

It sounds like magic, but it isn't really. Imagine how you'd work away from the network without this feature. You simply copy the files you need to work on to your laptop computer's local hard disk. Then, when you take the computer home, you work on the local copies. When you get back to the office, you connect to the network and copy the modified files back to the network server.

That's essentially how the offline files feature works, except that Windows does all the copying automatically. Windows also uses smoke and mirrors to make it look like the copies are actually on the network even though you're not connected to the network. For example, if you map a drive (drive M:, for example) and make it available offline, you can still access the offline copies of the file on the M: drive. That's because Windows knows that when you aren't connected to the network, it should redirect drive M: to its local copy of the drive M: files.



WARNING

The main complication of working with offline files is what happens when two or more users want to access the same offline files. Windows can attempt to straighten that mess out for you, but it doesn't do a great job of it. Your best bet is to not use the offline files feature with network resources that other users may want available offline, too. In other words, it's okay to make your home drive available offline because that drive is accessible only to you. I don't recommend making shared network resources available offline, though, unless they're read-only resources that don't contain files you intend to modify.

Before you can use offline files, you must first enable the Offline Files feature. To do that, open the Control Panel, double-click the Sync Center icon, and click Manage Offline Files. This brings up the Offline Files dialog box, shown in Figure 4-7. Next, click Enable Offline Files and then click OK.

After you've enabled offline files, using the offline files feature is easy: Just open the Computer folder, right-click the mapped network drive you want to make available offline, and choose Always Available Offline.

If you don't want to designate an entire mapped drive for offline access, you can designate individual folders within a mapped drive by using the same technique: Right-click the folder and then choose Always Available Offline.

When you first designate a drive or folder as available offline, Windows copies all the files on the drive or folder to local storage. Depending on how many files are involved, this process can take a while, so plan accordingly.