

## My Dropbox Misadventures and Search for a Replacement

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While editing a document on my computer a week or two ago, I saw a little notification in the lower righthand corner of one of my screens: "WMerge was added to your Dropbox." If I had blinked, I would have missed it.

By giving that notification, my Dropbox software was telling me that a folder called "WMerge" had just been created in my Dropbox. This meant that on every computer with my Dropbox account installed, I could work on anything in the WMerge folder, and every computer would always have the exact same files and folders, all of which Dropbox would keep synchronized as long as I had an Internet connection. It's a brilliant idea and incredibly convenient and helpful -- when it works.

There was just one problem, though. I had deleted the WMerge folder from my Dropbox several months before. It wasn't supposed to exist. I didn't want or need access to anything in it. So having it available would just cause confusion and mistakes. Why did it reappear?

While pondering that question, I watched the computer screen. More little notices told me Dropbox was adding more folders -- all of which I had deleted many months before -- along with the thousands of files those folders used to hold. Why?

It turned out my computer consultant was working on a machine we had taken out of service. He had turned it on for the first time in months, to scrub the hard drive to donate the machine to a school. By turning on that old machine, it seems he also activated the Dropbox installation on that machine.

When that happened, I would have expected the Dropbox synchronization system to uneventfully modify the Dropbox folders on the old computer to match all the changes I had made to my Dropbox folders since anyone had turned on the old machine -- thousands of files added, thousands of files and folders deleted and modified as my staff and I lived our electronic lives for many months.

But the Dropbox installation on this old machine was doing the exact opposite of what it was supposed to do! Dropbox was bringing back to life on all my machines the old outdated Dropbox folders and files on the old machine. I later figured out that Dropbox also probably deleted some current files. And whatever happened on one machine happened on all my machines, thanks to Dropbox synchronization.

As a result, dozens of folders and subfolders and hundreds of files that I no longer wanted in Dropbox reappeared on all my computers connected to Dropbox. For example, I had once used Dropbox to store accounting records and active client work, but had moved both to my file server (more on that later). Yet here they were again, back from the dead. My Dropbox account was dumping on all my computers an outdated version of information that I had long since moved to my file server. If my staff had started to edit the outdated information, we would have had chaos. And I had no idea of how much current information I was losing in this process. In other words, Dropbox failed to perform its one central and fundamental task: keeping my computers current and in sync. Instead it created chaos.

As soon as I realized what was happening, I knew I would need to "roll back" my Dropbox files and folders to however they existed before my Dropbox disaster began, i.e., just before my consultant turned on the old machine.

You might think I could accomplish a rollback quite easily. First, I could figure out the last date and time when Dropbox was satisfactory. Second, I could go to Dropbox.com and find a page in the Dropbox website where I could initiate a rollback. Third, I could specify the date and time to which my Dropbox should be rolled back. Fourth, Dropbox would roll everything back to that date and time. It would just happen.

But it didn't work that way. To initiate a rollback, I needed to review in order, one by one, each event that had occurred in my Dropbox, such as file additions and deletions, eventually finding the last "good" event before my disaster began. It's not an easy matter to go through the history of events. In

the past, when I had tried to look at that history, often this function didn't work at all. This time, I got lucky and it worked.

I chose the date when my disaster occurred. Dropbox displayed the last couple of dozen events that had occurred that day. Then I went to the bottom of the display and after a little while Dropbox displayed the next couple of dozen events. I had to repeatedly wait for Dropbox to display each group of two dozen events, then page down again, until I finally found the last "good" event before my Dropbox disaster, i.e., the last event before the "WMerge" folder came back to life in my Dropbox. Then I needed to give the Dropbox support desk some identifying details about that event. Hours later, someone got back to me by email to tell me they had started the rollback. Then it eventually happened.

Even after the rollback, though, my Dropbox still contained some vestigial folders that I had deleted long ago. At first, they contained no files. After a while, files showed up in those folders -- files and folders that I had deleted long ago. So I spent some time looking for folders that shouldn't be there but still existed after the rollback and deleting as appropriate. I was glad my Dropbox disaster had been (mostly) reversed. But I still had to identify and delete some vestigial folders and files. After I deleted those relics on one machine, they sometimes still showed up on other machines. None of this inspired confidence.

Dealing with the Dropbox "history" page also got me thinking about how badly it works. In addition to allowing a full rollback, it is supposed to let someone selectively restore files or folders that might have been deleted or modified. But a user can see only a dozen or two events at once, with no structure at all to them, one screenful at a time. You have to scroll down again and again and wait for each group of events to display. Many times an event just identifies a single file name affected, without even indicating the folder where it resides.

If I needed to do any serious selective restoration, as opposed to a total rollback, I might need to deal, one by one, with hundreds of individual events, each devoid of context. The command menu for restoration is also quite cumbersome. One would have expected a more user-friendly restoration system, with a better structure to display and let the user act on the Dropbox file structure. The net effect of the Dropbox restoration system is that a user cannot in any practical way restore large numbers of files or folders on a selective basis. Unfortunately, a typical user won't realize that until the need actually arises. One can only hope they maintained their own recent backups.

My frustrations with Dropbox don't end there. I actually have a long and public history of frustrations with Dropbox. In a 2012 TechnoFeature for TechnoLawyer, my physician sister and I co-authored a long article about the chaos and version madness she experienced when her hospital started to encrypt files that she had kept in a Dropbox folder <<http://bit.ly/2bifa02>>. Because I hadn't had similar problems, I kept using Dropbox despite my sister's travails. I actually increased my usage of Dropbox. But I should have listened to my sister.

At one point, I upgraded to Dropbox Business and then kept my day-to-day accounting notes (copies of bills, copies of deposit slips and so on) in a folder called "Assistant Work to Do." I shared this folder with a few other Dropbox accounts in my office, so other people could access it. Then one day I hired a new accountant, who didn't want to be identified as the assistant but instead as the accountant. So I renamed that folder "Accounting Work to Do."

As soon as I did that, something very strange happened. For all the other Dropbox users in my office, Dropbox kept the old folder under its old name ("Assistant Work to Do"), but also created a new folder under the new name ("Accounting Work to Do") and invited everyone to join it. My staff members wound up with two identical folders with two different names, each containing all my accounting notes as they existed when I renamed the folder. So when a staff member had new accounting notes to save, those notes might end up in the new folder or the old folder. Again, the result was chaos. Dropbox again failed to achieve its essential purpose of keeping files and folders current, correct and synchronized, this time among multiple users.

After we cleaned up that mess, I resolved to move as much of my data as possible out of Dropbox and onto my file server, and then downgrade back to Dropbox Pro. So I moved "Accounting Work to Do," "Active Client Work," and a bunch of other folders out of Dropbox to my file server. But those folders came back into my Dropbox! Even though I had moved them out of Dropbox, they came back to life, just like the folders that came back to life when my computer consultant started scrubbing the old machine we had taken out of service. You would think that if I moved an entire folder out of Dropbox, that would propagate, as a folder deletion, through all my Dropbox installations. But it turns out that if

you move an entire folder out Dropbox, Dropbox doesn't always notice. Whenever one of these ghost folders returned, I deleted it as soon as I saw it. But it still came back. Eventually, the ghosts did vanish permanently. I think some of these problems arose because I downgraded from Dropbox Business to Dropbox Pro, although I'm not sure of that.

I also have noticed that Dropbox regularly creates bogus warnings of "conflicted" files. In other words, Dropbox "thought" I had worked on the same file simultaneously on two different machines so Dropbox didn't know which one should govern and instead threw up its hands by keeping both files and identifying one as "conflicted." This happens regularly in Dropbox for no reason at all. Usually the allegedly "conflicted" file is quite old. In none of these cases did I ever actually edit the same file on two machines simultaneously. I know not to do that. Whenever I finish editing any file, I always immediately close it. Any "conflicted" files arose simply as Dropbox errors.

Dropbox's problem with allegedly "conflicted" files seems to be a lesser variation of the Dropbox disaster I described at the beginning of this article. In fact, even after the rollback my Dropbox still contained some allegedly "conflicted" files that arose for the first time during my Dropbox disaster.

I used to spend a lot of time comparing the allegedly "conflicted" files with their "non-conflicted" siblings. I eventually figured out that all the alleged "conflicts" were completely bogus. I could just delete whichever file was older. Still, it further diminished my confidence in Dropbox. So did the fact that sometimes a folder just doesn't synchronize with another Dropbox account, even though it was set up to synchronize and formerly did synchronize.

Maybe I'm doing something wrong, or need to work around special sensitivities of Dropbox. Maybe I should email or call Dropbox's help desk to help me undo and prevent my problems. Maybe when my problems started I should have reinstalled Dropbox or tweaked its settings. But a utility like Dropbox is just supposed to work, without extra measures, interaction with help desks, phone calls, reinstallation, tweaking or remembering to do special things. It's not supposed to malfunction in the many ways it malfunctioned for me.

After my adventures, I realized I could not rely on Dropbox to do its job of synchronizing my computers without creating chaos, so I looked for alternatives. I signed up for Microsoft OneDrive, which was less expensive. But it has at least one serious flaw: It assumes you are always connected to the Internet. If you edit any file while disconnected from the Internet, e.g., on an airplane or out in the countryside somewhere, this produces a mess. I also kicked some other tires in OneDrive and was not impressed. Among other things, OneDrive synchronized files at glacial speed, unlike Dropbox, which synchronized very quickly but not always correctly.

So I'm still using Dropbox, terrified about my next Dropbox disaster. I've moved critical data out of Dropbox to my file server. I just use Dropbox for personal stuff and to propagate templates and settings for my computers and my staff's computers, maintain reference information that doesn't change very much, and keep shadow copies of documents edited in NetDocuments and Word. I minimize any sharing of Dropbox folders. I back up regularly, so I won't have to rely on the Dropbox "rollback" or "restore" functions. And I look for something better.

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#### *Community Manager's Notes*

I find that Dropbox conflicts occur when my Internet connection is spotty. I've never experienced this in the office, just on my iPad when using a cellular connection. Also, some iPad apps have better Dropbox integrations than others. I've never lost any work. In every case, I could safely delete the conflicted file as Dropbox eventually synced the original. I agree that OneDrive isn't ready for primetime. Thank you for the article Joshua! Read our review of Dropbox Business. See Edward J. Zohn, Review of Dropbox Business, SmallLaw (March 11, 2016) <<http://bit.ly/1qyxy9Z>>. -- Neil J. Squillante, helloneil@peerviews.com