can't solve your disk problem) and a signed seven-page contract. According to Susan Salisbury, an Ontrack sales and service representative, the firm's insurance company mandated the liability-limiting contract two years ago, when Ontrack decided to go into the data recovery business.

Twenty-four hours after we sent the disk to Ontrack, the company faxed back an "engineer's report" that informed us that our disk had suffered an "electrical problem." The cost to retrieve the data was an additional \$300, for a total of \$500. A day later, we received a box that held the disk drive, a dozen DOS-readable diskettes containing our lost data, and a printout of the hard-disk directory tree.

Salisbury claims that the firm can work with virtually any disk drive that operates under DOS. That includes

## CONSUMER WATCH

SCSI drives, Bernoulli Boxes, hard cards, and just about any other type of mass storage device. Typically, the company can recover 98 to 100 percent of the data on the drive. Most disk repairs require three to five days for service. Ontrack won't repair your disk drive, however.

### **An Ounce of Prevention**

No drive manufacturer provides data recovery services, but some former employees of drive makers do. In Hypoluxo, Florida, two former service managers from Seagate and Rodime now run Computer Peripheral Repair, a recovery service that specializes in SCSI drives. According to vice president Tony Alvarez, his firm can recover data from 82 percent of the drives it examines. A typical recovery effort takes Computer Peripheral Repair four hours at \$75 per hour. The flat fee for additional disk repair varies by model.

Although he's a booster of data recovery, Alvarez notes that many problems result not from mechanical failure but from user error. He is especially critical of software recovery utilities such as those from Norton and Mace because "they let users tamper with the data." He estimates that users meddling with disks account for 50 to 60 percent of his business, a figure not disputed by other recovery services.

Although hard disks are more reliable than ever, disasters still occur—with alarming frequency in some models. Data recovery notwithstanding, the best way by far to avoid a crushing loss is to back up your data. The time and hassle it takes to back up your drive will seem like a bargain while you're waiting for your damaged disk—and the hefty recovery and repair bill—to return from the shop. ■

---

*Doug van Kirk is an associate editor and Patricia Cullen is PC resources manager of PC/Computing.*

#### **Mace Data Recovery**

400 Williamson Way  
Ashland, Oreg. 97520  
503-488-5011

#### **Ontrack Data Recovery, Inc.**

6321 Bury Dr.  
Eden Prairie, Minn. 55346  
800-872-2599  
612-937-1107

#### **Computer Peripheral Repair**

7570 U.S. Hwy. 1 South, Suite 8  
Hypoluxo, Fla. 33462  
407-586-0011