How often do you call up vendors, customers, government agencies, banks, insurance companies, etc., etc., for information, only to be told that "the computer is down?" I don’t know about you, but it happens to me a lot.

Micro-computers both pose a problem and offer an opportunity in this area.

First the problem. Micro-computers are not especially prone to needing repair; as a class they’re usually more problem-free than larger computers (mainframes in particular) which have, of course, a lot more things about them to go wrong. But when they do "go down," they can take several days to get fixed; and they can also wipe out any programs, data, etc., to which they happen to have access at the time.

The opportunity lies in the ease, and relatively low cost, of backups—backup hardware and backup copies of software and data files.

If a machine costs several hundred thousand dollars or more (as a mainframe or even a sophisticated mini-computer does) you don’t buy more than you actually need. But if it costs only three or four thousand (as do micros), having a backup makes a lot better sense—especially when the likelihood is that you’ll also find some additional work your backup can be doing to help pay for itself.

Backing up software and data files is even less costly—no more than the $2-apiece cost of floppy disks. Really careful managers insist on backups after each major session on the
computer (and perhaps even more often if programs or files are especially valuable and/or hard to reproduce). It takes but a few moments and is essentially an unsupervised procedure (so the operator doesn’t have to just sit there while the machine cranks away).

It’s a straight cost/benefit calculation. If you’re dependent on a computer, having it go down even once may cost you a lot more than the expense of backups. And despite the general reliability of micros, you can expect that sooner or later the law of averages will catch up with you. So why not be prepared?

A Personal Story

In connection with backups, here’s a sad tale with a happy ending. Or maybe it’s a happy one with a sad beginning. Either way, it illustrates the power of the computer to deal with problems that, in the pre-computer office environment, could have spelled major disaster.

There probably exist few individuals who haven’t at one time or another, in a moment of inattention, discarded papers that were of utmost importance. Discovery of the mistake then leads to weary hours of sifting through trashbins, in the hope that the needed material can be rescued before the garbage collectors arrive. And then come more tedious hours of re-typing, re-copying, re-collating, etc., since papers that have once joined the used coffee cups and other detritus of the wastebasket rarely emerge in mint condition.

The same problem can arise with computer files, of course; computers aren’t proof against carelessness any more than anything else in the office. But it can be easier to correct your blunder there, provided you take some time and effort to learn how.

The Lost Chapter

The events came at a time when I was spending long hours, often well into the evening, at work on a much-overdue book manuscript (no, not this one; my previous Practical Handbook of