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Automatic file transfers: scheduled SFTP and rsync from a script

Ideas & Everyday Automations

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Automatic file transfers: scheduled SFTP and rsync from a script

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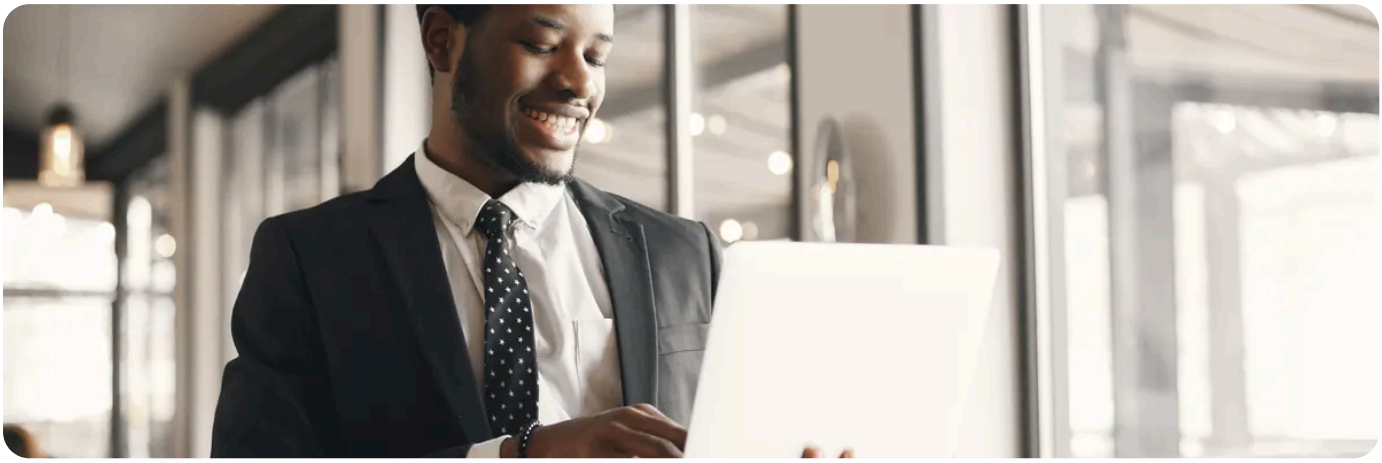

To send or fetch files every night without opening FileZilla, use a cron job that runs the `sftp` command with an instruction file, or `rsync` over SSH. Both need **key authentication**, because nobody is there to type a password, and **SSH switched on for your account**. On Interweb's shared servers the SSH port is 2299, and every plan has SSH.

When it makes sense

Situation	Direction	Tool
Fetching a supplier's price file every night	From the supplier to you	`sftp` with `get`, or `rsync`
Sending exports to a partner	From you to the partner	`sftp` with `put`
Copying backups to another server of yours	From you to the other machine	`rsync`

Setting it up, step by step

1. **Confirm where SSH is. Every plan has it: the Terminal and "SSH Access" appear in cPanel. See SFTP instead of FTP.**

2. **Create a key just for this job.** In cPanel's "SSH Access" you generate a pair. If the destination is another machine, the public key must be authorised there, on the account that will receive the files.

3. **Connect once by hand**, to accept the server's fingerprint. Without that, the first connection from cron stops waiting for an answer that never comes.

4 **Write the instruction file** for `sftp`, with lines such as `cd /folder` and `put /home/ACCOUNT/export.csv`. The command is `sftp -P PORT -i /home/ACCOUNT/.ssh/KEY -b /home/ACCOUNT/instructions.txt user@server`. The `-b` runs in non-interactive mode.

5 **Or use rsync:** `rsync -az -e "ssh -p PORT -i /home/ACCOUNT/.ssh/KEY" /home/ACCOUNT/backups/ user@server:/destination/`. It only sends what changed.

6 **Put the command in cron** with a log, and check at the destination that the files arrived: **cron jobs**.

Rehearse before you schedule. `rsync` has a simulation option (`-n`, or `--dry-run`) that shows what it would copy without copying anything, and `-v` lists the files. Run it like that the first time and check the source and destination are where you think. A slash too many or too few at the end of a path changes the result.

! **A key with no passphrase, in a cron job, is a key that anyone who steals it can use.**
So use a key just for this job, with the destination account limited to the folder it needs, and read permission for you alone on the key file. Never put it inside `public_html`.

`rsync` has an option that deletes the source after sending (`--remove-source-files`). It is useful and dangerous: use it only after watching the copy work for several nights, and never on files that exist only there. For backup strategy, see **making and keeping your own backup, and testing that it works**.

If the supplier only offers FTP
, ask for SFTP. Plain FTP sends the password unprotected. If there is nothing else, use FTP over TLS and keep that password for this job alone.

NEED A HAND?

Not sure where to find SSH or how to set up the key? Ask us. Every plan includes SSH.

Open a ticket →

SEE ALSO

- **SFTP instead of FTP: when you can, and why it is better** →
- **The cPanel Terminal: a command line with nothing to install** →
- **Automatic backups of your own application: cron and mysqldump** →

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