

FOCAL POINT

Spreading Out

It's a law of physics: A gas, like oxygen or hydrogen, expands to fill whatever container you put it in. A similar property seems to hold true for computer files: Over time, they grow and multiply until they take up all available disk space.

I've seen it happen time and again. It doesn't always happen quickly. For instance, the first week after we hook up a new disk drive for our department or begin to use a new partition, I think, "Finally, we have enough room to get our work done. We won't need more space for years." I resolve to archive projects as soon as they're completed and compact my mailbox every day. I figure we're set for good.

But one day, maybe just a few weeks later, it happens. I get a warning from the HogWatch program that monitors disk space; I suddenly can't receive new mail; available space drops to double digits (or, gasp, *single digits*). Others in the group start to have the same problems. The signs are unmistakable.

In desperation I compress everything in sight and off-load older files to floppy disk or tape. I send out frantic messages to the people I work with to clean up old projects and discard unneeded files. I even print out all those old e-mail messages that I'll never need again but have been saving anyway, just in case.

But in the end, there's no escaping it: We need more disk space, again.

So we buy another, bigger hard disk drive; or we beg for additional space, maybe another partition for the department. "Two gigabytes," I think. "Now that's *really* gonna take care of this space problem for good!"

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