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Pogue's Posts

The Latest in Technology From David Pogue



October 20, 2011, 12:25 pm

Dropbox Will Simplify Your Life

pogue.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/20/dropbox-will-simplify-your-life/?scp=2...

1/18

Every time I'm tempted to write about some tech product that's been around awhile, I'm torn. On one hand, I'll be blasted by the technogeeks for being late to the party. On the other hand, it doesn't seem right to keep something great hidden under a barrel from the rest of the world.

Newsletter

From the Desk of David Pogue

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So here goes: I love Dropbox.

I just finished writing a 900-page book. Not just writing — “packaging,” which means I'm also responsible for doing, or hiring people to do, the editing, the technical review, the page layout, the index and so on. Over the last 12 years, I've produced about 35 books this way.

Logistically, it's a screaming nightmare. Each chapter has to worm its way through a series of stages. For example, on this book, each chapter I wrote went first to Julie, the copy editor; then Kirill, the technical editor; back to me, to incorporate their edits; then to Phil, the designer; back to Julie, who distributed them to a team of proofreaders; back to me for a final check; then back to Phil for conversion to high-resolution PDF files for turning in to the printing plant.

If you can believe it, for 12 years, we've passed these files around by e-mail — except for the files that were too big for e-mail. Those, we had to turn into .zip files, post them to an FTP server, notify the recipient by e-mail; the recipient had to download them, unzip them, and throw away the .zip file. It was a technical, multi-step hassle.

Inevitably, we'd wind up with occasional visits to Version Hell, where we'd lose track of who had the “hot potato.” We'd wind up with two people editing the same chapter in different ways.

On this book, everything was different. We used Dropbox.

It's a free service that puts a magic folder on your computer desktop. Anything you put into it magically appears in an identical folder on all your other computers.

That simple concept offers a wealth of possibilities. You can work on a project at the office, then go home and pick right up from where you left off. Those same files are in the same Dropbox folder — without ever having to send them, carry them or transfer them.

You can also consider Dropbox a simple, automatic backup system. After all, anything that sits on multiple computers simultaneously is, by definition, backed up. (You get 2 gigabytes of storage at no charge. Each time you refer a friend to Dropbox, you get upgraded by .25 gigabytes, up to 8 gigabytes. Or you can pay a monthly fee for much greater storage.)

There are even iPhone and Android apps, so that you can open common kinds of files (like photos, videos, Office and PDF documents) right on the phone, and forward them to other people. Yes, even though the files themselves are at home on your computer.

Over the years, I've heard so many rave reviews of Dropbox that I decided to see if it could relieve my

bookflow headache. Turns out you can grant other people access to certain folders in your Dropbox folder.

So I set up a folder called “First Drafts.” When I finished a chapter on my Mac laptop, I dropped the Word file in there. On Julie’s Windows machine in Montana, a tiny notification window appeared that said, “A new file has arrived in ‘First Drafts’”—and there it was, ready for her to open and edit. No file transfer, no e-mail, no FTP, no stuffing or zipping, no effort whatsoever on her part or mine. It was a miracle.

After editing, she’d add her initials to the file’s name; its name changed in my First Drafts folder, too, so I knew she was finished with it. Again, nobody had to send or transfer anything; it’s exactly as though the file was in two places at once.

The illustrations for these books are too big for e-mail and a royal pain to zip up and send by FTP. But we didn’t care. I dragged each chapter full of pictures into the “Graphics” folder, and they appeared by magic on Phil’s desktop in Stamford, Conn., and Kirill’s desktop in Moscow.

Even though my Dropbox folder appeared to be physically in multiple places simultaneously, my gut told me that behind the scenes, Dropbox must work by rapidly uploading and downloading files and carefully synchronizing the changes. Once, when I was about to leave my home Wi-Fi network, I wished I knew if it had finished syncing my recently added files; I didn’t want to run for the plane without ensuring that my collaborators had the files. So I clicked the little Dropbox icon on my menu bar. And there it was, right where I hoped to see it: “All files synced.” Bingo!

There are other, rival services. SugarSync, for example, is like Dropbox Plus — it offers many more features, at the cost of complexity. (Typical example: In SugarSync, you can set up multiple synchronized folders. In Dropbox, only one master folder is synced, although you can create as many folders inside it as you like.)

But me, I’m another Dropbox convert. Julie, Kirill and Phil were all equally astonished at how easily and effortlessly the system worked. Nobody lost a file, nobody fell into Version Hell, and everybody was spared the psychological wincing of realizing, “Ugh — now I have to figure out how to get this to the next person.”

I realize that not everybody works on such elaborate file-shuttling projects. But try Dropbox for its ability to keep your important files everywhere at once. Or try it as an automatic, silent, encrypted backup of your essentials. Or try it so that you can get at your computer’s files from your phone.

The main thing, though, is to try it. There are so few free, delightful, polished gems like this.

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1.

[Greg](#)

Seattle

October 20th, 2011

10:30 am

I've been using dropbox for a couple of years now, and it is fantastic, like David says. Last year I was working on a project that involved six people collaborating on a photo presentation. Everyone could add files whenever they wanted to, and see what everyone else had added. Without dropbox, this would have taken hundreds of emails and been a total mess. With dropbox, it worked flawlessly.

The ability to have the most recent version of my documents on my iPhone and iPad is wonderful too. And one thing that David doesn't mention is versioning- Dropbox keeps tracks of all versions of your files, so you can see who has made what changes. This function is only available from the web interface, so I don't know if many

people know about it, but it is another great feature.

Recommend Recommended by 35 Readers

2.

alansky

Marin County, CA

October 20th, 2011

10:50 am

I also love Dropbox, but a couple of caveats for those unfamiliar with the service:

In order for files placed in your Dropbox folder to magically appear in someone else's Dropbox folder, they must obviously sign up for the service themselves. Dropbox users can also send download links to people who do not have their own Dropbox account. Personally, this is the feature of Apple's iDisk that I use most. However, if you send a link to a file that can be displayed in a web browser, the file isn't automatically downloaded on the recipient's end; it is simply displayed in a browser window. To make sure that the file is downloaded on the recipient's end when they click the download link, the sender must zip the file. Folders containing multiple files must also be zipped before sending download links to recipients.

Despite the bad press that Apple's iDisk sometimes received, I found it indispensable for sending large files.

Dropbox isn't really a full replacement, but it certainly makes life a lot easier.

Recommend Recommended by 14 Readers

3.

tonyl

NY

October 20th, 2011

1:05 pm

Works great with macs. As I had to find out. Since the recent upgrade to OSX version 10.7.2 - Apple has deprecated back-to-my-mac (in favor of the cloud) so that time capsules that were formerly accessible over the internet are now no longer available.

Dropbox is providing at least an interim solution - and interim can become permanent.

Recommend Recommended by 9 Readers

4.

Vicky

Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

October 20th, 2011

1:05 pm

For those that are prepared to bite the bullet and get the paid version, there's also one extra killer feature (for an extra dollar a month): unlimited versioning. One person in a shared group had their laptop stolen and the data wiped, including all those shared files. No problem: I just went onto the website, clicked Version History, and restored those files. Everyone else got them back. Accidentally change a file? Same thing. Granted, you can do this with Time Machine, but the fact this works across OSes and has an online backup makes it that much more useful.

Recommend Recommended by 23 Readers

5.

James Klosty

Millbrook, NY

October 20th, 2011

1:10 pm

OK, I'm something of a Luddite who had been working for several years on a photograph book. These are my own photographs of an important historical figure, now dead. As I am creating them (scanning old B&white negatives, then working on each image in Photoshop,) I store them on an external hard drive and, to be safe, on a second external hard drive. I have been seriously advised that this is not really safe since both hard drives are under the same roof and a disaster of some sort could destroy both of them and that I really should be placing them in "the cloud" for ultimate safety. This concept is rather difficult for me, but my question is simple. Is Dropbox an example of storing them in the cloud?

Recommend Recommended by 8 Readers

6.

Noel

New York

October 20th, 2011

1:10 pm

Total agreement. Makes mobile life very easy. Almost foolproof. The only caveat is this: when you shut down at the end of the day wait until the folder is fully synchronized before powering down; when you start up in the morning make sure the folder is fully synchronized before opening any files. Depending on your folder size this may take a minute or two.

Recommend Recommended by 7 Readers

7.

Steven P.

NEW YORK CITY

October 20th, 2011

1:15 pm

I have been using Dropbox for about three months, mostly for sending video and photos from my phone to my laptop for editing and subsequent sharing. Additionally it is a great way to insure that articles I come across or are sent to me during my workday, end up on my iPad for later reading. It works so simply and beautifully you find that sharing files any other way to be so 20th Century.

Recommend Recommended by 3 Readers

8.

rwolf

nyc

October 20th, 2011

1:20 pm

I find dropbox invaluable even when not collaborating with others on a document. So far, the free version is sufficient for my needs, but I'd be more likely to pay for an expanded Dropbox than most other things. It is invaluable for tracking essential documents among multiple computers and ipads/smart phones ---not least being "personal" docs like itineraries, travel notes, file lists and other "household/admin" files. I even put my most recent Quicken "backup file" into it. I'm pc based not Apple but dropbox is my favorite app by a mile.

Recommend Recommended by 5 Readers

9.

James Messick

Kernersville, NC

October 20th, 2011

1:30 pm

Dropbox is wonderful, but not perfect. An entire folder full of folders became empty without intervention on my part. I went back and forth with customer service but ultimately it was a "he-said she-said" scenario and my files are still permanently lost.

Recommend Recommended by 13 Readers

10.

MonkeyBusiness

Phoenix, AZ

October 20th, 2011

1:30 pm

I love Dropbox. I've been using the paid version for about a year and love having my desktop, laptop, iPad, phone, and the cloud versions synchronized in real time. I keep almost all of my personal and business files in Dropbox (even the 100GB paid version isn't large enough for my music collection - everything else fits very neatly). I no longer need my Mozy account for backing up, so that reduces the net cost of the paid version of Dropbox.

I use Dropbox to collaborate with members of my team. One missing feature is the ability to make certain files read-only. We have a few templates that people shouldn't be changing or deleting, but it happens anyway. At least it's easy to restore altered or deleted files out of the Version History.

I hope David Coursey is wrong in his Forbes article "How Dropbox Will Die."

Recommend Recommended by 5 Readers

11.

Kathy

Hancock, MI

October 20th, 2011

1:35 pm

As a scientist, most of our research teams use dropbox for proposal development, writing, sharing, compiling docs. Yesterday our two teams of over 60 people across four countries wrapped up 300 plus pages of over \$10 million worth of proposals. We used dropbox for everything and it largely worked without a hitch. Us folks at research universities use it all the time. Great product- up there with the roku box and the many i-devices and the pogoplug.

Recommend Recommended by 9 Readers

12.

jgilbert

Berkeley

October 20th, 2011

1:35 pm

Yup. Anyone who works collaboratively on large files needs this service. I used my .me account but this is going away (apple calls it 'migrating' I think).

One additional great feature that works on my jailbroken/unlocked iPhone 4G that PKGBBackup syncs to DropBox. Thus, updating or restoring the iOS is fast and easy saves many hours of reconfiguring. When my 3GS bricked itself magically and unpredictably while I was listening to a podcast last month, I needed to transfer to

the newer 4G. No problem! The installation went fine and with the backup stored on DropBox, I got all my configuration settings back and was on my way in no time.

Recommend Recommended by 2 Readers

13.

Jackson

Boston

October 20th, 2011

1:45 pm

If I have a file folder on my Mac with a bunch of files, and I edit the content of one of those files and then upload the entire folder to Dropbox, does Dropbox only replace or update the file I've changed?

Recommend Recommended by 2 Readers

14.

Shortstack

New jersey

October 20th, 2011

1:45 pm

I've been using Dropbox between work and home computers for years and love it. One glitch to keep in mind when working with multiple computers is to always save and close out of the document before leaving, otherwise the latest version won't be available from the second computer. Simply saving won't make it accessible, you must close out of it.

Recommend Recommended by 12 Readers

15.

Pax

Canada

October 20th, 2011

1:55 pm

Have to agree but must also mention SugarSync which does exactly the same but with more storage and the ability to dedicate a folder, subfolder or file within your file system. I like that because it means I don't have to remember to save certain files to certain folder. In David's case the very point would be to have a dedicated folder but often its a (minor) inconvenience. SugarSync also gives you 5GB free storage and you can email files if need be.

Both services offer a usable and aesthetically acceptable photo gallery functionality, by the way. Not as slick as mobileMe gallery, perhaps, but very simple.

Recommend Recommended by 9 Readers

16.

JoyL8

Pasadena, CA

October 20th, 2011

2:00 pm

I have been using dropbox for at least 2 years to store my dissertation and my articles. I have always felt the documents are very safe, although I do not feel that the documents i am storing are top secret. Today I sent a file (not my dissertation) to members of my work team for the first time and within 10 minutes the leader of the work team asked me to remove the document because of concerns about security. Can someone please address the security of the files stored in dropbox? Are the files vulnerable to hacking? Thank you in advance.

Recommend Recommended by 9 Readers

17.

robotman

Bloomington, IN

October 20th, 2011

2:00 pm

One thing to be careful about is security. Dropbox recently had a security bug that allowed anyone to log in as anyone else and access their files. (See the blog post from June 20, 2011 on the Dropbox blog for details.)

That said, I love Dropbox and continue to use it to sync things across my various computers, accounts, and devices. You just need to be carefully about putting things out there that are sensitive (i.e. credit card numbers, bank account information, and perhaps your next book).

Recommend Recommended by 6 Readers18.

Bob Wolfman

New Jersey

October 20th, 2011

2:15 pm

I believe that DropBox will EXPLODE in popularity in the coming months, mainly due to the fact that Apple is abandoning cloud storage (i.e., MobileMe's iDisk). All those MobileMe users need a replacement for their stuff (i.e., non-iWork documents, etc.). iCloud, in it's current iteration, does not solve 95% of the cloud storage needs of Mac users. (For me, it's closer to 100% - I'm a Microsoft Office user, not an iWork user, and I am not willing to change this just to be able to use iCloud to store my documents. And even if I was willing to change, what about all the files that already exist from the past umpteen years of using Office?) Mr. Pogue also failed to mention that DropBox publishes an API that many iPhone/iPad apps are already taking advantage of, i.e., they're building DropBox right into the apps! That puts DropBox into the rarefied realm of those few other services that are being built right into apps - Facebook, Twitter, etc. If Apple plans to extend iCloud to offer more general-purpose cloud storage (i.e., iDisk), then it better act quick before we all get used to using (and loving) DropBox - it's not easy to make this kind of shift in one's life, and now that I have to do it for DropBox, and will NOT be in a mood to do it again anytime soon!

Recommend Recommended by 13 Readers19.

Doug Dickeson

Lincoln, NE

October 20th, 2011

2:20 pm

Dave, I agree 100%. We shoot and produce video and we're able to deliver the files to the broadcasting house using DropBox. Super spiffy, saves gas and time. Plus, who wants to be flinging plastic (DVDs) all over the city?

Recommend Recommended by 1 Readers20.

Bob in NJ

NJ

October 20th, 2011

3:00 pm

One complaint - DropBox does not work well with password protected files. I'm not able to open password protected excel files on my iPhone or iPad that were created on my desktop.

Recommend Recommended by 2 Readers

21.

G. Armour Van Horn

Whidbey Island

October 20th, 2011

3:05 pm

I'm not going to be using Dropbox or its competitors, but I think it's a great idea. It's such a great idea that I've been using it for years, parking things on my own servers both within the local environment and the wider world. It's not as convenient as Dropbox, but not inconvenient enough to switch, because all the people I work with on these projects currently are comfortable with the tools needed. But I run with a really techie crowd, for the 99.99% of the world that never edited Z80 assembler language to install a modem on a CP/M system, this is simply wonderful.

Recommend Recommended by 2 Readers

22.

Mark, New York

NY, NY

October 20th, 2011

3:10 pm

Check out SpiderOak, can't say enough good things about them. More backup focused but also syncs well, techie-designed so lots of configuration options if you're a geek. They are open about problems (and every online sync/backup service I've tried sometimes has problems), zero knowledge (they don't even have access to your filenames), and great pricing -- \$100/yr for 100GB shared across an unlimited number of machines, so you can backup as well as sync a lot, and 50% off for academic users. Really great customer support the few times I've needed it, as many configurable syncs as you want with their own folder sets, backup multiple machines under the same account, forever versioning unless you want to delete a historical version (helpful as sometimes it takes me more than the month limit on some services to realize I accidentally deleted something important, they store changes so versioning doesn't eat up too much storage). Downsides to SO: purging old versions is tedious if you do want to purge, web access is a bit cumbersome, limited search within spideroak by filename, it helps to know the name and folder, client is sometimes flakey and needs to be reinstalled.

Recommend Recommended by 3 Readers

23.

DrT

Doha, Qatar

October 20th, 2011

3:15 pm

I recently lost an entire folder from Dropbox that had lots of files related to a large grant. Only a single folder was affected. I have no idea what happened, but I am willing to consider that I made some kind of dumb mistake. I am rebuilding the collection from an external hard drive and Time Machine. Frustrating.

Other than that one time, I have been very satisfied with Dropbox. Having the app on my iPad means I don't have to take paper copies of items to meetings most of the time, too.

Recommend Recommended by 4 Readers

24.

Steven

Kamuela, HI

October 20th, 2011

3:35 pm

Dropbox is great! I used to e-mail my important files to myself in order to access them from any of the five computers and eight operating systems I routinely use. Dropbox provides a simple and more elegant solution to the problem of accessing important files anywhere!

Recommend Recommended by 2 Readers

25.

romu

Oakland, Ca

October 20th, 2011

4:20 pm

I've been using Dropbox for over a year and access my folder on multiple computers (work, laptop, desktop). I had a similar issue where my folders disappeared and my Dropbox folder was completely empty. You don't lose these deleted files (no matter who deleted them) because they remain in a deleted folder that you can access by logging into dropbox.com on the web ('show deleted files'). You simply chose the files and folders you want to restore and they appear back into Dropbox. I believe they retain these files for about 6 months before they are permanently deleted. The customer service rep was also able to track down which computer I was using when I accidentally deleted the contents of my folder.

Recommend Recommended by 14 Readers

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