



www.sparebackup.com

Backup Review Rating



Reviewed on 1/03/08

Summary

SpareBackup Backup will do a good job of backing up your PC. It is fairly easy to use, and the new release 4 is a big improvement. Nevertheless we wouldn't put it at the top of the heap in usability, though that is a subjective judgment. It has a few of idiosyncrasies and performance issues that affected its rating. These are not serious flaws, however.

Prior reviews of SpareBackup include:

PC Mag.com – 2.5 out of 5 (4/24/06)

- Intelligent selection, access from any Internet-connected PC
- Takes time to check for updates, full file upload *versus* just changed parts, slow recovery from online interface

TechWorld (11/6/06)

- Pros: Excellent security design; Usable once you get the hang of it; good value for money.
- Cons: Interface could be clearer; backing up any useful quantity of data is very slow; Restore is fiddly

Overall we gave SpareBackup Backup 3½ stars as a backup service – it's a good product. It lacks some of the technical sophistication of Carbonite and Mozy – for example, they can't backup open or locked files, and they don't seem to be able to do block level incremental updates or restores. The restore process gave us some trouble – we had a couple of failures. But overall it's fairly intuitive, though there are a lot of different screens to deal with.

We have some concerns about the viability of the company. Type in SPBU.OB on any financial web site: for the quarter ended Sept. '07 SPBU.OB reported \$78,000 in revenue, \$4.96 million loss, and \$1.019 million in cash. Their accountants gave them a "going concern" warning.

We did not take the company's financial condition into consideration when evaluating the product.

Pros:

- Excellent security and redundancy
- Can backup to an external hard drive or DVDs (allows disk spanning)
- Integration with Windows explorer
- Simple interface – includes all personal files by default
- 14-day free trial, no credit card required
- Versioning
- Live chat (24/7) and telephone support
- Web access

Cons:

- 50GB limit
- Various restore problems
- No block-level incremental backup
- No backup of open or locked files
- No automatic throttling
- Some performance issues

Company Information

Location:	Palm Desert, CA
Est. revenues:	\$140,000 for year ended Sept. 07
Employees :	20
Financing:	\$8.9M in financing
Subscribers:	est. 5,000 paid subscribers @ \$60/yr
Stored data:	est. 5,000 * 20GB avg = 100 TB
Positioning:	"Leader in file sharing and backup services." SwapDrive's services allow customers to remotely backup, store, and access critical information more easily, reliably and efficiently than ever before, with the highest levels of security and availability"
Sales channels:	Partnered with broadband providers, service providers, software & hardware companies

Pricing

50 GB	\$6.99/mo month-to-month
	\$59.88/year, paid in advance

Getting started and initial backup

To sign up for a free trial, you simply fill in your email address and password. Oddly, they also require your name and phone number – we were reluctant to give out our phone number, so we made one up. You then answer some security question in case you forget your password.

Then SpareBackup issues you a private key that looks like this:

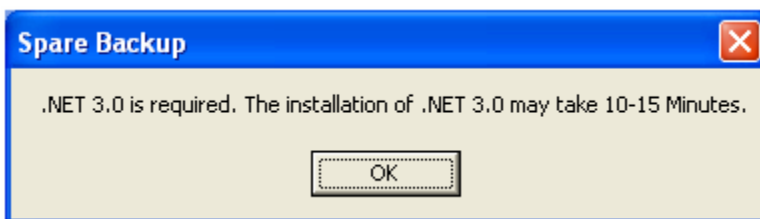
Your Spare Key: **Ze97Yjw8** [What's this?](#)

This is the only record of your Spare Key.

It is recommended that you print this information now.

SpareBackup is a good product if you're paranoid about who can see your files. They are unique in that they do not retain a copy of your key – their marketing materials say that they give it to a 3rd party escrow company, and you can get it back from them using the security questions. We take it on faith that SpareBackup is not keeping a copy, since they generated it in the first place. We would prefer to let SpareBackup keep the key so that we could just remember a password. That's good enough for my bank and my credit card company, and it's hard enough to remember passwords, let alone case-sensitive keys.

Next you download and install the client software which was 12.3 MB. There was a big surprise here: SpareBackup requires you to download and install Microsoft .NET Framework:



It took an extra 10 minutes. No restart was required. No other backup service that we tested required this download. For someone who doesn't know what Microsoft .NET is, this might be a little scary. The rest of the install process was automatic and simple. Finally, a message appeared about new features in SpareBackup version 4.

The message states, among other things, that "SpareBackup Backup will provide unlimited data storage for all your data, photos and music during your trial, and will continue to do so after you subscribe. As always, your valuable information will be encrypted, compressed, securely transported and then stored at one of our Tier 3 Data Centers." This contradicts the 50GB limit that is on the web site. When we contacted customer support via live chat, the rep said that if you want more than 50GB, you have to request it from customer support and there is an extra charge. He stated that when you reach the 50GB limit, your backup stops. The other contradiction in this statement relates to "one of our Tier 3 Data Centers." The operative word is "one." The web site, however, states, "Your data's safety is our number one priority which is why we have not one, but multiple Tier 3 Data Centers. This means your backup has a backup." So which is it, one copy or two copies? And why does a company with \$78,000 in quarterly revenue need more than one data center if they are not making multiple copies?

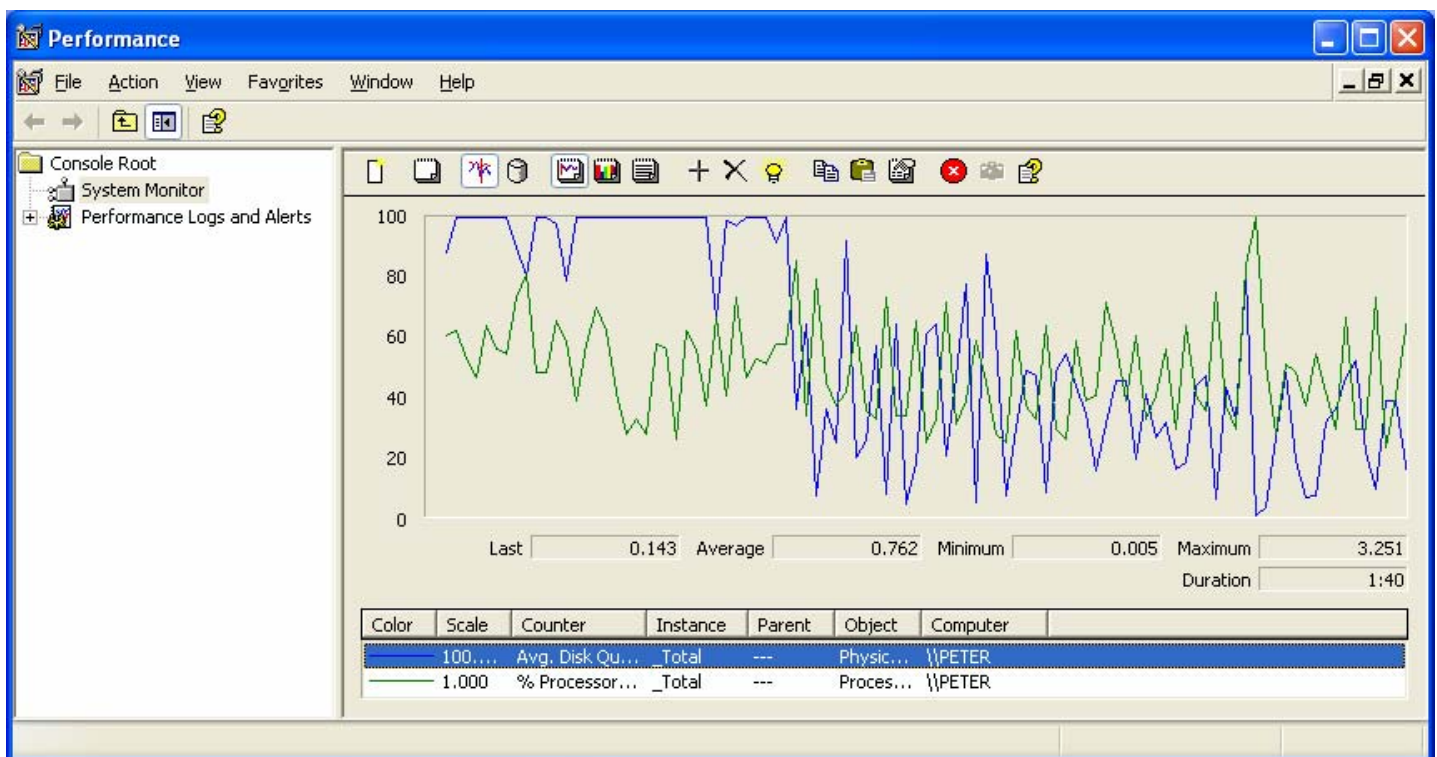
We had tested version 3 a few months ago, and version 4 has a few noteworthy improvements and a greatly improved appearance. The most important new feature is "idle-time backup" which scales back on resources when you're using your computer for something else. The UI now includes two choices: 1) run when idle or 2) run when scheduled. We were not able to determine what happens if you are in the middle of a scheduled backup and you start using your computer for something else. Once the backup has



started, it does not appear to automatically slow down if you decide you need to use your computer. There is a big "Pause" button on the UI home page, and presumably that's what it's there for. It would be a lot better if you didn't have to do this manually. It's just another thing for the user to have to master.

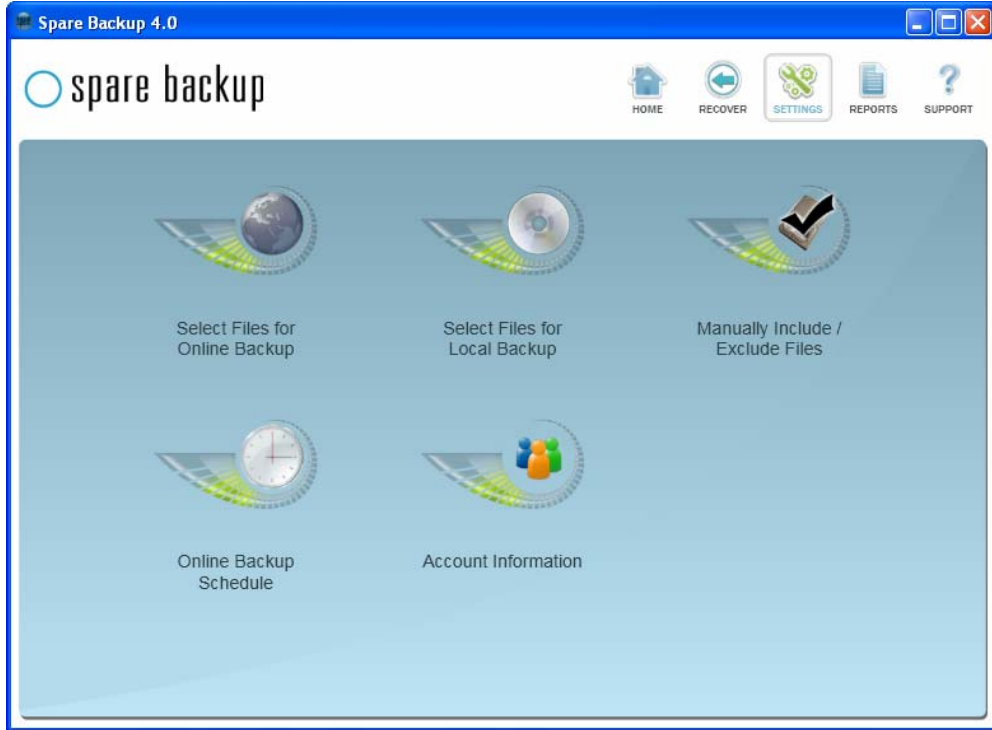
What's missing from the scheduling options is the ability to "black out" certain times – e.g., backup whenever idle, but not between 9AM and 5PM. The ideal scenario is to back up all the time except during peak working hours when you may want to protect your office's bandwidth usage.

When SpareBackup is backing up, your computer will feel very sluggish at times. We started our backup, and the Windows PERFMON application indicated that the disk queue was nailed and the CPU utilization averaged around 50%. Some other backup service we tested were able to keep CPU utilization under 5% almost all the time. We bet they get more than a few complaints about SpareBackup slowing down your computer. Backup speed was reasonable – we got 655 kbps over a 5 hour test period.



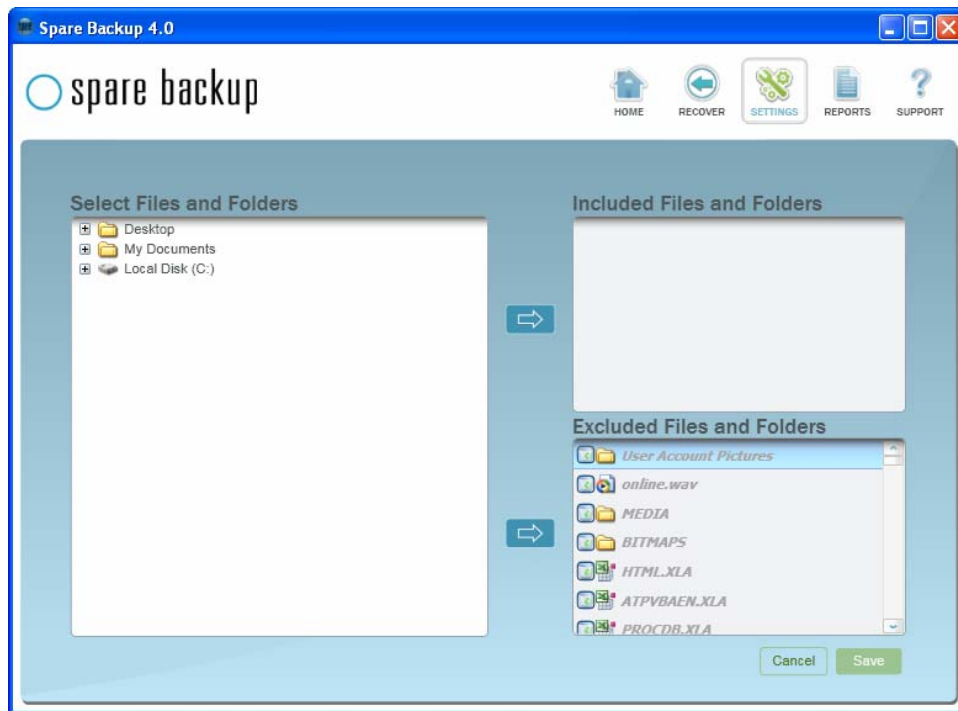
Selecting your Backup

When you log in, you get a screen with a number of options:



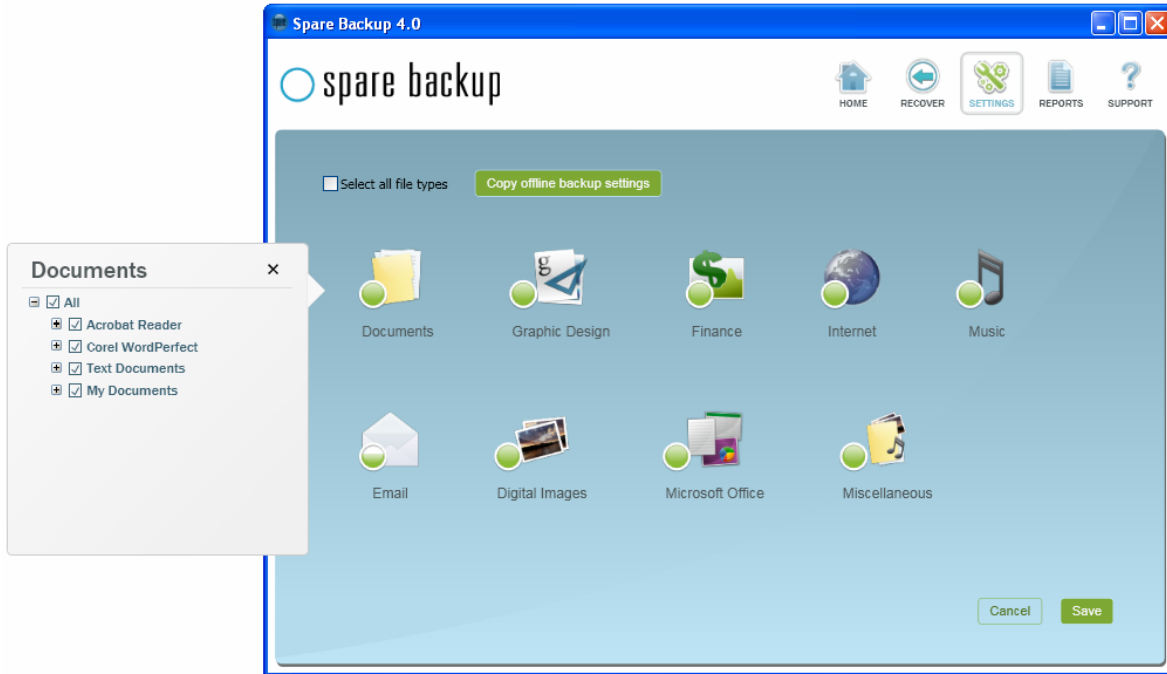
All of this is pretty self-explanatory.

The first thing you'll need to do is select what you want to back up.

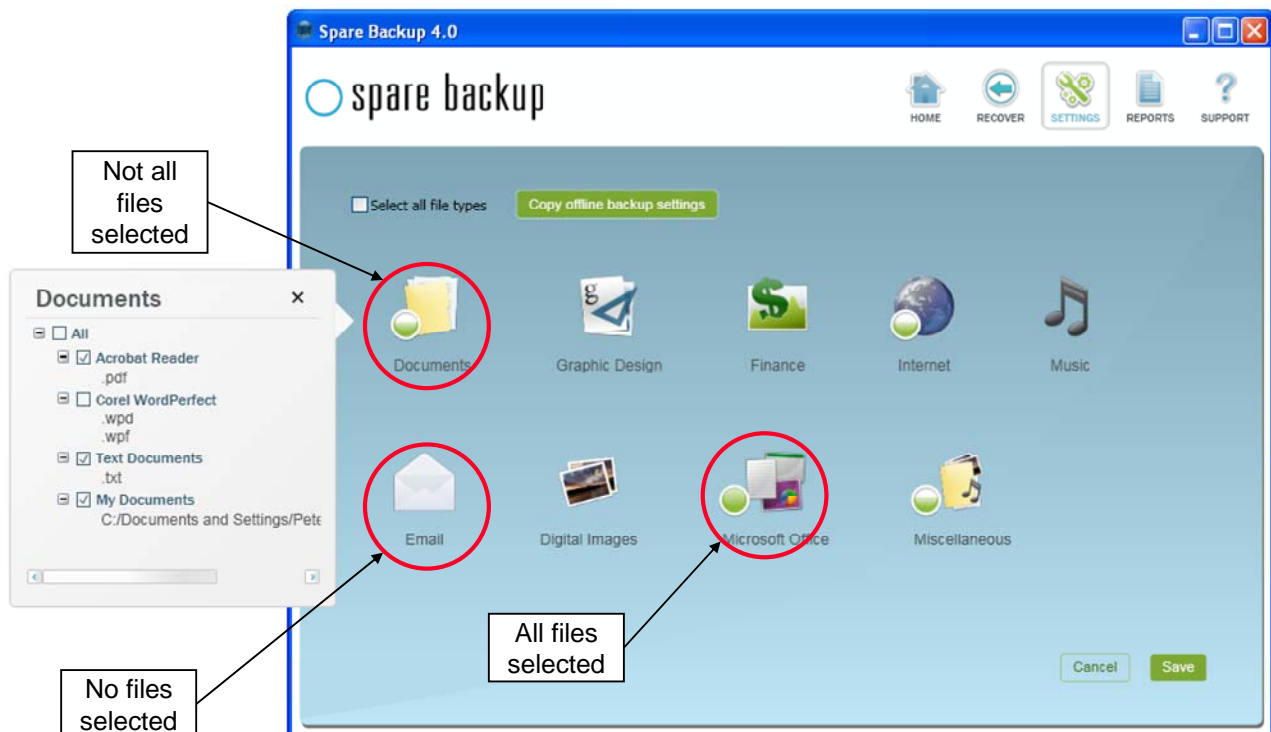


By default, includes various specific system files, program files and temp files

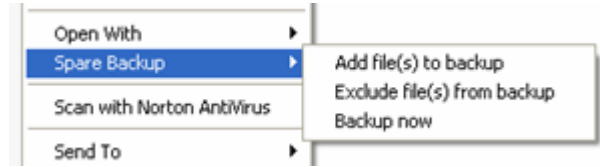
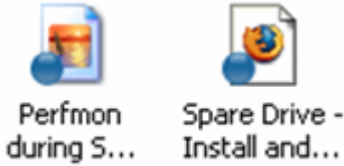
SpareBackup excludes executables and system files by default – a good idea.



SpareBackup steers you to selecting your backup by file type and application, rather than the more usual folder structure approach. So long as the file types that you need to back up fall into one of the SpareBackup categories, this works fine. And it may be more understandable to novices who aren't familiar with Windows file structures. In some cases, such as video, SpareBackup indicates that is backing up a specific folder (such as My Videos) rather than file types. The default seems to be to back up everything, which makes life easy. But there are some file types that are not automatically included, so you need to check. Why not just back up everything and save the user from having to think about this?



SpareBackup has also provided a Windows integration whereby you can right click on a file or folder within a Windows Explorer screen and select or deselect files to back up. We're guessing they got this idea from Carbonite who introduced this method a couple of years ago. They also display little colored dots on files and folders to indicate backup status, again something that Carbonite appears to have invented.



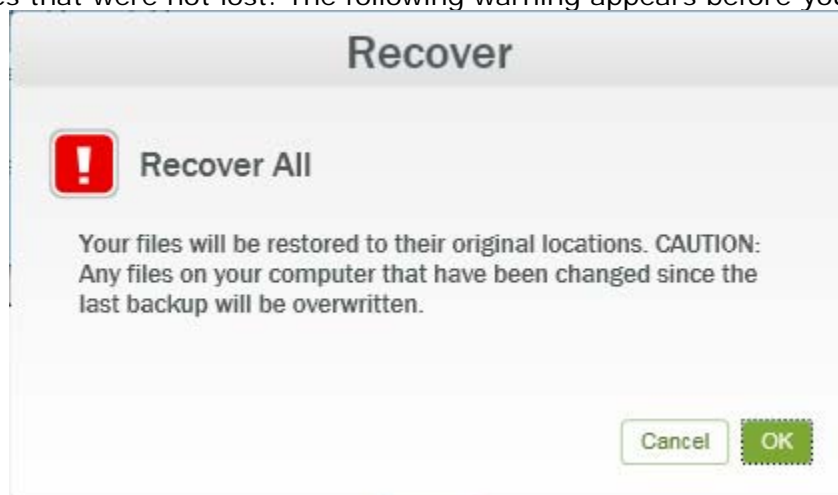
Restore Process

Restoring one file was fast. Curiously SpareBackup defaults to putting restored files on your desktop rather than back where they came from. If you accidentally delete a file on your PC and you go to your backup to restore it, wouldn't you think it should go back where it came from? What if you're restoring 100 files?

A full restore required four tries. At that, 3 files were reported as being "unrecoverable." Files are restored to their original locations. When the restore process fails, you get a screen that says simply that "Recovery was aborted due to too many errors." Another error message says "Login failure due to the following error: #2, Server error." This erratic behavior is not very reassuring.



Another problem with SpareBackup's recovery process is that a full restore is not very smart about what to do with files that were not lost. The following warning appears before you start your backup:



What it should do is offer to skip overwriting files that already exist on your PC, as some of their competitors do. You could easily overwrite files on your PC and create just the kind of problem that you're trying to prevent with a backup service. All in all, SpareBackup needs some work on the restore process.

Conclusion

SpareBackup is better at backing up than it is at recovering. Recovering data is what backup is for, so all the errors and bugs are inexcusable. We hope that other users don't encounter the same problems that we did. There was nothing special about our PC or Internet connection to cause such problems, and we didn't have any other applications running at the same time.

The biggest problem with the backup process was the lack of block-level incremental backup. We had a 2.5GB Outlook mail file on our PC which took most of a day to back up. If you have any interruption in the backup process, such as a momentary disconnection from the Internet, turning off your PC, or whatever, it has to start all over again from the beginning. It's not realistic to believe that users' PCs never get shut off or disconnected. The second biggest problem is the lack of support for open and locked files. Some of our files, such as the mail file, are open almost all the time, so they never get backed up. Other vendors have solved this problem.

If SpareBackup can fix the problems mentioned above and sort out the ambiguity of what they are really offering for backup space (50GB? Unlimited?), they could be competitive with the market leaders.