

Technology Corner

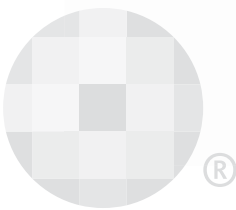
By Joseph G. Hodges, Jr.

Microsoft Windows 7—Should You Upgrade, When and How?

Microsoft Windows 7, the successor to the Microsoft Vista operating system, was finally released to the public in late October of 2009 after a public sector beta-testing period that first began in April of 2009. It was released with much fanfare and the promise that it would cure or improve many of the features that were so disliked in Vista. Whether or not that is so will be examined in part in this article.

As a preface, the readers of this column need to know that I am currently not running Windows 7 or even Vista on any of my current PCs, as my approach to operating system upgrades is to wait until at least the release of SP1 (Service Pack 1) before even considering such a move. Also, I heard such bad things about Vista when it first came out that I concluded early on that I would never upgrade to Vista. Thus, I am currently operating with two Windows XP portables, a Windows 98 desktop and a Windows 95 desktop whose functions are relegated to some specialized Windows 95 programs and a few DOS based programs I still run periodically. When and if I ever do upgrade to Windows 7, I will also be faced with the decision of either replacing the desktop PCs or getting another portable that I can use both at the office and on the road, as the cost of having to replace hardware every two to three years just to keep up with changing operating systems is often prohibitive, especially for solo practitioners.

With that said, let's now turn to an examination of Windows 7 and its features. Windows 7 was ushered in with quite a media blitz from Microsoft, and rightfully so, given that Microsoft knew full well how strong the reluctance of consumers and business people had been to Vista almost since its initial retail release in January of 2007. Vista was seen as buggy and a memory hog that lacked backward compatibility with many Windows



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XP applications. As a result, Vista's adoption rate never was very high. It occupied only 19 percent of the OS (Operating System) market by the end of 2009, while Windows XP occupied 69 percent. Knowing this, Microsoft attempted to address these concerns early by highlighting the new Windows XP Mode that is designed to run XP-based applications within a virtual environment in Windows 7. eWeek.com says XP Mode "is intended as a 'last ditch' fix for any programs that managed to elude Windows 7's focus on backward compatibility." Microsoft also attempts to address this lack of a linear upgrade path between Windows XP and Windows 7 on its Web site with step-by-step instructions for making the transition. In theory, a clear upgrade path already exists for Windows Vista and Windows 7.

The next issue is, assuming you have decided to upgrade, what will it cost you to do so, and are there legal ways to get Windows cheaper or even for free? The official price list for Windows 7 shows prices ranging from \$120 for a Home Premium upgrade to \$320 for a fully licensed copy of Windows 7 Ultimate. Not surprisingly, the best deals go to PC manufacturers and you can reap the benefits of that by buying a new PC with Windows 7 preloaded on it. However, most of us do not want to have to buy a new PC if we can possibly avoid it, so we will be looking instead for upgrade versions. If you custom-build a new PC, you can choose the exact Windows 7 edition you want by selecting the right OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) versions which generally command the best prices. If you purchase a preconfigured PC from an online or local retailer, you most likely will get Windows 7 Home Premium, although on a netbook you likely will get the basic Starter edition. Purchasing a full retail upgrade is one option, but the Anytime Upgrade option can be much cheaper. For example, a retail upgrade of Windows 7 Professional costs \$199.99. However, if you have a PC with Windows Home Premium already installed on it, you can buy the Anytime Upgrade option for \$89.95 direct from Microsoft. Similarly, you can go from Windows 7 Home Premium to Ultimate for \$139.95. Still another option for those who have already bought a new PC with Windows 7 on it is to buy a second upgrade copy of Windows 7 for use with another PC as a discount, with the estimated prices here being \$49.95 for the Home Premium Edition, \$99.99 for the Professional Edition and \$119.99 for the Ultimate Edition. This pricing is available from most of the popular PC merchants. A popular upgrade path exists for eligible college and university students, who can purchase a fully functioning upgrade edition of Windows 7 Home Premium or

Professional for only \$29.99, but you must be actively enrolled for at least 0.5 course credit and have an .edu address. Also, this deal is limited to one per student and is nontransferable. You get the \$29.99 price if you digitally download it from Digital River, or else you can pay an additional \$13 for physical disks. For students enrolled in a science, technology, engineering or math department at an educational institution that belongs to the MSDN (Microsoft Developer Network) Academic Alliance, you can get free software for use in your studies.

The next crossroad in your upgrade path is to determine, to the extent you can, if your existing PC equipment and software is compatible with Windows 7. Fortunately, here Microsoft itself has provided a compatibility Website that can assist you greatly in this regard. It is located at www.microsoft.com/windows/compatibility/en-us/default.aspx. Windows states on this page: "Windows 7 is designed to be compatible with the most popular hardware and software products you use every day. Thousands of these will just work, but if you have questions we've got you covered with the resources below." Very promising, yes—realistic, remains to be seen. Not only can you obtain the compatibility status of your individual software and hardware items but you can apply the Windows 7 Upgrade Advisor to your entire system. Additional compatibility resources are available at the bottom of that page including how to upgrade to and getting to know Windows 7.

So just what is under the hood of Windows 7 that makes it so attractive as an upgrade possibility? Let's take a look at some of the key features and improvements.

Initial reports are that Windows 7 sure beats Windows Vista in many categories, but then that is not all that surprising given the rather cool reception that Vista has received since its launching in 2007. Although there are similarities between the two, Windows 7 includes major user interface updates, and it promises to work much better with third-party hardware and software. Some of the key new features include HomeGroup, simplified home networking for sharing media, files and printers; Divide Stage, which is a single page that gives access to all the capabilities of a device such as a phone, MP3 player, printer, or camera; Windows Touch for mouse-free PC interaction on touch-sensitive screens; and a newly redesigned Taskbar. Mike Nash, the Windows Product Manager, reports that all software and hardware that works with Vista will work with Microsoft 7 because the driver support is the same, and that the kernel version number will remain at 6.1, which will help avoid

some problems with older software that has not been updated to work with a new major version number.

As for the newly redesigned Taskbar and Desktop, the Taskbar buttons are larger but take up less horizontal space and include devices (such as printers and scanners) plus applications. You can hover over one of the buttons and it will bring up a preview thumbnail of each document open in the application, which can then be expanded into a full-screen preview of the document, or you can get a “jump list” for one-click access to tasks associated with a given application. You can now relocate buttons along the Taskbar or pin an individual button to a set location. Windows behavior has also changed for the better in that dragging a window to the side when there is another window behind, it neatly arranges the windows in a side-by-side half-screen mode, and dragging or “snapping” a window title bar to the top of the screen automatically maximizes the window thus avoiding the need to do this resizing manually.

New in Windows Explorer is the concept of Libraries. These are virtual folders that can live across multiple folders and make like content scattered in various folders easily accessible. The default libraries are for Documents, Downloads, Music, Pictures and Videos, but you can freely create libraries of your own with whatever criteria you choose. In the System Tray you can now determine what events and applications can place icons in the tray and when they can pop up warning messages. Another entry in the Tray is the Action Center icon, which consolidates messages from many purveyors of unwanted messages, including Windows Update.

Windows 7 also has better device support because it uses the same device drivers as Vista. The new Devices and Printers folder, along with a Device stage page for each piece of hardware, promises to make using those devices and getting to all their capabilities much clearer and easier. Multifunctional printers will have just one entry with all their functions showing. The Device Stage page, which is to be supplied by the hardware manufacturer, will use an open XML format to present a photo of the device, access to all of its settings and capabilities, and a link to its manual or vendor-supplied software.

Windows 7 will bring touch screen capabilities to the Windows operating system for the first time—sort of like Blackberry or iPhone on steroids. Its improvements include a Start menu of choices that enlarge when a screen is touched and support for multitouch gestures such as the ability to flick your finger to pan down through many-page-deep windows or Web sites. A water drop symbol tells you when you are in touch

screen mode, and your mouse cursor disappears so as to avoid input confusion. Sadly, you have to have a PC that is touch screen compatible and supports multi-touch input in order to be able to use this tool.

In the accessories department, the Paint image-editing tool has finally been updated with a Ribbon-style menu bar. The big Copy button is especially useful for grabbing images from the clipboard or taking quick screen shots with the Print screen key without the need to install screen-capture software. The WordPad text editor has been significantly improved with new features. The Calculator has also been updated, and there is a new accessory called Sticky Notes that does the digital equivalent of the familiar paper variety.

In the Windows Notification Area (e.g., system tray), which has been a cluttered mess in the past, you can now chose for each application to display or hide its icon and notifications. The overflow area for icons that do not fit in the Notification Area now pops up. You can even drag and drop icons between the overflow and the notification sections. As for Themes, it lets you choose collections of wallpaper, color schemes, sounds and screen savers and allows you to see a full-screen preview with one click. Another slick one for someone as old as me is Magnifier, which will enlarge a portion of the display.

In the User Account Control (UAC) area, this was one of the biggest bugaboos of Vista. Windows 7 has attempted to correct this by allowing you to adjust the UAC enforcement with a slider that ranges from “Always Notify” to “Never Notify,” with the latter making the most sense for a one-person PC. Two useful intermediate settings are one that notifies you of attempts to install software or change settings without making you click to continue, and another that notifies you only when a program tries to change settings. The UAC settings reside in a new control Panel section called Window Solutions Center.

Several Windows applications have changed their address to the “cloud,” meaning they have relocated to that part of the Internet cloud occupied by Windows Live services and software. The plan is to deliver Windows Live Essentials such as Mail, PhotoGallery, and Movie Maker, online rather than with the OS installation disks. This will allow for more frequent periodic updates and will make these programs play better with third-party online services.

PC Magazine’s editors first impressions of Windows 7 are that it seems a little faster than Vista. It is slimmer, taking up only 9GB vs. 15GB for Vista. There are plenty of new major OS changes and a trimmed-down memory footprint. A lot of thought has been given to prevent-

ing software from doing bad things. All in all they see Windows 7 as Microsoft's chance to remedy the bad impression made by Vista, which has been roundly criticized for incompatibilities and steep hardware requirements.

PC World's editors report that Microsoft appears to have made addressing Vista's performance problems a matter of priority and made Windows 7 perceptively leaner, meaner, and faster, thereby improving its use of system resources. Other improvements are intended to make the OS less crash-prone and to prolong portable battery life. They see the new Home Group tool as the answer for those of us who use company PCs on noncompany networks.

All in all, it looks as if an upgrade to Windows 7 is probably a safe bet, with the critical questions being when and how. For most of us the ideal solution may be a single test machine with an original OEM install of Windows 7 in order to see for sure how well it handles our existing software programs before pursuing an upgrade of the rest of our machines. To assist you in this regard, some of the following resources may be of help:

- PC World, Rick Broida, *How to Get the Best of Windows 7 Without Upgrading—Coax New Life out of Vista and XP* (August 2009)
- PC World, Nick Mediati, *Forward-Speed Tests: Windows 7 Versus Vista* (July 2009)
- Inside PCMag Newsletter, *Microsoft Unveils Win 7 Pricing: Is the Win 7 Price Right?* (June 26, 2009)
- CBS Interactive, Inc., Ed Bott's Microsoft Report, *Your Top Windows 7 Questions, Answered* (November 12, 2009)
- eWeek Magazine, *Ten Things Missing from Windows 7* (a slide show) (November 2009)
- PC Magazine eNewsletter, Ziff Davis Media, Inc. *What's New Now, Special Windows 7 Newsletter* (October 22, 2009). Includes stories on Upgrade for Free, Performance, Can Your Laptop Run and Windows 7 System Reviews.
- Microsoft Corporation Windows: *Windows 7 Is Here* (October 23, 2009)
- Microsoft Corporation Newsletters, *For the former Windows XP User, Welcome to Windows 7* (August 19, 2009). A quick guide to help familiarize yourself with some of the changes in and benefit of Windows 7.

Featured Web Sites:

- PB Works—A Project Management, Intranets and Collaboration Tool
www.plans.pbworks.com/index.php
- Google Profiles—Manage Your Online Profile
www.google.com/profiles
- Ecofont (going green)—uses up to 20 percent less ink (its free)
www.ecofont.eu/results.html
- Calloway, the Ethics of Metadata 2008—Law Practice Tips Blog
<http://jimcalloway.typepad.com/lawpracticetips/2008/11/the-ethics-of-metadata-2008.html>
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