Offline Files & Sync Center

The *offline files feature* is designed for laptop lovers. It lets you carry off files that ger-ally live on your office network, so you can get some work done while you're away.

Then, when you return and connect your laptop to the office network, Windows automatically copies your edited, updated documents back to their original locations on the network, intelligently keeping straight which copies are the most recent. (And vice versa—if people changed the network copies while you were away, Windows copies them onto your laptop.)
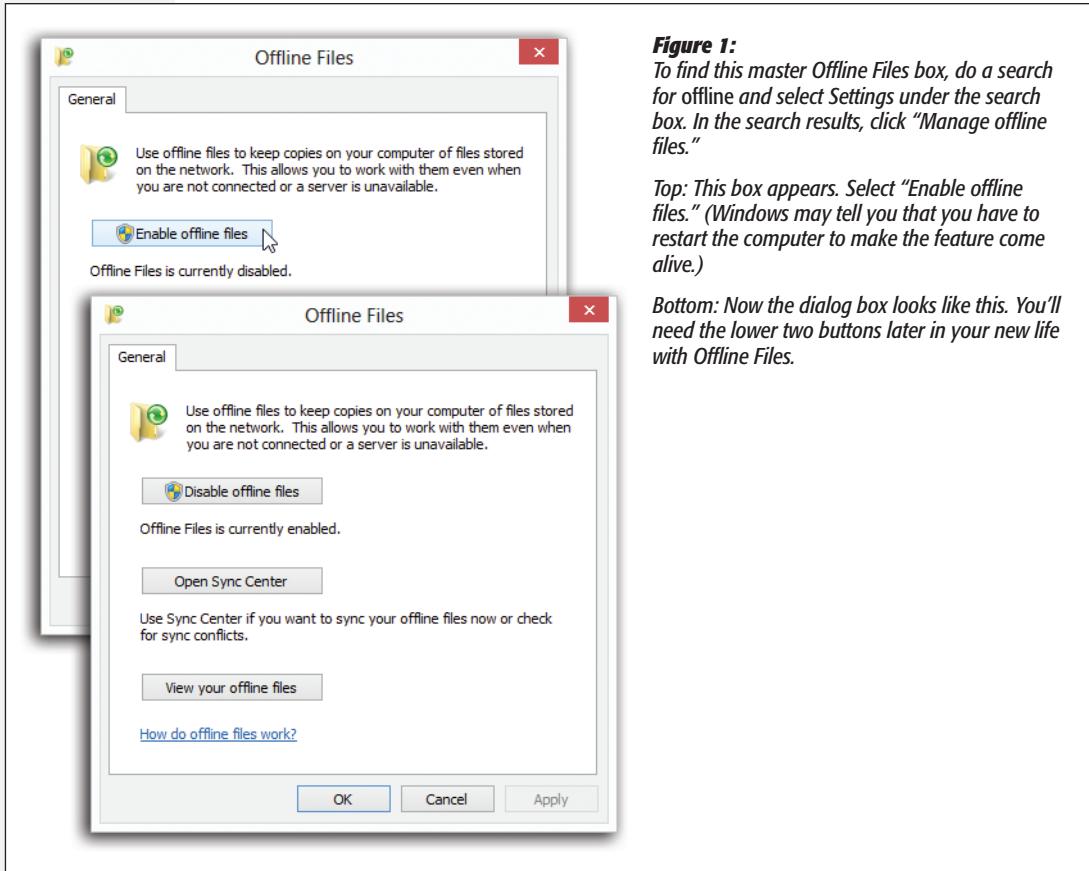
Of course, these days, the OneDrive is a much better solution to this problem. But maybe you're still curious; read on.

Offline Files is a great feature for corporate workers. When you reconnect to the home network, Windows triggers an automatic, seamless, invisible synchronization of the files you worked on while you were away—there's no alert balloon, no need to shut down all programs and manually trigger the sync.

You can also command Windows to sync at more specific times: every time you con-nect to the network, for example, or at 3:00 a.m.

Turn on the Feature

Before you can use Offline Files, you have to flip its master switch on. See Figure 1.

Figure 1:
To find this master Offline Files box, do a search for offline *and select Settings under the search box. In the search results, click "Manage offline files."*

Top: This box appears. Select "Enable offline files." (Windows may tell you that you have to restart the computer to make the feature come alive.)

Bottom: Now the dialog box looks like this. You'll need the lower two buttons later in your new life with Offline Files.

Preparing to Leave the Network

To tell Windows which files and folders you want to take away with you on the laptop, find them on the network. Proceed as shown in Figure 2.

Windows now takes a moment—well, quite a few moments, actually—to copy the selected files and folders to your laptop. Fortunately, it works in the background, between your mouse clicks and keystrokes.
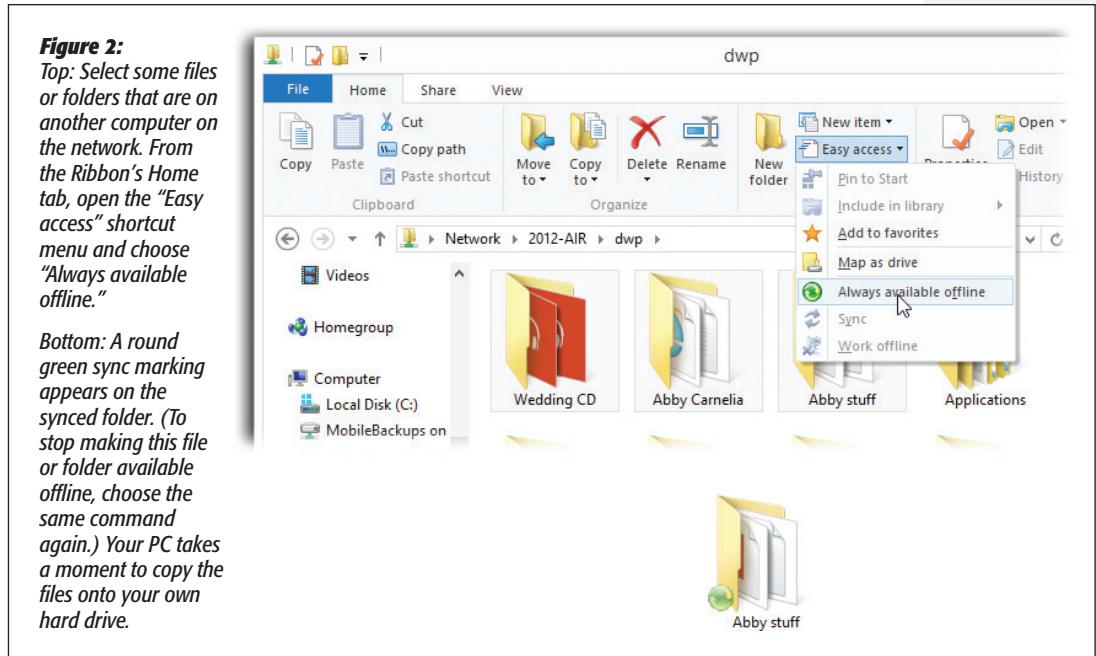

Note: If somebody on the network is actually using those files right now—has them open—you'll get an error message at this point. Wait until those documents are closed, and then try again.

It's an excellent idea to synchronize your folders manually every time you're about to leave the network, so the files on your laptop are up to date. (In fact, if you're away and you try to edit an out-of-date file, Windows won't even let you open it!)

To trigger the syncing, open that "Easy access" pop-up menu again (Figure 2) and choose Sync.

Figure 2:
Top: Select some files or folders that are on another computer on the network. From the Ribbon's Home tab, open the "Easy access" shortcut menu and choose "Always available offline."

Bottom: A round green sync marking appears on the synced folder. (To stop making this file or folder available offline, choose the same command again.) Your PC takes a moment to copy the files onto your own hard drive.

Working Offline

Now suppose you're untethered from the network, and you have a moment to get some work done.

To find the synced folders, open the master Offline Files dialog box (Figure 1); click "View your offline files."

A new window opens (Figure 3). There before you is a list of all the files and folders to which you "subscribed" before you left the network (Figure 3).
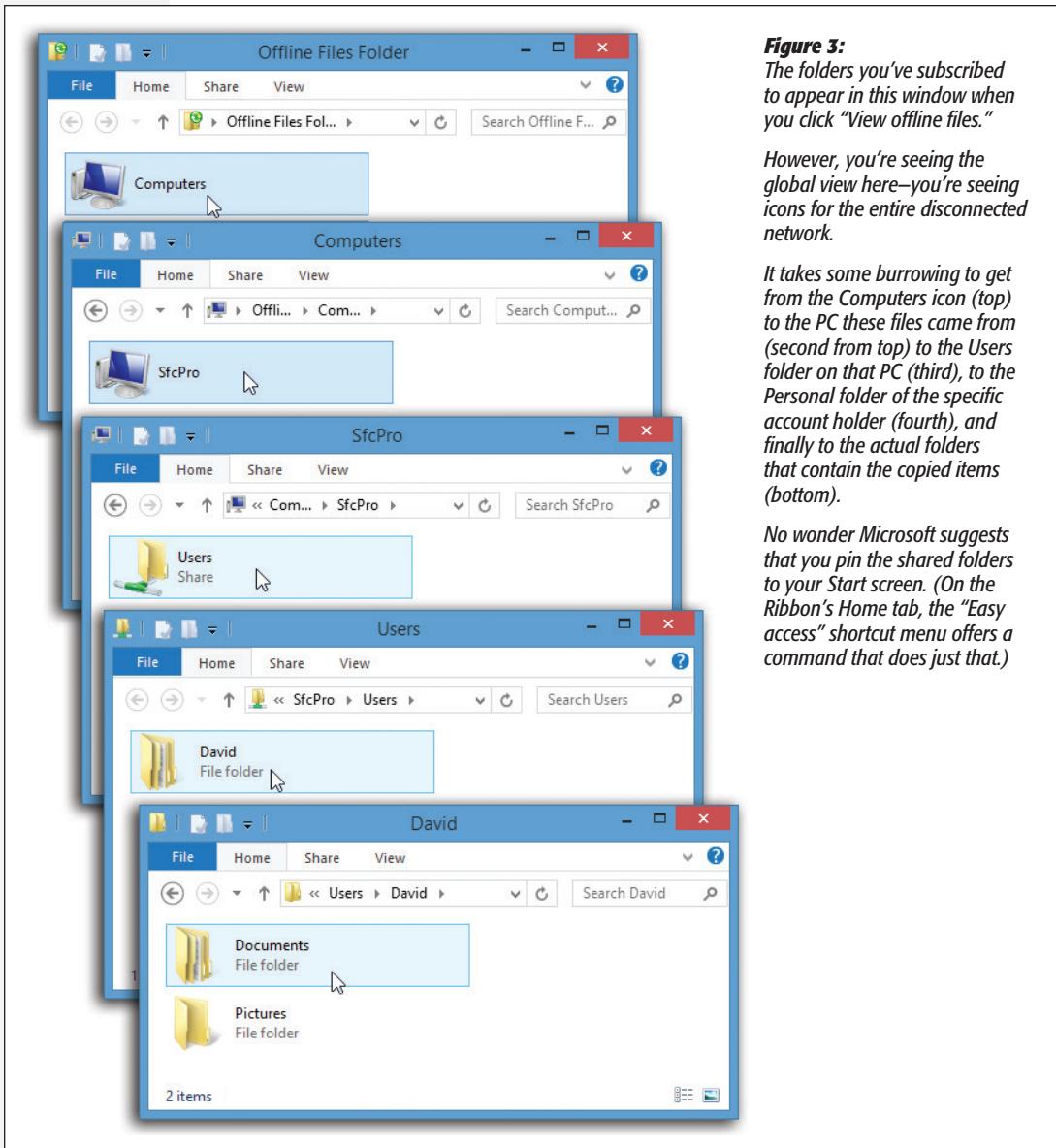

Note: In previous versions of Windows, you'd also see the icons of folders you didn't ask for, displayed for context with red X's on their icons. That doesn't happen in Windows 8.1; Microsoft found that people were just too confused about what those other icons were.

You're free to work with offline files and folders exactly as you would if you were still connected to the network. You can revise, edit, and duplicate files, and even create

new documents inside offline folders. The permissions remain the same as when you connect to the network.

Tip: Sometimes you want to work with your laptop copies (not the network copies) even if you're still *on* the network—if, say, the network connection is not so much *absent* as *slow.* To do that, open the folder on the network that contains the offline files. On the Ribbon's Home tab, open the "Easy access" pop-up menu and choose "Work offline."
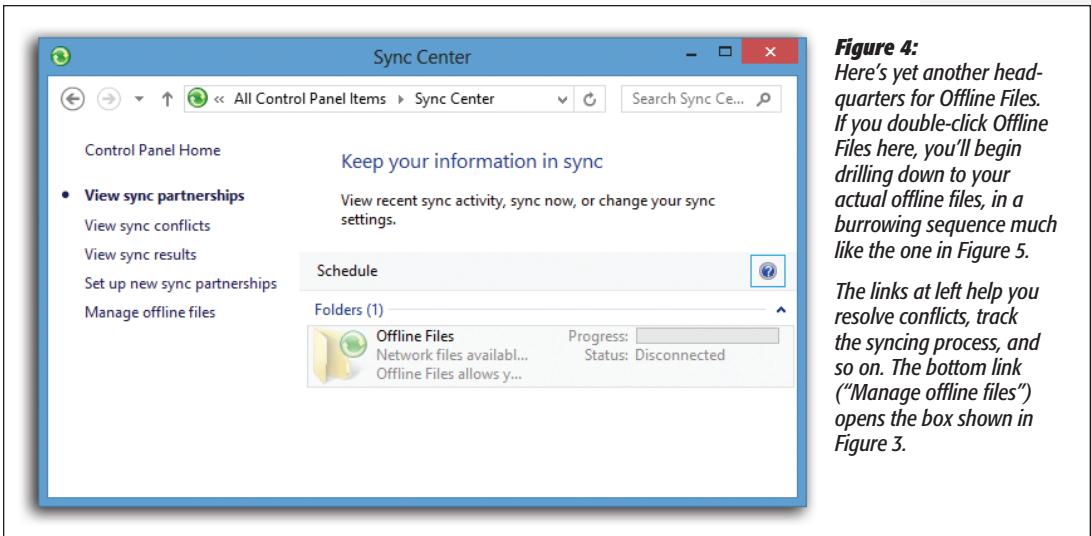
Reconnecting to the Network

Now suppose you return from your jaunt away from the office. You plop your laptop down on your desk and reconnect to the network.

Once Windows discovers that it's home again, it whirls into action, automatically comparing your set of offline files and folders with the master set on the network. (Windows copies only the changed pieces of each file—not the entire file.)

Along the way, Windows attempts to handle discrepancies between the two sets of files as best it can. For example:

- If your copy and a network copy of a file don't match, Windows wipes out the older version with the newer version, so both locations have the latest edition.

- If you deleted your copy of a file, or if somebody on the network deleted the original, Windows deletes the corresponding file so that it no longer exists on either machine. (That's assuming that nobody edited the file in the meantime.)

- If somebody added a file to the network copy of a folder, you get a copy of it in your laptop's copy of the folder.

- If you've edited an offline file that somebody on the network has deleted in the meantime, Windows offers you the choice to save your version on the network or to delete it from your laptop.

- If you delete a file from your hard drive that somebody else on the network has edited in the meantime, Windows deletes the offline file from your hard drive but doesn't delete the network copy from the network.

Figure 4:
Here's yet another head-quarters for Offline Files. If you double-click Offline Files here, you'll begin drilling down to your actual offline files, in a burrowing sequence much like the one in Figure 5.

The links at left help you resolve conflicts, track the syncing process, and so on. The bottom link ("Manage offline files") opens the box shown in Figure 3.

- If both your copy and the network copy of a file were edited while you were away, a balloon in the notification area notifies you of the conflict. Click it to open the Sync Center, where you can decide which version "wins." (Until you do that, the file in question remains offline, on your laptop.)

The Sync Center

As you've discovered, the Offline Files feature requires trips to three different headquarters. You turn on the feature in one place (Figure 1); you identify the files you want to sync in another (Figure 2); and you view the files in a third place (Figure 3). Wouldn't it be nice if Offline Files could get its act together?

It would, and it has. The Sync Center is just what you need. To open it, try one of these methods:

- **Click in the Search box.** Type *sync center* and select Settings under the search box. In the search results, click Sync Center.

- **Click Open Sync Center** in the dialog box shown in Figure 3.

- **In the Control Panel, search for** *sync*. Open the Sync Center result.

However you decide to get there, the resulting window looks something like Figure 4.