

N.J.
Accounting,
Business &
Technology Show Issue

NEW JERSEY

CPA

Magazine of the New Jersey Society of Certified Public Accountants May • June 2008

Software Solutions

Your Outlook for
One-Touch Email

How to Excel with Your
Spreadsheet Software

Taking in a Stunning
New Vista

Putting Your Stamp of
Approval on Adobe Acrobat



Taking in a Stunning New Vista

Microsoft officially launched Windows Vista in 2007 and followed it up a year later with Service Pack One, which collected all of the fixes and security patches into one set of updates. It seems the time has come for businesses to move to Windows Vista, particularly with Windows 2000 well into the extended phase of the support lifecycle and Windows XP entering that phase next April.



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Security Is the Mother of Invention

Windows Vista, the newest version of Windows, replaces Windows XP. Windows XP was released in late 2001, so it has taken Microsoft seven years to release this newest version — and with good reason. Vista represents a huge step forward in security. XP was released before Microsoft's Trustworthy Computing initiative began, and thus was similar to Windows 2000 in that security was secondary to ease of installation and use.

Microsoft released Windows XP Service Pack 2 in 2003, incorporating a considerable number of security enhancements. But XP SP2 superimposed these enhancements to an operating system that was not designed for security at the outset. Windows Vista, on the other hand, was designed for security from the ground up. Microsoft reengineered the product to specifically avoid the types of security problems customers have been encountering over the last seven years.

User Rights

The core change in Windows Vista

security revolves around user rights. In the earlier Windows version, the default user account ran with administrative privileges, which made it easy to compromise the system's security. Some companies went through the considerable work required to run their systems at a lower rights level, but many companies gave up trying. It was very difficult to do this and still have programs that were able to run properly and manage the systems.

Vista users run their systems by default at a lesser security level and are prompted for an administrator password to be able to do tasks requiring higher rights. This is much more secure and significantly reduces the security exposure risk for both businesses and consumers.

Other Enhancements

Windows Vista introduces a considerable number of additional security enhancements. Internet Explorer 7 is much more secure than the prior version, which is important because the web browser has become the number one point for attacking systems. Internet Explorer also runs under Vista in an isolated context, so if the browser does get compromised, malicious code or hackers can't jump to the operating system kernel. Vista also adds encryption capabilities, anti-spyware software, improved ability to lockdown and secure systems via Group Policy settings and more.

Windows Vista is also a step forward in ease of use. The graphical user interface is simplified and streamlined, making it easier and more intuitive for new users. The Aero mode of Vista provides an enhanced, three-dimensional experience. Enhanced



search capabilities have been added to make it easier to find files, along with preview capabilities to see the contents of files before they are opened. Vista is friendlier for notebook users and has improved power management capabilities, increasing battery life.

Look Before You Leap

However, Windows Vista is not a casual upgrade. It is designed for modern hardware, one with more than two gigabytes of memory and a good video card (with dedicated memory if you plan to run Aero). Essentially, Vista is designed to be deployed onto new PCs, not as an upgrade for pre-2006 ones.

Having a good hardware inventory is critical. Vista should also be installed cleanly onto the hardware; over-the-top upgrade installations on earlier Windows versions tend to be problematic, as leftover files and registry settings can destabilize systems. Upgrade only onto a clean system and then reinstall your programs and data. Microsoft offers a Vista Upgrade Advisor utility, which you can use to scan your Windows XP computers to see if they are ready to be upgraded to Vista or determine what issues you can expect.

Application Compatibility

The next major issue around Vista is application compatibility. Largely because Microsoft so radically changed the security model for Vista, many software programs written for earlier versions of Windows may not run properly under Vista. Thus, it is critically important when planning a Vista upgrade to have a solid inventory of all the software programs your organization uses and check them for compatibility. Microsoft does make this process easier with its Application Compatibility Toolkit, which can be downloaded from Microsoft's website and used to scan your programs against a database Microsoft maintains of programs and their Vista compatibility status. The toolkit also provides steps you can take to resolve issues and make those programs work with Vista.

There are a variety of ways you can work around compatibility issues, including running Microsoft Virtual PC inside of Vista to create a Windows XP or 2000 compatibility mode, delivering programs through Terminal Services or Citrix MetaFrame, or virtualizing applications (such as with Microsoft's SoftGrid technology or Citrix Application Streaming). Either way, it is imperative to plan the upgrade to ensure your programs

work properly under Vista and that this is tested on a sample of machines before anything is rolled out globally.

Rollout

Microsoft has made some great, no-cost rollout tools available to help businesses move to Vista. The Business Desktop Deployment Solution Accelerator allows you to create Windows images — similar to Ghost, but more flexible and for free — and deploy them to PCs. The tools are a bit complex, but when used properly they can significantly expedite Vista deployments.

Microsoft also has a lot of prescriptive guidance available on best practices to help you plan and implement your upgrades and to manage and secure the environment. While moving to Windows Vista is not an effortless exercise, when properly planned and executed, the benefits can be significant. ☑

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