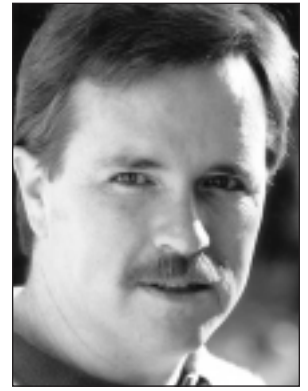


Timothy Perrin



## 10 Years of Change

This column marks the beginning of my second decade writing about new technology for *The Scrivener*. In looking back over the last 10 years, I've noticed I've kept coming back to several themes: alternate input, the unfulfilled promise of the paperless office, and backup, backup, backup. Let's start with the last.

### Backup, Backup, Backup

In my last column, I climbed on my favourite hobby horse and harangued you—again—about the importance of frequent and complete system backup. Like insurance, I reminded you, a backup system is something the benefits of which you hope never to see.

Less than a week after I filed that column, a thunderstorm fried the motherboard of my computer. It wouldn't boot, no matter what I did.

For about two weeks, I had been running a product called MirrorFolder that “mirrors” one disk drive to another. My drive D: is identical to my drive C:. So, I was able to take my D: drive out of my machine, slap it into my wife's machine, drop mine off at the shop for a motherboard transplant, and get back to work on my wife's computer. Total downtime: about three-and-a-half hours.

Now, a lost half-day is not insignificant but it is better than the four days it took the shop to get my system running.

Of course, I continue to make nightly backups of every data file that has changed that day, weekly backups of my entire data folder, and every month I send a complete backup to work with my wife where she tosses it in a drawer. While it would be a huge inconvenience for me to lose a month's work, it would be an irreplaceable tragedy to lose my life's work.

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***As I learned to  
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When I was still practising law, we took the backup off-site daily. I suggest you do the same.

It only takes a few minutes to burn the necessary one or two CDs each day. Toss them in a drawer at home where, hopefully, they will grow old and useless.

By the way, you should also make copies of all your software CDs and keep them at home. If your office burns down or is seriously burgled, the cost of replacing the software will be covered by insurance, but the time it takes to gather all the necessary programs could be substantial and it is crucial that you are back up and running as quickly as possible.

As I learned to my chagrin three months ago, it *can* happen to me.

And it can happen to *you*.

### Alternate Input

One of the first columns was on the subject of voice recognition software. Looking back, I have to laugh. Ten years ago, I was amazed at an early version of Dragon Dictate that cost, in my own words, “\$1500—not \$15,000, but \$1500!” You had to speak one-word-at-a-time, it took almost half-an-hour to “train” it, and even then the accuracy was not great. But it *was* a portent of things to come.

Today, the voice software sector is in a bit of disarray. The technology has not “matured” as quickly as the hypemeisters had predicted; those investors in it for a quick return have been bailing out. The problem of deciphering human speech has turned out to be more complex than we once anticipated.

That's not to say the software hasn't improved by many orders of magnitude. It has. Today's latest products from Dragon Systems (now owned by ScanSoft) and IBM, makers of ViaVoice, are sophisticated, prefer whole sentences to individual words, are trained in just 5 to 7 minutes, and cost as little as \$30.

Accuracy levels hover at the 97 or 98 percent level, but that is still a bit more than two mistakes per double-spaced page. (I must admit that two mistakes a page is considerably more accurate than my typing, which made two mistakes on the previous line!)

I continue to vote with my vocal chords and use voice recognition software for about 50 percent of my work. Which 50 percent? It's entirely happenstance. Sometimes I type. Sometimes I dictate. Whatever feels right.

But voice recognition is not the only form for alternate input for computers.

Scanners have become so cheap, you can pick up a decent one for home use for under \$70. For your office, however, you want a machine that handles paper much like a good photocopier. Consider one of those all-in-one-machines I've written about that function as a scanner, photocopier, printer, and fax machine.

What makes a scanner an alternate input device is good optical character recognition (OCR) software, a program that can read a printed page and convert it into text you can edit on the screen. It allows you to take old precedents and other documents and turn them into editable computer files, complete with formatting.

Your scanner undoubtedly came with a free version of some OCR program. If you plan on doing some serious document conversion, it pays to get the full-featured programs. Some of the bells and whistles will pay off when you are processing dozens of pages.

## The Non-Existent Paperless Office

But not all your documents need to be turned into editable text. Some can simply be scanned and stored as an image, much like microfilm. That is part of the long-promised “paperless office” that was supposed to come with the computer revolution, but that has never seemed to materialize. Rather, the simplicity of telling the printer to make four or five copies has led to a proliferation of paper.

The non-existent paperless office is more a failure of confidence than it is a failure of technology.

I have slowly been converting all my personal files to computer images using a program called PaperPort. When I pay a bill, I scan it into an electronic “file” and I shred the paper. When I can, I take old files out of my filing cabinet and scan the contents into the computer. Then I shred that material, too. Soon I will start on the files from my old law practice, which are sitting in a dozen banker’s boxes

taking up space I could be wasting with some perfectly good useless junk. Then I’ll shred those files.

My point is that with a good system of naming files and folders on your computer and with a strictly enforced backup system, there is no reason to fear digitizing *everything* in your office. You can easily have multiple backup copies in separate locations while keeping the working versions available to everyone in the office from your network server.

Our offices today work a lot differently than they did 10 years ago. Twenty years ago, all but the most prescient among us were still banging away on IBM Selectrics. Where will we be in another 10 years? Who knows? I was reading this weekend about research into DNA-based computing systems; scientists have started to experiment with direct interfaces between computers and the human brain, the ultimate in “alternative input.”

One thing I do know is—God and The Society of Notaries Public of British Columbia willing—I will be right here, telling you about the latest developments in the field. It has been my privilege and my joy to write this column for the past 10 years. I am grateful for the opportunity and the excuse to stay on top of what continues to be the most fascinating technology since the development of moveable type.

Thanks for reading. I’ll talk to you in three months. ▲

**Timothy Perrin**, a former lawyer, is a technology writer for a variety of magazines. He teaches writing in the Professional Writing program at Okanagan University College in Kelowna; online for the Community College of Southern Nevada; and through his own school, [WritingSchool.com](http://WritingSchool.com).

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