

Save your files online

Fast connections make the Internet the biggest and cheapest place to save your files

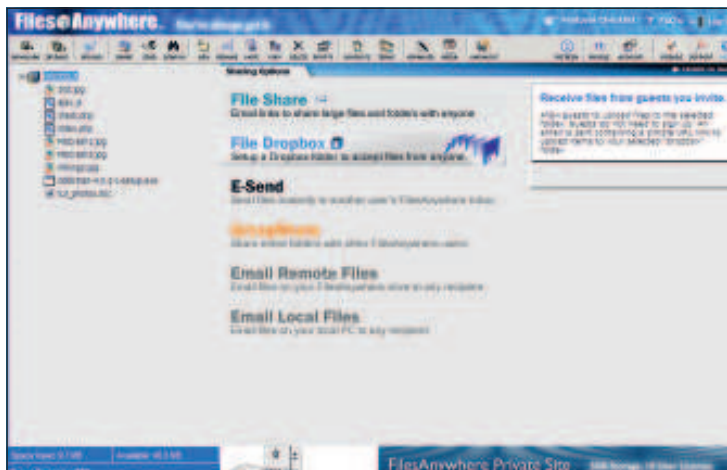


► USB drives aren't always reliable.

There's nothing quite so likely to induce cheers from your colleagues as you pulling out a complete, pristine system backup tape after a server crashed and lost a month's work. But equally, there's nothing quite so likely to get you sacked as having a server crash, losing a month's work, then realising you forgot to do the last system backup. You see, the backup process is great when you remember to do it, but it tends to be such a dull routine to carry out that many people forget every so often or, worse, don't bother to do it at all. Even when you do get around to backing up, it's quite common to find that you simply don't have the capacity to get a good copy of your system – even DVDs are limited to 9GB or so.

Server space

Now that broadband is standard in most homes, a new option has emerged: rent some space on a gigantic server somewhere, then transfer your files over the Internet. These servers usually have multi-terabyte capacity (or larger), super-high speed connections and secure facilities that make them safe bets for storing your precious data. What's more, there really is no limit to the amount of data that you can send to them – as long as you don't mind paying – and you can have your



▲ FilesAnywhere is all neatly organised into a smart and compact GUI – but still manages to pack in a range of features. The pop-up help (on the right) is invaluable.

computer run automatic backups as often as you want.

Unsurprisingly, not all online storage vendors are made equal, with the principal differences revolving around price, capacity and transfer bandwidth. Some services offer unlimited capacity (store as much as you like) and make their money by charging you for how much you upload; others offer unlimited transfer bandwidth (upload and download as much as you like) and make their money by charging you for how much you store.

For most people, a few gigabytes of space is more than enough because

there's no real need to back up your Windows directory or your Program Files directory, because if either of these two are actually destroyed you'll have a hard time even connecting to online storage, never mind restoring the files. Instead, you should be looking at the size of your Desktop and My Documents directories, because these are probably where you store most of your important files.

Once you're past the basic stuff like bandwidth and storage space, the competition starts to hot up a bit as the contenders try to differentiate themselves from the pack. Most offer a basic web-based interface that lets

FilesAnywhere

Price \$8.95 (£5) per month for 2GB storage space and backup
Info www.filesanywhere.com



In terms of raw functionality, this online backup service leads the pack by a mile: there are so many features here that it feels more like an online operating system rather than a simple web GUI.

Yes, you can email files to your friends and create drop boxes, as with most of the other services on offer here, but this gives you WebDAV, FTP and Windows drives as alternative file access methods.

You can rename your files on the server, print from the server, generate slide shows and even set up a primitive file versioning system to keep track of changes.

Despite all of the features that are crammed into the utility, the FilesAnywhere developers have taken the time to craft a smart user interface that is well organised and helpful at every stage. Through the pop-up help tool to comprehensive documentation, you can find your way around this system in minutes. ■



Streamload

Price \$10 per month for 25GB bandwidth and unlimited space
Info www.streamload.com



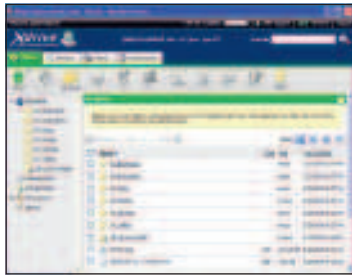
Streamload has an unusual business model: you're not charged for uploading your files or how much space you use on its servers. Instead, you're charged for how much data you download from your server space, which offers great value for money when used as a backup service.

After all, you only need to retrieve files when you've had a disaster. For just \$10 per month you get 25GB of download bandwidth,

which is a stupendously large amount. But if you're a business with some larger requirements, Streamload offers a range of higher-end options up to a mind-boggling 15TB per month. We can't even imagine 15,000GB of data, but perhaps if you have a very (very) large MP3 collection.

Multimedia is one area where Streamload really excels, because it lets you add your own meta information to files – such as album or artist – that can later be used for searching or sorting. ■





▲ **Xdrive is slick, but be sure to disable your pop-up blocker before using it.**

you upload and download files through your web browser, and also send files to your friends. Some extend this so you can create public spaces – known as ‘drop boxes’ – where others can upload files for you to view later. Just how jazzy the online interface is varies greatly: some are highly optimised for storing pictures and music and let you assign metadata for easy searching and sorting; and some even let you convert files from one type to another live on the server.

Working through a web browser is nice enough for emails, but gets to be a bit of a pain when dealing with lots of files, so the best online backup offerings allow you to treat your server space as either a mounted Windows file system, FTP server or a WebDAV folder (known as ‘web folders in IE’) so you can just drag and drop your documents using Explorer. WebDAV is particularly helpful, because it allows your drive space to be treated as a folder on Windows, Linux and OS X. This is great for those people who really

aren’t interested that they are transferring files over the web.

The most advanced systems also come with Windows-based tools to enable local file manipulation, including uploads and downloads without your web browser and even automated backup of files that can be scheduled overnight. But these are quite rare; the emphasis inevitably falls on the web-based GUI.

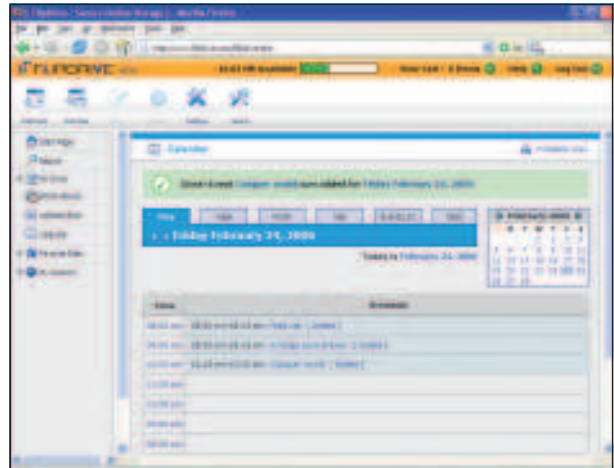
Speed and security

Two features that are near the top of the list for users often don’t get mentioned on the web pages of online storage companies. These are how fast the service performs, and how secure it is. Speed does, of course, vary greatly depending on your location and connection speed, but if you have a fast connection then it’s quite possible that the server company is the bottleneck. You should ask: how many customers do they have; how do they ensure quality of service; do they use compression to

“Rent space on a gigantic server and transfer your files over the Internet”

achieve maximum speed; and do they have some servers around the world to help boost speeds?

As for security, consider this – in your My Documents folder you might keep accounts information, passwords, private letters, databases, spreadsheets, pictures and other sensitive documents. The web is, for the large part, sent in ‘clear text’, so anyone watching on the line can see

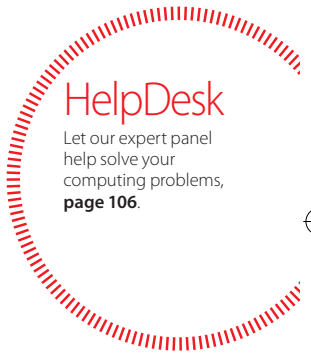


▲ **If you need more out of your online storage, FlipDrive offers a calendar, an address book and even a bookmark cache.**

all the web pages fly by unencrypted. If you’re sending and receiving your sensitive documents, then these are also sent in the clear, which is an open invitation to hackers to get into some serious identity theft. Some services offer encryption of the data transfer stream, which, admittedly, is never going to be strong enough to lock out the FBI if they ever take an interest in you, but will at least keep bedroom warriors away.

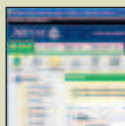
To save you time trawling through the web to find the best deals, we’ve picked out a selection of online storage solutions (below) that suit different budgets and different types of user. Whether you’re a company looking for hundreds of gigabytes of secure storage space, or an avid photographer who needs a way to share your art with the world, online storage has a solution for you – and your budget. ■

Paul Hudson



Xdrive

Price \$9.95 for 10GB storage
Info www.xdrive.com



The race to make applications look and feel more like Windows XP has now moved to the web: Xdrive’s web-based interface proudly sports XP colours, XP-alike icons, and XP-esque folder naming conventions, such as My Documents. Granted, we’re a bit bored with the XP look, but at least it gives a low learning curve to new users who don’t want to read help files just to get started. It’s a shame, then, that the site relies heavily on pop-up windows

that inevitably get blocked by any modern web browser, so there’s a fair amount of head scratching involved when you click a link and nothing happens.

The easy interface extends to the way the system works – we liked the “simple, but works straight away” file sharing system that’s split into “Folders shared with me” and “Folders I’m sharing”. Even without seeing the interface you can already figure out how that works, which gives this system top marks for usability. ■

PCPlus Verdict



FlipDrive

Price \$9.95 for 5GB storage
Info www.flipdrive.com



This was one of the fastest backup systems on test, but rather than using this speed to try to push the envelope for file storage, FlipDrive has chosen to focus on adding peripheral features that would be more at home in a webmail account. For example, you can save your calendar and address book information on FlipDrive, as well as your favourite web bookmarks. We’re not quite convinced that we would actually want to do this,

because Gmail is a) free and b) better, but if you’re without Gmail then these may well be useful.

Where FlipDrive succeeds is in handling pictures. Once you’ve uploaded your shots, it only takes a few clicks to organise them into albums that anyone can view. As part of FlipDrive’s business model, people viewing your albums can order prints to be delivered straight to their door. Unless you like your hard work earning someone else money, we’re not sure this is a smart move! ■

PCPlus Verdict

