Acronis PartitionExpert: Your Very Own Partition Techie
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Topic: Productivity Tools

A few months ago I had a few minutes of free time on my hands and so I made a stop at Best Buy to browse for some networking equipment. As I walked toward the hardware section, a software package caught my eye that I hadn't heard of before: "Acronis PartitionExpert." Realizing the need for a good partitioning tool in many environments that use GNU/Linux, I made a mental note to contact Acronis when I got back to the office.

After receiving a copy of Acronis PartitionExpert for review, we fired up one of *OfB Lab's* testing systems -- one that actually still has a copy of Windows on it -- and got ready to install the package. While, frustratingly, you must have a copy of Windows on your system to get Acronis PartitionExpert installed, the install process can create a boot disk or CD that will allow you to accomplish partitioning tasks without any operating system requirements. Acronis's Stephen Lawton reports that the CD in the retail box version (as opposed to the downloaded version) can be used as a boot disc as well, meaning that those who purchase a boxed copy will not have to bother with Windows.

We opted for the CD boot disc and within about five minutes of starting the installer, we were rebooting our system and booting off the Acronis PartitionExpert CD (which actually runs a customized version of Red Hat). After waiting a few more moments for the CD to boot, we were placed in a pleasant, XP-like, interface with very strong similarities to the look of "My Computer." In the right panel of the program we could see the existing partitions on both hard disks, and the left panel had basic operation options, such as creating a partition from free space.

One thing we appreciated in Acronis PartitionExpert, over similar products such as PartitionMagic, was that we weren't immediately bombarded by all of the possible functionality available. Rather, Partition Expert can run in an "automated mode" that makes it a snap to create partitions for Windows and Linux (from free space or from free space in an existing partition) and delete partitions. For example, when we wanted to create a new partition on the drive, the wizard interface offered the option of using free space or resizing any of the existing partitions to create the new partition.

On the other hand, if you need the full functionality of the product, you can easily select the menu item to move to the "manual mode" which gives you the full gauntlet of options in the same friendly interface. All of the standard partitioning tools are available, including resizing partitions, converting partitions, and setting the partition type ids.

Much of this functionality, however, is pretty well standard issue with partitioning tools. What is really impressive is that Acronis has taken the time to make the product truly a partitioning tool suited to Linux partition management by including support not only for resizing ext2 and ext3 partitions, but also the popular ReiserFS type partitions, functionality missing from every other partitioning product that we have looked at.

We also found the product was fast even on our very modest Pentium II 450 MHz test box, with a 5 gig NTFS partition containing nearly 4 gigabytes of files resizing in just thirty three seconds if we resized the end of the partition. If we pushed the partition toward the end of the drive, the resize process still came out at just two minutes. Repeating the same tests with ReiserFS, we found that the times came to six seconds and four minutes, respectively.

When deleting partitions, the package also offers the handy feature of writing over the data in the partition to make it harder to recover (for security purposes). We tried deleting and doing one overwrite pass on a ReiserFS partition and found it took only three minutes to complete the task (the amount of overwrites is selectable, so it is possible to do more than just one pass).

All in all, Acronis has created a really impressive product that really should prove useful to GNU/Linux system administrators and heterogeneous system administrators who need a reliable, user-friendly partitioning tool. If you are in the market for such a tool, Acronis PartitionExpert, competitively priced at less than fifty dollars, should definitely be on your short list of products to consider.

Summary of Acronis PartitionExpert 2003

Overall:	A	B	C	D	F
Functionality:	A	B	C	D	F
User Interface:	A	B	C	D	F
Total Cost of Ownership:	A	B	C	D	F
Deploy:	YES	NO		MAYBE	

UPSIDE: *With an easy to use interface, superb support for GNU/Linux, and features comparable to its competitors, PartitionExpert is a great choice if you need a fully featured partition management solution ($44.95, www.acronis.com).*

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