Cell Phone as Backup Connection
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Many lawyers are "dead in the water" if their primary office or home Internet connection goes down. Fortunately, most Internet Service Providers (ISP's) take their customer service obligations seriously and restore service quickly. But that is not always true. Some providers, Comcast comes to mind, are notorious for poor customer service. When your office or home connection goes down what can you do to stay online?

Your smartphone, because it has a data plan, can serve as a backup Internet connection. It isn't a perfect solution, but it will do in a pinch (such as needed to comply with an impending e-filing deadline). Most smart phones have the ability to "tether" their connection to your computer in three different ways.

The fastest and most efficient in terms of connection speed and preservation of your smartphone's battery is USB tethering. You need to connect your Internet-enabled smartphone or tablet to your computer using a USB cable. Each operating system and version offers its own set of menu options to enable this connection. An added benefit is that your phone may be able to charge from your computer's USB connection (battery or AC power) while it tethers. It is also the most secure connection.

Next in terms of smartphone battery life preservation, but typically providing the slowest connection, is Bluetooth tethering. It is great for checking email or light web browsing. You can connect multiple devices to your smartphone for Bluetooth tethether (like with WiFi - see below). Since Bluetooth is specifically designed for mobile use, it consumes less power. Bluetooth tethering isn't used nearly as often as it should be. It's a little more involved to set up than WiFi because you have to pair your computer to your smartphone and do some configuration work. But because it is relatively easy on your phone's battery, I left it on all day supplying an Internet connection from my Android phone to my Nexus 7 tablet and used Google Maps to navigate New York City using the larger Nexus 7 screen.

Tethering via WiFi is one of the easiest to set up, and is arguably compatible with the most types of devices. Simply put, if your laptop (or other device) includes WiFi support, you should be able to tether via WiFi just as quickly and as easily as you would to any other hotspot. It is quicky and easy, and up to five devices can typically be wirelessly connected to your phone's Internet connection.

However, there are downsides to WiFi tethering. Depending on what security configuration you use, it could be anywhere from not secure at all to "fairly" secure. Also, since you're not required to plug in to a USB port, your battery is going to drain fairly quickly while WiFi tethering. Bringing along a wall charger or a portable battery pack would be advisable.
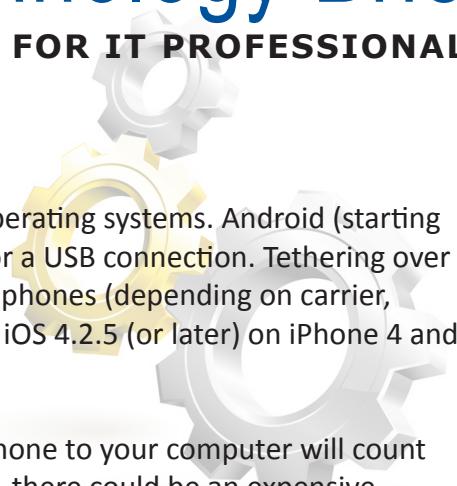
All three types of tethering are available to the two major smartphone operating systems. Android (starting from version 2.2), and iOS 3.0 (or later) offer tethering over a Bluetooth or a USB connection. Tethering over WiFi, also known as a Personal Hotspot, is available on nearly all Android phones (depending on carrier, manufacturer, and software version). WiFi tethering is also available with iOS 4.2.5 (or later) on iPhone 4 and newer, and iPad 3rd generation and newer.

If you tether by any of these methods, the data run through your smartphone to your computer will count against your monthy data allowance. Depending on your carrier and plan, there could be an expensive "gotcha" at the end of your billing cycle. Some carriers (Verizon, for example) levy hefty charges for exceeding your data cap. Other carriers (T-Mobile) will simply throttle your connection back to a lower speed once your cap is exceeded. Before you tether, know your plan's limitations and your carrier's policies. Still, even with this possible downside, using your smartphone as a backup Internet connection can be a lifesaver.

About Scott Bassett:

Scott Bassett is the Senior Editor for Affinity Publications, which is a fancy title for editor of their monthly email newsletter. He also contributes regularly to the Affinity blog.

Scott came to technology via the law and he still maintains a full-time virtual law practice handling Michigan family law appeals. He received his J.D. degree from the University of Michigan Law School in 1981 and his B.A. from Wayne State University in 1978. His interests are technology ("duh"), law (double-"duh"), music, and bicycling.