

BRIEFCASE

(Use files on different PCs and then synchronize them using MS Briefcase)

In concept, Briefcase involves five steps: You

1. Create the Briefcase folder
2. Copy into the briefcase whatever files and folders you want to sync between PCs
3. Copy, transport, or physically move the Briefcase to the second PC (via USB drive, floppy, direct connection, etc.)
4. Use the files in the Briefcase normally on the second PC--you can edit them, modify them, whatever. When you return the Briefcase to the first PC
5. Then use the Briefcase's "Update" function to merge the changed files from the Briefcase to their original locations on the first PC.

You can see from this conceptual description that Briefcase is overkill if you're just working on a file or two. In that case, it'd be simpler just to copy the file(s) back and forth as needed from one PC to the other. But when you're dealing with multiple files or folders from multiple locations on a hard drive, it's much, much simpler to let Briefcase keep track of what's changed, and what needs to go where.

The theory may sound confusing, but looking at how it works in the real world may make things clearer:

Setting Up And Using a Briefcase Folder

There are a couple ways to create a Briefcase (and it's OK to create more than one Briefcase on your system, too). The simplest way is to right click anywhere on your desktop, select New, and then choose Briefcase. That's all it takes!

If you prefer, you can put a Briefcase inside a different folder: Navigate normally to the folder where you want the Briefcase, then, on the File menu for that folder, point to New, and then click Briefcase. You're done!



There also are several ways to use a Briefcase. We'll focus on the simplest for now: To use the Briefcase, copy whatever files and/or folders you want into the Briefcase; the Briefcase will automatically remember where everything came from. Once you have the files and folders you want inside the Briefcase, you have to get the Briefcase to the second PC.

If the two PCs are physically connected via network, direct cable connection, or something similar, simply drag the Briefcase directly to the desktop of the second PC.

More commonly, you can use any convenient data-storage medium (USB drive, floppy, etc.) to store and transport the Briefcase: Just drag the Briefcase to the USB drive, floppy, or other storage medium; and then physically bring that storage medium to the second PC.

When you're working at the second PC, you can access and work on the files inside the Briefcase as needed and in the normal manner--the files will open, close, save, etc., just like any file in any other folder. But--in this simplest form of Briefcase use--leave the files inside the Briefcase (i.e., don't remove them; work on them while they're still inside the Briefcase). For clarity, we'll now refer to this Briefcase, containing the files you've edited, changed, or otherwise modified, as the "Modified Briefcase."

Later, return the Modified Briefcase folder to the original PC. Most commonly, this means bringing back the USB drive, floppy, etc., onto which you originally placed the Briefcase. Right-click the Modified Briefcase and select "Update All" from the menu (or select "Update All" from the Modified Briefcase menu in Windows Explorer). The Briefcase software will then compare the Modified Briefcase's contents to the files in the original location, and offer to update, create, or delete files, as needed, to bring the file sets into sync. The Briefcase software will show you what it intends to do before anything happens; and you can manually override its actions, if you wish.

Other Briefcase Uses, More Info

There are other ways of accomplishing the same basic Briefcase tasks, including ways that can use fewer duplicate file copies than the simple method (above). You can find more detailed instructions in [Knowledgebase article 307885, How To Use the Briefcase Feature in Windows XP](#). As usual, the XP Help File (via the Start/"Help and Support" menu) also is excellent: simply search on "briefcase" for a wealth of data.

Earlier versions of Windows all the way back to Win95 also have information on Briefcase in their help files, although the further

back you go, the sketchier the information becomes.

There's also a [general FAQ](#) on the Briefcase available from Microsoft; and a [broad Knowledgebase search](#) can turn up any additional information you may require.

Offline Files

Offline Files are similar to Briefcase files only in general concept--you work on copies of files that can later be synchronized with the originals. But the details are quite different.

In Briefcase, the files are the portable part; you bring the Briefcase files to another PC for editing, and then return the Briefcase files to the original location for synching. With Offline Files, there's usually no second PC involved. Rather, there's one PC that's sometimes connected to a network, and sometimes not. Offline Files lets you keep working on what are normally shared network files even when you're disconnected from the network. Microsoft explains it this way:

You can make network files available offline by storing shared files on your computer so they're accessible when you are not connected to the network. This can be helpful when you use a portable computer to accomplish most of your work, or if your standalone computer is frequently disconnected from the network. You can work with offline files the same way you work with files when you're connected to the network.

When you reconnect to the network, any changes that you made to files while working offline are updated to the network. This process is called synchronization. If you and someone else on the network made changes to the same file, you can save your version of the file to the network, keep the other version, or save both.

To set up your PC to use Offline Files, open My Computer/Tools/Folder Options, and select "Enable Offline Files."

Right away, you may run into a "gotcha," because Offline Files can't be enabled if you also have Fast User Switching enabled. If you have Fast User Switching enabled, you'll have to turn it off (via User Accounts in Control Panel) to get the "Enable Offline Files" option.

Next, to actually make a specific network file or folder available offline, open My Computer normally and select or navigate to the shared network file or folder that you want to make available even when you're not on the network. Then, in the File menu, choose "Make Available Offline."



For this to work, of course, you must be on a network; there must be shared network files or folders to which you have access; and to which you have connected. After that, unfortunately, the Offline Files waters get very deep, very fast depending on what networking features and attributes are in play. In general, with larger networks, the network Administrator (not the local PC's Administrator persona) probably will set usage guidelines and policies for Offline Files. Because much of the detail in using Offline Files may depend on local usage rules, we can only go so far in a general discussion like this one.

But if Offline Files sounds like the right tool for you, there's plenty of background material to help you (and your network Admin) get started. For example, see [How to use offline files in Windows XP](#); and search for the phrase "offline files" (without the quotes) in the Windows Help File. In XP alone, that one search will yield info on seven Tasks; eight Overviews, Articles, and Tutorials; 15 full-text searches; and 15 Knowledgebase articles; all relating to Offline Files. It's a complex topic, but there's plenty of help available!

Strengths And Drawbacks

Neither Briefcase nor Offline Files is the final answer to file syncing between local and remote PCs, or PCs that sometimes "go remote" on their own. In fact, there probably is no single, final answer, due to all the vagaries involved: what's right for one setup may not work at all in another.

But Briefcase or Offline Files may be *an* answer; and can work in many cases. You already have both tools available to you inside your copy of Windows, so it makes sense to try them: You just may find a useful tool that doesn't cost you a penny extra!

From Fred Langa List