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Super Software – Technology Tested

Seagate DiscWizard – disc image backup

Manufacturers of commodity hardware sometimes offer free software that adds real value. Seagate's DiscWizard includes an OEM version of **Acronis True Image** disc imaging software, which is **free** to PC users with a Seagate or Maxtor hard disc in their PCs or attached to a USB port.
The wizard won't perform without one of these on the system but don't stop reading yet - *Acronis True Image* is well worth the $50 US asking price for the full version, which the Seagate DiscWizard offers a 40% discount on.

Disc Imaging

Disc imaging is a different concept from file backup. It takes a snapshot of a disc partition or entire hard drive and stores it on another backup medium – a second hard drive, an external hard drive or even on DVDs. Creating a disc image takes less long than a full file backup and is especially useful on occasions like these:

A hard disc crash. Once the new hard drive is installed in the PC, simply copy the image across from a USB drive (for example) and your operating system, settings, applications and data will be restored in short order.

Upgrading the primary hard drive. Big capacity hard drives are good value and disc imaging takes the pain out of upgrading.

'Cloning' a standardized configuration for multiple installations on PCs in a corporate environment.

A system crash that prevents you from getting into Windows. The saved system image can be quickly restored with a special boot CD.

Upgrading and cloning is best left to PC-savvy types, but using the Seagate DiscWizard for backup/restore jobs requires no special knowledge.

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How Acronis True Image works

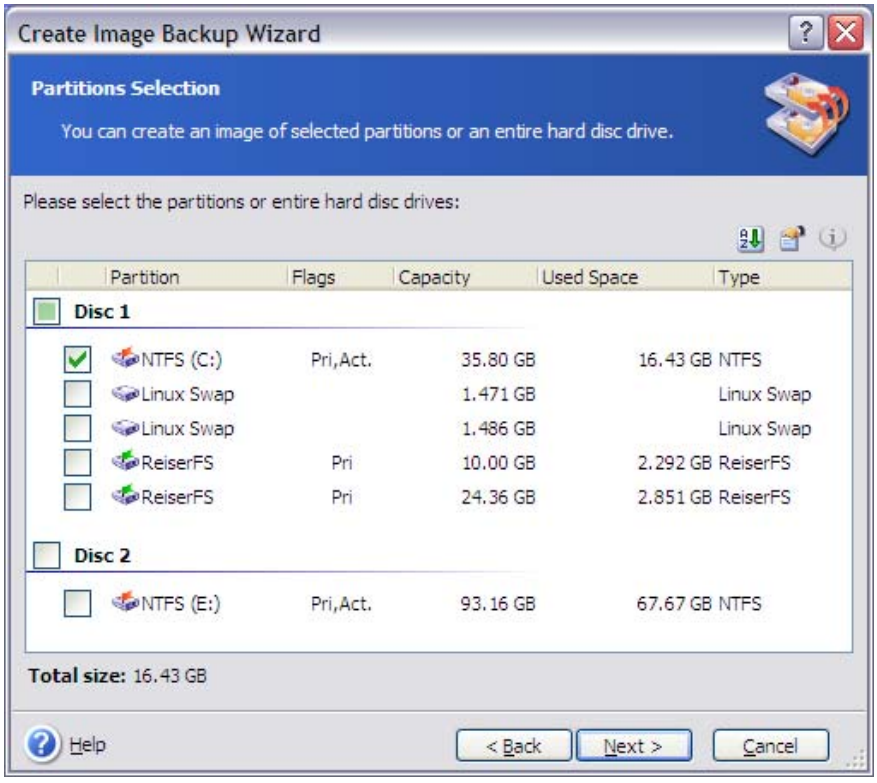
The Seagate OEM version of Acronis True Image lacks the standard product's file backup options and the 'Secure Zone' feature (more on that below). The disc imaging features are fully implemented, however.

Most PC users have software (or should have) for making day-to-day file backups, but few users know about or deploy disc imaging software. File backup is great for keeping up-to-date copies of data, while disc imaging is an all-or-nothing solution for special occasions. Combining the two methods provides a strong safety net in an emergency. Even if your last system disc image is several weeks old, you can roll it back and then simply restore your up-to-date data files with your file backup program.

Having a recent disc image handy is also a blessing if you've mislaid or lost your Windows XP discs, or if the system discs weren't supplied with your PC in the first place. These days, many PC vendors put a copy of Windows on a small partition of the hard drive, which you can access with a special function key. In an emergency that version of the operating system can be restored, but it will be so far out of date as to be almost useless.

The Seagate DiscWizard makes copying your system so easy that there's no reason not to take a snapshot every week or two, but there's a small chore to get out of the way first: burning the emergency boot disc (for those times when you've had a systems crash and can't boot up). It's a once-only job and it's simple enough: click on 'Create Bootable Media' and select CD/DVD on the menu the wizard offers. Make sure you mark the CD clearly once it's burnt and store it safely.

Making an image is just as easy: select 'Image backup' from the main menu and follow the prompts. You'll get to a screen like this that shows your hard drives disc partitions (if you only have one hard disc with Windows installed, you'll only see the NFTS partition on the C drive):



Select the drive or partition you want to save an image of, then choose where to save it. Double-check that it's the correct place in the 'Folder' panel (see next screenshot), in this case a USB hard drive labelled E:\. All image files have a .tib suffix (**A**cronis **T**rue **I**mage).

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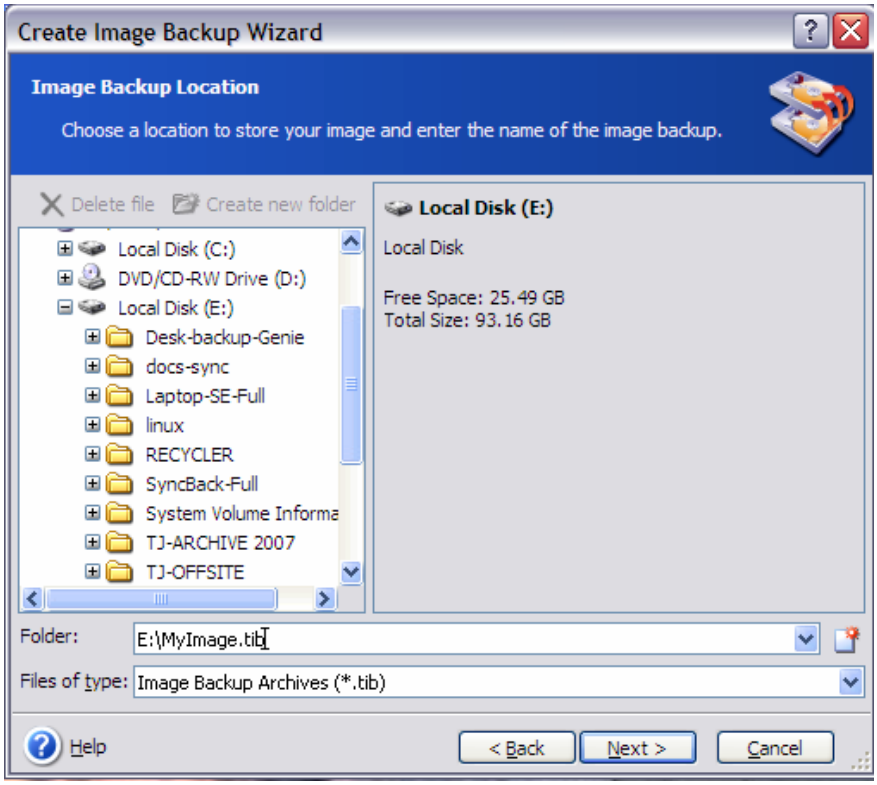

The rest is straightforward. When using the default options, the image is compressed by about one third. This means a 30gb image will take up about 20gb of disc space. It takes about 30 minutes to create an image of that size, and about the same time to restore it.

True Image offers to validate the image file after it's been created and it's a good idea let it do that - better to find out now rather than later if there is a problem. The program also adds a date to image files so they're easy to identify.

The restore process is no harder, thanks to the wizard's guiding hand. If you need to restore from the boot disc, it will load a copy of True Image into RAM that provides all the restore options. A step-by-step guide of storing/restoring Acronis images (with screenshots) can be found here: http://www.tweakhound.com/xp/backup/discimage2.htm

The same site also provides a helpful guide to Windows XP backup strategies here: http://www.tweakhound.com/xp/backup/discimage.htm

And here's the download location for Seagate DiscWizard – the file is about 100gb in size - http://www.seagate.com/www/en-us/support/downloads/

Acronis True Image Home version 10

The full version offers a feature called **'Acronis Secure Zone'**, a hidden partition for storing images the software sets up on a PC's primary hard drive. Other applications cannot access this partition so it is in effect a quarantined zone. With current hard drives providing 250gb of disc space and more, a 40 or 50gb partition will barely make a dent.

The advantage of the Secure Zone feature is a snap restore in an emergency (when Windows won't boot at all) by selecting F11 as the system tries to boot (F11 is the special key that opens up the Secure Zone).

This restore method is a little quicker than using the boot CD, and it's especially handy if you're on the road and your laptop has a crash (with your Acronis boot CD safely stored at home or at the office, a long way away).

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With the **snap restore** feature, you can even work on the system while TI restores it. The only drawback is that the Secure Zone will be of little help when your primary disc fails. To cover all circumstances, it's best to have another image on a second drive.

The full version of True Image offers file backup options for various folders from My Documents to those pesky Outlook .pst files. However, you can also restore individual files and folders from an image archive by mounting it as a 'virtual disc', or you can load them directly in Windows Explorer with the 'Explore Backup Archive' feature.

Backing up to, and restoring from, a **NAS** (*Network Direct Attached Storage Device)* is another option. Once the NDAS Device ID and Write Key are entered, the storage device will appear as an additional hard drive. Version 10 also allows backing up to a network server via FTP, but transfers are limited to 2gb at present.

The 'Backup Location' feature makes managing backups and disc space easier by allowing the user to set limits on the size of the image folder and number of backups stored. True Image will delete the oldest images first when it runs out of space. TI also provides the option of incremental backups.

Summary

It would be unreasonable to voice complaints about the limited version of Acronis True Image provided for free by Seagate. As stated at the beginning, Seagate/Maxtor users are offered a 40% discount on the full version of Acronis, which costs US $50. Amazon.com and other sites offer 26% off. The product will pay for itself several times over, even if you only use it once in earnest.

Our main complaint about the full version of TI is the ludicrous process of getting product updates. Instead of checking automatically and installing updates when you click okay, you have to go to the Acronis website and check the latest build number and compare it to yours. It's an unexpected blemish on a product that is so well-designed.

A blow-by-blow, feature-by-feature guide to Acronis True Image Home v10 is available here:
http://www.barrys-rigs-n-reviews.com/reviews/2007/utilities/ti10/ti10_1.htm

The Acronis website is found here:
http://www.acronis.com/homecomputing/products/trueimage/index.html

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