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Windows 7 Ignite Program Delivers Real Benefits

Small Business Owners Reap Early Reward by Upgrading Early

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News that Writes Itself

This is a good news story, one that's easy to write because it writes itself. Microsoft set out to please a customer set and succeeded. In doing so, the company got some good advanced reviews for Windows 7, the new version of the company's main operating system being introduced this fall to replace all previous versions. Microsoft has succeeded with its code, and customers who have had a chance to try it like it and will likely adopt it more deeply in their organizations.

Methodology

Microsoft created the Ignite Program to stimulate Windows 7 Professional adoption among small and midsize business customers. Simply put, the strategy was to let some end users try the software free of charge (and with free hardware) before it was entirely baked on the assumption that, if they had a good experience, they would buy the software for the rest of their systems when it became generally available, tell peers about their positive encounter, and help generate positive buzz in advance of the launch date, scheduled for Oct. 22, 2009. In addition, because Microsoft inaugurated the program right at the start of beta code availability, the company was able to gather feedback from people using the software day in and day out at the heart of their businesses and incorporate that advice into the final feature set.

The basic mechanics of the program involved Microsoft's soliciting around the world sign-ups among partners that serve small businesses. To each partner that signed up and met certain requirements, Microsoft sent up to ten notebook PCs preloaded with Windows 7 Professional. These notebooks were then distributed to the partner's customers, if they signed up to be in the program. The choice of customers was at the partners' discretion. Partners donated their installation and training services, and Microsoft hovered in the background, also without pay, to provide higher level support (e.g., driver help) as necessary. In the end, the program garnered 131 participants altogether.

At this point, the reader might be tempted to ask, "Well, why not? I mean, the whole thing was at no charge to the customer, who at least got some nice hardware out of it, if nothing else. Who wouldn't participate in this program, in which the subjects of study get free hardware and software plus lots of personal attention from Microsoft and the local partner? What's not to love?"

And the answer would be: Microsoft was still shouldering a lot of risk. Supposing the program had backfired, and Windows 7 was awful. Then, the company would have suffered immediate buzzkill, even before it had a chance to launch the product. And the subjects wouldn't buy any more Windows 7. And they would tell all their friends how they hated it. The preferred marketing schema — particularly for a product that follows one that bombed and has

created a fair amount of gun shyness among the target customer base — is “Try to Buy.” And the Ignite Program was a classic in this sense.

As part of the deal, participating customers agreed to give feedback and take calls from interviewers like me (which, by the way, made my job both easy and pleasurable). Microsoft itself wrote up case studies on each customer experience (fairly wooden for the most part), and some customers participated in videos designed to be marketed during the launch period.

Microsoft obtained consent for the interviews from the subjects, and Endpoint Technologies Associates, a technology market analysis firm, conducted 16 half-hour-to-one-hour interviews, administering a questionnaire aimed at understanding the subject’s experience with Windows 7 thus far and how it relates to the principle business of the company. Most interviews were conducted between Sept. 13-25. Several were completed in early October. The questionnaire probed such things as perceived benefits, problems and issues, intention to further deploy, and advice for others as well as baseline questions about numbers of employees, the nature of their work, and software loads.

Endpoint then collated the results, which are presented in the body of this paper, with statistical (such as they are) and anecdotal references.

Context

As part of a coordinated effort led by Microsoft in the run up to the official launch of Windows 7, the company ran a program that brought early code to a number of small and midsize businesses throughout the world. The Ignite Program, part of a larger effort aimed at different user classes, was designed to give users exposure to the Windows 7 code before it was finalized. The company bet that the experience would be positive and lead to wider adoption, both at the particular client accounts and in their individual vertical markets. The reasoning went that one shipping company, for example, that had a good experience both upgrading and using Windows 7 would be likely to help generate positive buzz among other shipping companies, which the first would be in contact with as part of normal business activity.

The difference between this sort of coordination and the entire lack of it during the Windows Vista launch is striking. Much ill has been said of Windows Vista, both of the code itself and of the launch, which was uncertain, delayed, changed, and otherwise moved about until all harmony of timing was beaten out of the PC ecosystem.

This go round, Microsoft left little to chance. Not only was a strict schedule imposed and advertised from the very beginning of Windows 7’s development, but feature creep was forbidden soon after the programming effort began in earnest. Luck and timing fell their way, and Microsoft developers were able to start from an increasingly stable Windows Vista back end. These fortuitous circumstances created an environment in which the Windows 7 code settled down much earlier in the process than it did during past development efforts (and particularly than during the Windows Vista project). Couple that with the new discipline introduced to the development process (tip o’ the hat to Steven Sinofsky, President, Windows Division), and a few hearty early adopters were able to move over to the new system not long after Mike Nash, corporate Vice President, Windows Product Management, announced the availability of pre-beta code during Microsoft’s Professional Developers Conference on Oct. 28, 2008, nearly a year before the planned launch.

From that point onward, increasing droves of testers, and even bona fide users, migrated to the new OS because the improvements it offered over Windows Vista— speed, smaller memory and disk footprint, simplicity, user friendliness — were obvious, and the detriments — incompatibility, unfamiliarity — limited. One interviewee said that he had an application — which had worked on Windows XP, and stopped working under Windows Vista — which started working again when he took the old machine out of mothballs and loaded a Windows 7 stack on it.

Most of the interviewees were running the Release Candidate code (known in official Microsoft parlance as Build 7100). All reported that instability was just plain gone. Several interviewees told me that Windows 7 has been running on one or more PCs non-stop since they were loaded weeks or even months ago. These systems may still be running as you read these words.

Statistical View

Although Endpoint obtained only a small sample of interview subjects, and they were to a great degree self-selecting, the high correlation of their experience still warrants a statistical summary in several areas. After some stage-setting data, highlights on these areas are presented as concisely as possible.

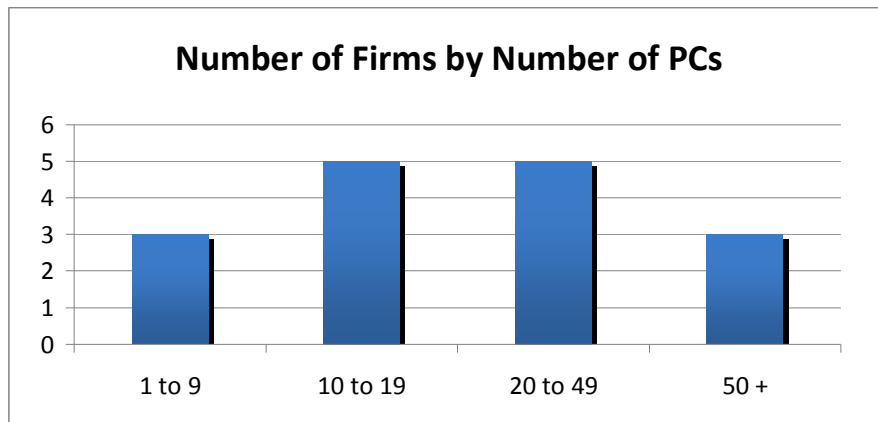
Company Size

The Ignite participants fell clearly into the small and midsize business category, with number of employees ranging from four to 120 and averaging about 26.

Number of PCs

Most firms in the sample had between 10 and 49 PCs, quite often more than the number of employees (Figure 1). Three had more than 50, and three had less than 10.

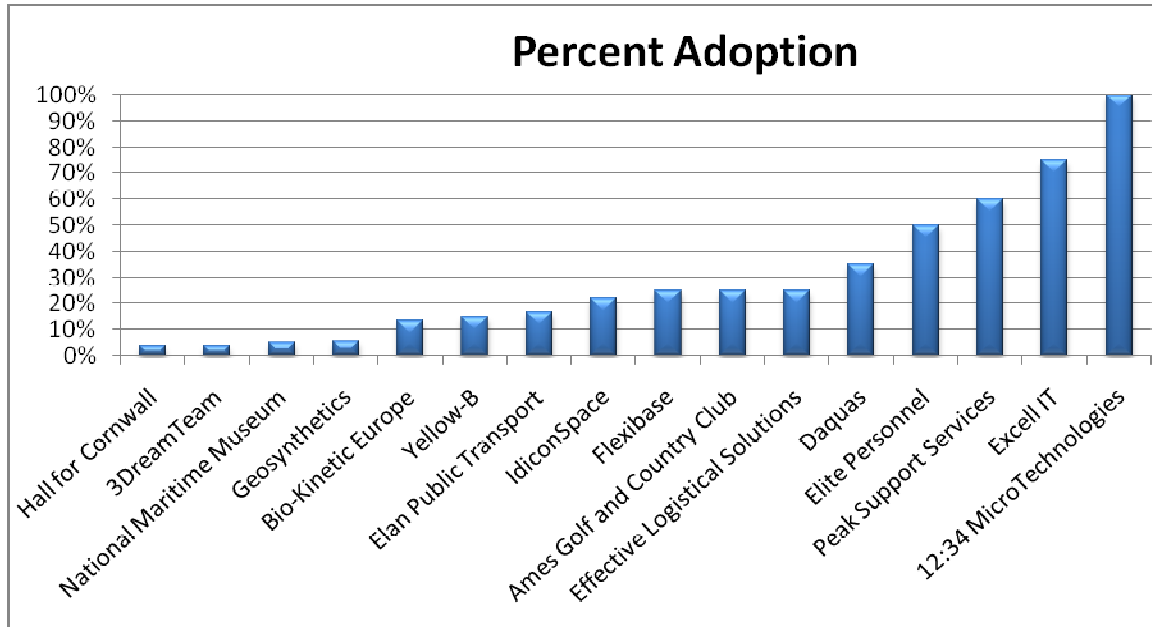
Figure 1



Percent Adoption of Windows 7 Prior to Launch

Since all study subjects were participants in the Ignite Program, everyone had at least two systems, which were deployed anytime from early Spring 2009 through mid-September. But most firms had adopted Windows 7 on other machines, and one had completed migration entirely. Adoption ranged from a low of 4% to a high of 100%, with an average of 30% (Figure 2).

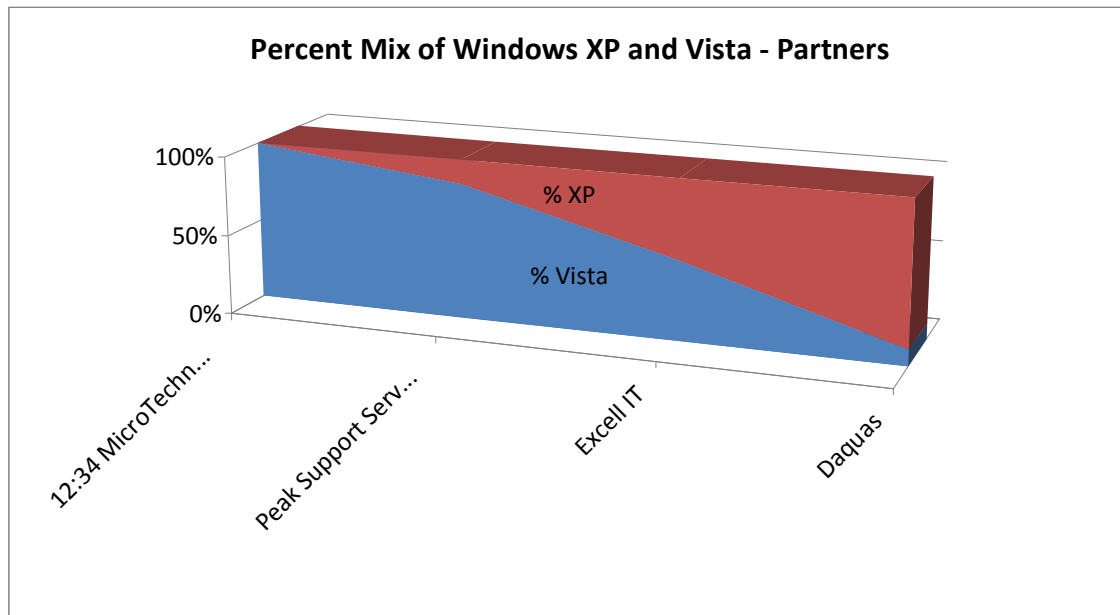
Figure 2



Environment Before Migration

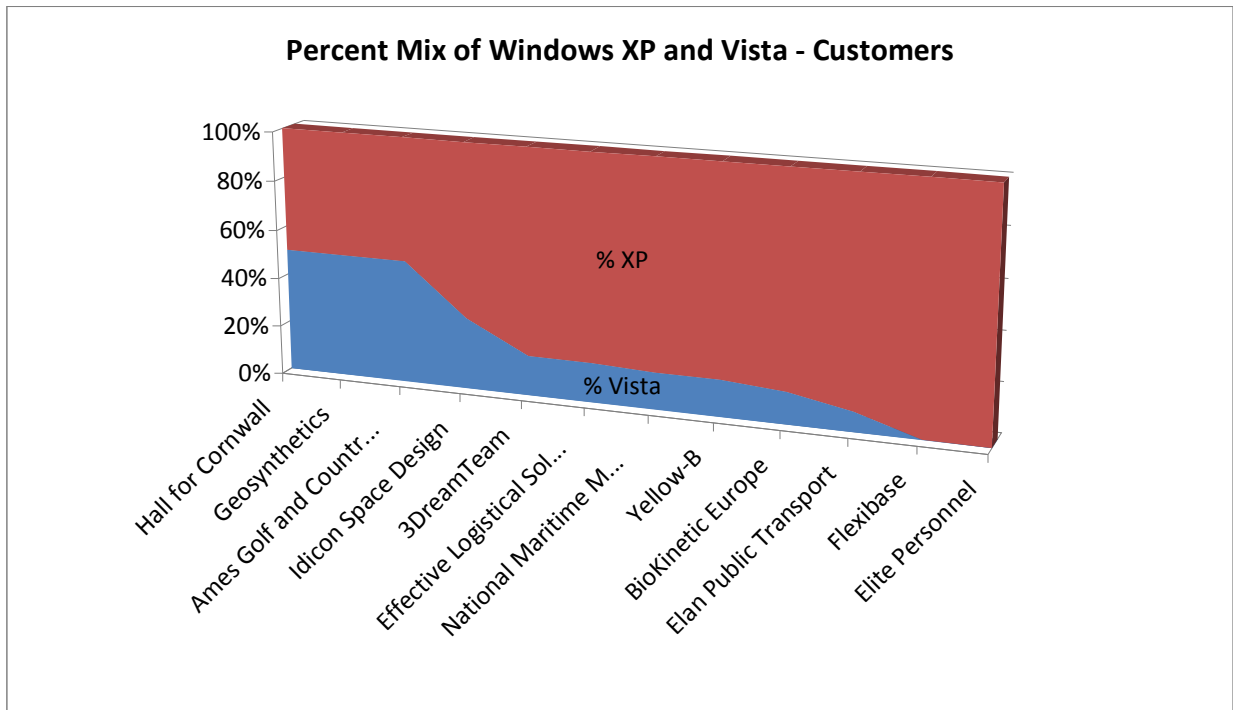
Most participants had a mixed environment of Windows XP and Windows Vista. The Windows XP loads were most often SP3, but a few were still back on SP2. The partners tended to have more Windows Vista, in one case 100%, primarily because their business involves keeping up with Microsoft developments (Figure 3).

Figure 3



Customers tended the other way, with two having all systems on Windows XP prior to the program (Figure 4) . The preponderance of systems overall were running Windows XP. Some Windows 7 machines were new, and therefore had no prior environment.

Figure 4



Windows 7 Version

Most participants were running the Release Candidate (RC) of Windows 7 Professional, sometimes known as Build 7100. This build precedes the Windows 7 Release to Market (RTM), a.k.a. Build 7600, which was given to all Microsoft partners to build systems for shipment starting at launch Oct. 22. Since many of the customers in the survey here were perfectly happy with the RC build and were aware that it will not expire until Spring of 2010, a number of them indicated that they were in no hurry to upgrade to RTM. Nonetheless, three of the four partners had already moved to RTM by mid-September 2009, well ahead of general availability. One even downloaded the bits late on the Sunday night that they became available and had his whole team up and running with them by next day.

Compatibility

Compatibility issues were limited, most resolved within a day or so via automated tools within Windows 7 that seek driver updates both on the local hard drive and online. In some cases, the partner intervened, either with training or installation support. Fine-tuning during the beta phase, Microsoft made a few judicious code modifications, based on customer feedback, to address compatibility problems. Five respondents reported having no issues at all (Table 1).

Table 1

Compatibility Issues	Resolved
Incompatible card reader	New reader purchase; meanwhile, run Windows XP for 4-year-old reader
Printer driver	Rolled back 64 bit to 32 for partial fix; will replace 5-year-old printer
One important one	Continue to run Windows XP on that machine
File format inconsistency	Didn't interfere with work
None	N/A
None	N/A
Rare	Windows XP Mode
None	N/A
None	N/A
Some	Received patches
None	N/A
Rare	Windows XP Mode
Some	Updated drivers
One	Removed beta telemetry
Some	Used search functionality, updated one application
Some with CAD Program	Swapped beta code for RC

Usage of Deployment Tools

Only three of the subjects reported using deployment tools for their installations. Two of those were partners and the other deployed across a fairly large number of PCs (~25). Since, for many, the Ignite Program involved simply receiving two preloaded notebooks, deployment tools were generally unnecessary. Those who did report using tools made use of Microsoft's Windows Automated Installation Kit and the Windows Deployment Toolkit. Also, in cases in which systems loaded with Windows XP were upgraded to Windows 7, a number of interviewees reported making use of the Windows Easy Transfer utility.

Benefits

One way or another, almost everyone in the survey cited **time savings** as the single greatest benefit (Table 2). There was tremendous variation in how that benefit registered, but the unanimity on this point was striking. Other benefits included variants on **more pleasing**, an aesthetic judgment about using Windows 7, **ease of use**, a reference to the simpler interface, and **productivity improvement**, of the IT staff, the users, or both.

Table 2

Benefits	Primary time or money savings
IT productivity improvement	Faster creation of training materials
Time savings	Faster boot, suspend, resume, operation
Time savings	Problem Steps Recorder
Time savings, ease of use	Uptime, faster device recognition, fewer problems
Time savings	Finding data faster
Time savings	Faster tasks for both employee and IT
Time savings	Many small tasks faster
None yet; still writing production code	N/A
Times savings	Faster performance, easier profile management, more intuitive interface
Time savings	Speed and efficiency of boot and operations
Time savings	Many small tasks faster
Time savings	Speed of upgrading and using
Time savings, more pleasing	Fast task switching
Time savings	Faster boot, suspend, resume

Everyone translated the time savings into direct benefits for the company (e.g., the ability to please customers more, to serve more customers in a given amount of time, to find information faster, to solve problems more quickly, to do more business).

Future Benefits

Although four respondents said they could not think of any future benefits that Windows 7 installation would confer on their organizations, the majority cited a variety of such benefits. In most cases, these benefits boiled down to networking effects of having Windows 7 installed on all PCs or of having Windows 7 PCs interacting with other programs. The other significant future benefit envisioned was an increase in productivity as users learned the features over time. Specific future advantages mentioned included:

- Gradual, continual increase in productivity and a boost from integration with Microsoft Office 2010
- Increase in savings with familiarity
- Windows 7 synergies with Microsoft Office 2010
- More savings as users learn features
- Working with Windows Server 2008 R2
- Better networking once installation is completed
- Organizational productivity improvement from completing migration
- Expected new features in future updates
- Operational improvement from use of Homegroup once Windows 7 is installed on all computers
- Incremental user productivity as more users migrate to Windows 7

Favorite Features

Perhaps surprising was the diversity of responses to the question about the respondent's favorite feature. There was some convergence around a combination of features that could be summarized as "more convenient user interface" (i.e., Taskbar, Preview, Jump Lists, and User Interface). Fully half the subjects cited some version of this response. Other favorites included:

- Ready Boost
- Sticky Notes
- Problem Steps Recorder
- Snap
- Searching from virtual library
- Snipping tool
- Location-aware printing
- Local profiles for quick connection to printing and network resources on customer sites
- Ease of navigation

Intention to Further Adopt Windows 7

It should come as no surprise, given their generally positive experiences, that all participants expressed an interest and even described concrete plans to further deploy Windows 7 across their companies. Their responses, however, indicate a variety of approaches, which include:

- May switch Windows Vista machines, but will wait for attrition to migrate Windows XP systems
- Will upgrade a couple of Windows Vista machines; the rest by hardware attrition
- 100% to Windows 7 by yearend
- 100% in undetermined time
- 1/3 to Windows 7 by yearend
- 93% to Windows 7 by late October
- 100% to Windows 7 by yearend
- Will migrate when development effort is complete
- Already done
- As soon as possible
- 50% to Windows 7 by yearend
- 87% to Windows 7 by yearend
- 83% to Windows 7 by 2Q10
- 1/3 to Windows 7 by yearend

Willingness to Recommend Windows 7

And, finally, all participants indicated at least some willingness to recommend Windows 7 deployment to others in their industries. Verbatim responses show that their enthusiasm was really quite marked (Table 3).

Table 3

What Advice Would You Give Others Considering Moving to Windows 7?
“Go for it if you know why you're doing it”
“Don't wait for SP1; Windows 7 was ready six months ago”
“Definitely go for it”
“Definitely do it”
“If your hardware is capable, upgrade”
“Do it as soon as possible”
“Test thoroughly before migration”
“Do it”
“Don't hesitate”
“Move to Windows 7”
“Start planning yesterday”
“Upgrade if possible”
“Do it all at once”
“Time savings, ease of connection, and user friendliness are all reasons to adopt”
“Get one machine running and simulate a day's work on it”
“Swap if you've got Vista; wait for hardware refresh if you've got XP”

Small Firms: The Holistic View

I empathize a fair amount with small business owners, perhaps because I am one. If I do say so, many of these people are heroes in their own right, albeit sometimes on a diminutive scale. For example, as I interviewed the Ignite volunteers and posed various questions to them about their businesses, IT infrastructure, and relationship with Windows 7, they all knew at least something about everything. Some were more directly technical than others, but all had a ready grasp of the issues they face as businesspeople, a holistic view. A small business owner has to be familiar with her whole operation, from the details of business processes to the minutiae of the technology required to run them, not to mention the financial significance of each transaction, proposed or encountered.

Thus, I was not surprised that many of the interviewees responded with specific metrics when I asked them questions about, for example, how much money they saved, or how many man-hours were freed up, by installing Windows 7. They knew how many PCs they had, what their workers were doing with them, what specific tasks were enhanced or eliminated by Windows 7, what their revenues and costs were by category, and what their employees' and customers' issues were, even as they still managed to keep a weather eye on the economy, government actions, and technology developments. These people, unlike their brethren from large enterprises, have their hands all over their businesses.

Interview Subjects

The interview subjects were 16 owners or managers of small businesses, four with Microsoft partners and 12 from Microsoft customers. Geographies included the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Germany, the Czech Republic, India, and Russia. Number of employees ranged from 4 to 120. Number of PCs ran from 5 to more than 50. Business types included representatives from architecture, education, entertainment, real estate, manufacturing, distribution, healthcare, professional services, human resources, software development, and logistics. Partners fell primarily in the professional services category, with some sales and distribution.

The following sections highlight the businesses and Windows 7 experiences of the firms interviewed. The first group follows the customers' stories, most interesting because they have no reason to be either pro or con about the new OS. The Microsoft partners who brought these customers into the Ignite Program are themselves, of course, small businesses. Their stories are set out in a later section.

Customers

Customers were nearly uniformly positive about their participation in the Ignite Program. Most had already experienced concrete benefits from Windows 7 deployment and expected further benefits in the future as they completed their deployments and learned the ins and outs of the new operating system. And although one or two were neutral on Windows 7's benefits, none were negative.

Geosynthetics

Justin Bates is the IT manager for Geosynthetics, a supplier of industrial fabrics for the construction industry, based in Hinckley, Leicestershire, in central England. "Bang in the middle," Bates noted. His company supplies fabrics that go underground in new construction. These materials are used to manage drainage and create impermeable separation between the construction and the surrounding environment. "All we do, you don't see," said Bates.

The company has 25 employees and 36 PCs. Most of the workers are sales oriented. "They buy beans and sell coffee," Bates explained, describing how the company takes in materials, breaks them down, and resells them. These workers primarily use Microsoft Office and Internet Explorer. The firm also has a design department that uses Adobe Creative Suite. The company is in transition from using Sage Line 50 — a popular U.K. accounting package, which is proving underpowered for a rising level of business — to an Access-based system, which can handle the company's increasing need to manage multiple currencies and more complex jobs. This move is causing some of the older PCs to show their age, a circumstance that will lead to their replacement with Windows 7 systems by the end of 2009.

About Windows 7, Bates called it “light years ahead of Vista.” He described the myriad small ways that Windows 7 sped up work, estimating that, across the sales force, migrating would save the company 300 hours or 1.5 man-months annually, “freeing up people’s time to utilize to best effect.”

Bates surprised himself by how positively Windows 7 struck him. “I was skeptical,” he said, “quite prepared to slate it, but it was brilliant. I didn’t think I’d be saying that.”

National Maritime Museum

Jonathan Griffin is the director of the National Maritime Museum in Falmouth, a port city on England’s south coast. Although the museum has 40 employees, there are more PCs than people, around 50 in all, because some of them are single-purpose machines, dedicated to running particular exhibits. These “floor” systems run custom code, sometimes quite complex, written by third parties. However, most are fairly lightly stressed, as they run only Internet Explorer in kiosk mode locally. Otherwise, back-office machines primarily run Microsoft Office, with marketing people tending to use Word and finance people opting mostly for Excel.

Griffin has been using one of the Ignite PCs himself and handed the other off to a colleague. “We’ve just been the two pathfinders,” he said. Most of his installed base is running Windows XP Professional. The migration for the two laptops went smoothly, he said, because most data is stored on central servers anyway. Thus, the migration from Windows XP to Windows 7 and from Microsoft Office 2003 to Microsoft Office 2007 “was a dream,” he averred.

Small issues uncovered during upgrade, such as finding that the museum’s PDF reader was “out of step,” were quickly resolved. “We got the latest versions,” he said. The largest issue was a printer too old to have a Windows 7 driver. Griffin struggled with compatibility for a while. His IT provider managed to get the printer to run by “flipping one of the Windows 7 machines from 64-bit back to 32 bit.” But some of the printer’s functions still wouldn’t work. “At some point, we’ll replace the printer,” he said.

Despite some frustrations, Griffin will convert the Museum’s back-office systems over to Windows 7 via attrition as the older machines are retired. Some of the floor machines, however, will stay as they are, since their functions are analogous to embedded applications, and they work fine just the way they are.

Flexibase

Philip Stone is the operation manager at Flexibase, a provider of short-term office space for small and expanding companies. The firm hosts furnished offices with PCs, access to a server with a small-business application load, and reception services for businesses setting up shop in Birmingham, England. “Most people stay a long time,” he said. “They intend to leave, but don’t.”

Eight PCs, most of which reside in the customer area, are loaded with Microsoft Office. Since Flexibase handles telephone services on behalf of its customers, one of the PCs in the back runs call-logging software.

Flexibase’s experience with the Ignite Program was fairly smooth. On installation and compatibility, Stone was pleased. “It was brilliant. You load the software, load the peripherals, and off you go.” He handled his migration himself, taking the pre-installed Windows 7 notebook and working slowly through his applications one at a time. “If it didn’t work, I’d try it again.” This way, he put all the company’s software on his system. “It didn’t take an IT specialist; I figured it out myself. It was easy,” he said.

Some work remains to be done. The company has yet to move the call-logging software over to Windows 7, but Stone doesn’t anticipate any problem. Since much of Flexibase’s software runs on a server, he said he can just grab a copy from the network. He noted that, including some time spent fiddling with file-format issues between Windows XP and Windows 7, he probably spent “a couple of hours” on the two Ignite machines together, about an hour each, and he figures he will need about an hour per laptop to convert his other machines, but noted that once he learns about the issues, he can run fixes “in parallel.” Because of the small number of PCs to be maintained, Stone has no intention of adopting deployment tools.

Stone plans to deploy Windows 7 “as soon as I can” on the rest of Flexibase’s PCs. He noted that when the Microsoft partner gave him the Ignite demo units, it offered to roll out the rest of his PCs, with a service package, at a discount. After his Ignite experience, he decided to go for the deal, expecting a compatibility benefit from having a unified environment. “Then we’ll all be running on the same system,” he noted.

Stone was frank about Windows Vista. “I didn’t like Vista on personal machines,” he said. “My reading on it is XP changed the way you work. I think Windows 7 will be the same.”

To others contemplating a move to Windows 7, Stone advised, “I would say, definitely go for it. It’s the best OS Microsoft has ever produced — by a long way. I think you can tell, I’m a bit of a fan of it.”

Hall for Cornwall

Stuart Fraser is the IT manager at Hall for Cornwall, a non-profit entertainment space in Truro, England, that offers live theater to the local population. Since Truro is nearly at the tip of far southwest Cornwall, not far from Land’s End, it serves in summer as a popular tourist destination. In winter, things are a bit quieter, but the theater operates all year round. “We have our regulars,” said Fraser.

The hall employs 120 people overall, but many of them are ushers, who are mostly on their feet. But between the box office and back room operations, Fraser has to keep 50 PCs up and running. In addition to Microsoft Office, many of those PCs run AudienceView, an integrated Web-based package for managing entertainment systems and sales, including Internet, phone, and ticketing at the door. Also, a few systems need to run Pegasus, an accounting package popular with small businesses in the United Kingdom.

Hall for Cornwall has only dipped its toe into the Windows 7 water so far, having taken on the two Ignite notebooks. Primarily for budget reasons, Fraser will upgrade over time by attrition, rather than initiating any wholesale swapping out of machines. He will upgrade his two Windows 7 RC machines to RTM when that code becomes available to him, but otherwise will stay with his mostly Windows XP systems.

During the Ignite program, the one issue that came up was Windows 7’s incompatibility with an older card reader used to authenticate money transfers from customers buying tickets online. Fraser tried various solutions and exhausted his IT partner’s and Microsoft’s resources before giving up, resolving to buy a new printer at some point. For the time being, however, he will keep a few Windows XP machines around to run the older readers.

Fraser’s bottom line on upgrading is to stay with Windows XP where it is installed, but swap out as soon as possible the few Windows Vista systems that he bought before realizing that Windows Vista was creating more problems than it was solving. “We’ve been bruised with Vista,” he said. “XP just works.”

So, although he likes Windows 7, the stability of his Windows XP systems combined with his tight budget will keep him from moving rapidly to the new OS.

BioKinetic Europe

Nick Maxwell is the IT manager at BioKinetic, a Belfast, Ireland-based provider of clinical research services (i.e., early-phase testing) to pharmaceutical companies. These studies are part of a new drug or medical device’s long pathway to the marketplace. BioKinetic’s customers are, therefore, large companies, but its study subjects are individual volunteers, the man or woman on the street.

The company employs 40 people, of whom 30 have PCs. These systems run what Maxwell calls a “reasonably hefty” application load on top of Windows XP. For example, a big part of the standard stack includes a study management system, written in SQL, that manipulates databases reaching easily 2 gigabytes in size. Employees may work on recruitment — dealing with volunteers, collecting information, identifying whether they’re suitable — data-oriented tasks — collating information on things like blood draws and blood pressure and generating documentation — or clinical activities — actually working with the volunteers to do the studies.

“All departments use the same system in a different way,” Maxwell said.

In addition to the database, Maxwell's PCs run SharePoint and Microsoft Office, with Outlook syncing to the company's own Exchange Server. A few specialists produce final output with Adobe products PhotoShop and InDesign.

Maxwell's experience with Ignite was extremely smooth. He mounted the company's applications on the Ignite laptops — most importantly the study management system — testing all aspects of each. He then made sure that existing peripherals, printers, and wireless links functioned. He encountered nary a compatibility problem.

Maxwell is a definite convert, planning to roll his entire fleet to Windows 7 around the official launch date (late October 2009). In preparation, he has already installed new server hardware and upgraded his software to Windows Server 2008 so as to be able to move away from using Ghost images and begin to take advantage of the Windows Automated Installation Kit and the Windows Deployment Toolkit.

The main benefit of deploying Windows 7, Maxwell figured, was countless small time savings from faster system boot, rapid program and profile switching, and quick data access. His Windows Vista systems take 5-6 minutes to boot, whereas his Windows 7 machines boot in a single minute. He estimated that, using his comparable Windows Vista experience as a baseline, he will save 15 hours in IT cost deploying Windows 7 across his fleet. In user time savings, he figured that on faster boot alone his company will save 2.5 hours per day across 30 workers.

He notes that further but unquantified time savings will be achieved as users discover the convenience of the new taskbar. For example, right-click-to-pin will allow users to pin to the taskbar, for easy access, things used over and over again, like recruitment email templates.

Overall, Maxwell had a good experience with the Ignite Program. "I was a bit wary when we were first approached," he recalled. "People really hated Vista. But once we had Windows 7 installed, we could see it was essentially Vista, but it works this time."

3DreamTeam

Pavel Skripichnikov is the system administrator at 3DreamTeam, a Moscow-based firm that creates interactive 3D modeling software, primarily for real estate developers who want show backers and buyers, with high fidelity, how envisioned projects will look. The company's 30 employees do their work on 50 PCs, mostly running Windows XP, in a few cases the 64-bit version.

Because of its special situation, 3DreamTeam is not yet ready to migrate to Windows 7. The company is in the process of updating its main production software, much of which is embodied in an 8.4MB downloadable viewer, an Internet Explorer plug-in, currently compatible with only Windows XP and Windows Vista. Skripichnikov noted that, while his Ignite notebooks are running without problems, he does not see any real benefits ahead from further Windows 7 deployment. He does have a point, given that 3DreamTeam's software is primarily about a browser, a plug-in, and proprietary data objects that contain specific 3D geographic information.

The company is likely to move to Windows 7, but, given its priorities, not anytime soon.

Ames Golf and Country Club

Cory Strait is the general manager of Ames Golf and Country Club in Ames, Iowa. In addition to having an 18 hole course, the private club offers a full pool, tennis courts, and formal and casual dining. During the high season, when the club is in full swing, it employs 50-60 people. During quiet time (i.e., winter), staffing drops to half. Besides retail and wait staff, back office workers keep the wheels turning. The club's eight PCs run typical office applications, including Microsoft Office and Internet Explorer, but they also run a specialized system called Jonas, an integrated club management package.

Strait's systems are running a mix of Windows XP, Windows Vista, and Windows 7, and he said, "They're all tied to the network and it works beautifully."

He noted that Windows 7 handled Jonas well. "Jonas required no adaptation; it just worked. Vista didn't deal well with Jonas, but Windows 7 just grabbed it."

Strait said he would “love to do every system,” but based on budget considerations, he’ll have to go slowly with full Windows 7 adoption.

Elite Personnel

Elise Ambrose is president of Elite Personnel, a full service staffing agency based in Bethesda, Maryland. While the company does place some workers permanently, its bread and butter business is temporary workers, with some “temp-to-hire” placements. Ambrose employs six people full time, and has as many as 50 temps of its own, many working off site. Elite has 12 PCs, six for the full time employees, and another six for temps and job-seekers to use.

Ambrose is ready to upgrade as many PCs as she can to Windows 7, constrained only by budget considerations. “We love Windows 7,” she said. “We’re never going back. So many features make our lives easier, coming from XP.” She cited the “huge time savings” her crew achieved being able to view two windows side by side because they have to do many cut and paste operations between documents all day long. That function alone, she said, “saved me from going insane.”

She also liked the organization of the libraries, which allowed her people to do the labor intensive activity of checking references, comparing resume versions, filling out reference and interview forms, and executing innumerable other tasks “hundreds of times a day.”

Other features that she was enthusiastic about included the speed of boot and shutdown, the Snipping Tool, the ease of use of the start menu and search, and the Problem Step Recorder, which she called a “phenomenal tool,” saying she used it as a way to create training modules.

She said that Windows 7, with all its efficiencies saves “at least 30-45 minutes per day” for each employee. Getting through the process faster means more placements, better customer satisfaction, and, ultimately, more revenue.

Effective Logistical Solutions

Phillip Paulos is managing partner of the Toronto-based Canadian operations of NYK Logistics, a large Japanese logistics firm. The Canadian subsidiary, Effective Logistical Solutions (ELS), offers shippers in Canada local customer support, primarily trucking and warehousing services. The parent company provides access to sea and rail transport as well as systems and offices that ELS uses. ELS, originally an agent for NYK, became an independent subsidiary when NYK bought it and had it absorb another NYK Canadian acquisition. Paulos described his business as buying and selling space in a “stock-market environment” on behalf of a roster of blue-chip shipping customers. In its database, ELS has more than 8,000 freight carriers ranging in size from a few tens of trucks to more than 5,000.

Paulos’s staff is extremely lean, with 11 workers managing \$15 million in annual business on 12 PCs (one for each employee and a spare). And these systems carry a fairly beefy software load.

“My people all run double screens,” he said.

In addition to Microsoft Office, Internet Explorer, and internally hosted Exchange with Outlook, ELS runs NYK’s Transportation Management System, which interacts with ELS’s internal accounting system.

Workers search for space with seven different carrier location programs, some Web based, others more primitive. “You run them all,” Paulos said. “You never know where you’ll find what you need. Maybe Bob’s wife is watching an older posting board. She’ll see your post, he’ll call in, and she’ll say, ‘Pull up a truck in Denver for tomorrow.’”

During the initial Ignite Program installation, the local Microsoft partner, Excell IT (featured in the Partners section), was able to clear up minor driver glitches quickly. In addition to the two preloaded laptops, Paulos has put Windows 7 on a third system and plans to bring up two more when final code becomes generally available in late October 2009. He expects to be 100% Windows 7 by Spring 2010. The transition should be fairly smooth financially because ELS already has an Enterprise Agreement in place.

Unlike most others in this study, Paulos did not cite time savings as the primary benefit, but rather talked more about the aesthetics of Windows 7 and how much he enjoys the new environment. “Honestly, it’s the appearance, the way it speaks to me,” he said. “I liked it right out of the box. It all works, and works well. It’s faster than Vista, and even XP, and it has a lot of flow to it. You don’t have to go too far to find what you’re looking for.” Paulos compared Windows Vista to “Fat Albert” and said that in this latest incarnation Windows has “turned into Adonis.”

Elan Public Transport Consultancy

John Henshall is a senior transport analyst at Elan Public Transport Consultancy, which specializes in advising local authorities, operators, and developers on public transport improvements. The Chesterfield, England-based firm has customers all over the United Kingdom and a few in the Middle East. The company works mostly on networks of buses, but has done some rail planning. Essentially, Elan helps make transport networks more efficient.

The company has five employees and five PCs, although not all systems are in service at the same time. In terms of software, workers mostly use Microsoft Office, doing some transport modeling in Excel spreadsheets, but they also resort to ArcGIS, a sophisticated geographic information system, for some functions, and the company does its accounting with a package from Sage.

Elan gets its IT services from Peak Support, which is based in nearby Matlock (and is featured in the Partners section). Peak Support supplied the two Ignite notebooks. As a result of Elan’s good experience with Windows 7, Henshall plans to migrate the two units to final code when it becomes available and has already ordered two more Windows 7 machines. If you’ve done the math and noticed that that leaves one machine still on an previous OS, you’re right. “We have a spare with Vista,” Henshall said. “One director has a habit of dropping his.” The spare will either live out its life cycle or die an early death on the pavement somewhere. At that point, it will be replaced with a Windows 7 machine.

In terms of deployment issues, Henshall said, “We did get a blue screen within an hour, but we sorted it out quickly.” The installation crew had plugged in a network cable while booting the beta version of Windows 7. Peak Support, with Microsoft’s help, determined that the telemetry code that Microsoft put in the beta to send information back to its development team caused the crash. Peak Support removed the code, and the problem went away. Microsoft eliminated the offending telemetry code from subsequent builds.

As the principal benefit of Windows 7, Henshall cited time savings from faster boot, suspend, resume, and shutdown. He also said he found the taskbar highly useful as a navigation tool. “When I went back to XP for the first time in months, it was difficult to find my way around.”

Yellow-B

Ian Griffiths is the CEO of Yellow-B, a Java software developer based in Epalinges, Switzerland. The name is more easily understood as a logo: [yellow@](#).

Yellow-B’s mission is essentially to get old back-office applications to run on the Web. “We take organizations’ legacy applications and create a Web presence for them,” said Griffiths, an Englishman who has been living on the Continent for years and is comfortable in both French and German. His customers include the cantonal government of Neuchâtel, Switzerland, which has 5,000 seats. “We created an infrastructure for all their eGovernment services,” he said.

The company’s 15 employees have 20 PCs among them, most running Windows XP. Their work is of two sorts, said Griffiths. “One is linked to pure programming; the other to commercial, customer-facing activity.” The former is done in Java, a programming language equally suitable to Windows and Linux environments. The latter makes use of Microsoft Office. Typically, Griffiths explained, public administrations have 20-to-30-year-old software, and citizens increasingly want access to government services from the Internet. Yellow-B has also worked on Swiss federal jobs, including national eVoting projects.

Griffiths was happy to participate in the Ignite Program, but basically stumbled into it when his longtime IT supplier, who he calls Alex, and whose company goes by different names in different countries, popped in on him,

Ignite units in tow, and tried to snag him as a participant. “I was doing it more as a favor to Alex,” he said. “I wasn’t sure I was going to like it. It took me 2-3 days to see what the advantages were.”

His deployment went smoothly. “Alex did it,” he said. “He did it in an hour. He copied the old files from the old system to the new, had a cup of coffee, showed me the features, and went off.”

It took Griffiths a few days to install all the new versions of his development software, but not that much total time, as he was able to configure his system alongside other tasks. For a few days, he had both machines side by side on his desk. “After a week, I gave the old system to someone else,” he said.

As he was careful to copy over only files and didn’t try to use old software, installing all-new programs from the Internet instead, he avoided most compatibility issues. He made a few false steps along the way, but “nothing that caused me any great distress,” he noted. He figured out how to do 80% of the things that stumped him just using Windows 7’s local search functionality. For the other 20%, he phoned up Alex.

“No bugs have stopped me since July,” he trumpeted.

He’s got three Windows 7 machines now, two from the program and one loaded on existing hardware. He expects to migrate a wave of five more machines this year, to be used by his commercial people, who will get the most immediate benefit, and a second wave in 2010, keeping a couple of Windows XP and Windows Vista machines around to maintain the ability to replicate customer environments for testing purposes. “Some customers are extremely slow at changing,” he said, a bit apologetically.

Like others, he described Windows 7’s benefits in terms of time savings, citing right off the bat fast startup and easy network connection as two features that save a lot of time. He estimated that he saves “tens of minutes” every day just because of the efficient design of the Taskbar, using Hover and Preview to manage his typical 10 or more open documents and programs. Griffiths also noted that Windows 7’s ability to suspend and resume quickly actually leads to productivity and service level improvements.

As an example of greater productivity, he said now he actually works “a lot more” on train rides that before would have been too short to allow time for wake up and sleep — as well as work.

As an example of service level improvements, he noted that now he can now immediately engage with clients upon arrival at a site without worrying. “It used to take me 15 minutes to connect to Internet, and the customer would often lose interest.” Now, his system comes to life, finds the local profile, and connects to network and printing services, all while he’s chatting with his customer, making a firm business contact before the presentation.

“When Alex came, I wasn’t sure I’d like it,” Griffiths summarized. “But I see it was a very large improvement over XP. We’re faced with another dimension, a leap forward. I get the impression I’m gaining lots of time and not losing anything.”

IdiconSpace

Priya Ravisankar is an associate architect at IdiconSpace, an architecture firm that designs buildings and does project management in Bangalore, India. The firm has 25 employees using 9 PCs, including the two new Ignite units. The software load includes Microsoft Office for general commercial purposes and a CAD program and photo editing software for design work.

Although IdiconSpace was pleased by its experience with Windows 7 and intends to migrate to it as budget constraints allow, reality is that the new OS will arrive at the company one unit at a time with new purchases of hardware, which will be replaced only via attrition.

Compatibility issues were limited with the Windows 7 installation. “Initially, we did have problems,” Ravisankar said, “two blue screens with the beta, working with the CAD program, but after the RC version we did not have that issue.” She did mention that Windows XP and Windows 7 “don’t work well together” on IdiconSpace’s network under some circumstances.

Benefits, however, were substantial. Ravisankar said that, in performing the common IdiconSpace task of doing a work estimation and a drawing simultaneously, Windows 7 cut by half the time it takes to do some multiday projects. Employees used to have to do this work on two different systems, printing the information, and transferring it by hand to Excel. Translating this time savings into money, she estimated, would yield monthly savings of 20,000 rupees (~\$420), serious money for a small business.

Ravisankar's favorite feature is that group of attributes that add up to ease of navigation: the Taskbar, Thumbnail previews, and being able to view large amounts of data at once. She also liked Windows 7's speed and ease of network connection.

"Windows 7 really saves time. Small firms aren't IT oriented and will find the ease of use features appealing," she said.

Partners

Partners, of course, could be expected to be more positive than customers, since they make their livings by selling products that include Microsoft software, and are anxious to extol their benefits and sing their high praises. Nonetheless, some of the partner detail is interesting in that it points out various highlights of Windows 7 by those who know them best.

12:34 MicroTechnologies

Alejandro Rosado is the CEO at 12:34 MicroTechnologies, a firm in Lancaster, PA, that provides outsourced IT services for customers who don't have their own IT departments. About 85% of 12:34's business is deployment and support of hardware and software. The company offers network and help desk support and even does some basic website design as well as provide limited application support. Although most customers have their own infrastructure, 12:34 rents space from DNE Communications, a local Internet service provider, where it can run an offsite datacenter for services such as disaster recovery.

Rosado has seven employees, four technicians, two administrative employees, and one person who provides help desk and development services in house. He was an early convert to Windows 7, having standardized the company on the beta code in March 2009, when the Ignite Program was launched.

"We're an early adopter of anything, a very proactive Microsoft partner," said Rosado.

He received beta code in December 2008, and right away put it on his production machine. A few months later, he had everyone at the firm on the beta, which he deemed stable enough to run his entire business. Right away, he saw benefits in Windows 7. He cited location-aware printing as a great time saver, doing the math quickly in his head. He figured that not having to set up printing at each client site saved "maybe only five minutes" of setup. But with four technicians visiting eight clients each per day, the time savings on that one feature alone was more than 13 hours per week. "And that's just one feature, let alone performance and the wireless tools," he added, referring to the fact that his technicians' location profiles include his clients' wireless settings and automatically log on when they arrive on site.

"The value to my business was apparent immediately," he said. "I knew it wasn't final code; I didn't care." He liked Windows 7 so much that when he found that an old printer didn't have a driver compatible with Windows 7, he just bought a new one. "The speed, the tools made us so much more productive, it was worth buying a new printer to be compatible."

Peak Support Services

Guy Gregory is a technical specialist at Peak Support Services, which is based in Matlock, a town in Derbyshire in the midlands of England. Peak Support, a Microsoft Gold Partner, provides IT services to small and midsize enterprises. Although the name implies a certain ability to provide IT support at key moments, it also plays on the fact that Derbyshire contains most of Peak District National Park and a section called High Peak. Customers run from single users to firms with 200 seats, but most fall within the 5-25 seat range.

Although the firm has only nine employees, among them they operate 20 PCs. These people assist customers via helpdesk, Internet chat, and on-site visits. In addition to supporting a full suite of Microsoft products, engineers do installations, hardware support, cabling, and other IT tasks. The company's PCs run Microsoft Office and Microsoft's Dynamics CRM software, which, Gregory said, "works fine on Windows 7," despite some initial compatibility issues.

Gregory is pleased with his Windows 7 experience thus far. "There was great driver support right out of the box," he said. "With any beta version you expect some issues, but we're running Windows 7 on all our main systems without any significant issues."

And in terms of stability, he added, the one in his office was "booted on July 6 and hasn't been rebooted since. It does go to sleep, but basically has been up for more than two months. I'm going to see how far I can take it. It's rock solid. I use it every day."

Naturally, as a Microsoft partner, Peak Support has used the Windows Automated Installation Kit and Deployment Toolkit, but more for customer installations than for its own systems, which carry "straightforward" software stacks and were mostly loaded from a USB key, which is faster than using a DVD. However, Gregory said that even firms with five or 10 PCs can benefit from Microsoft's deployment tools these days because they are so much more usable than prior versions, which he said were only suitable for 100 machines or more.

The one compatibility issue that he ran into was with an accounting package running on Windows XP. The software will not run on Windows Vista or Windows 7. The solution is to leave the Windows XP system as is for now and upgrade it to Windows 7 when the company moves to the next version of the accounting package.

The company plans to convert all its PCs to Windows 7 by yearend 2009. "Actually, we hope to by Oct. 22," Gregory said.

Daquas

Darina Vodrazkova is the general manager of Daquas, a Prague, Czech Republic-based provider of IT support services. The company handles software licensing and does consulting, but not implementation, for which it has local partners. The company has 13 employees and about 20 PCs, which have Microsoft Office and various software from the Microsoft Developer Network loaded on them.

Daquas has Windows 7 on 35% of its PCs so far, and expects to complete its Windows 7 rollout by yearend. The company's experience with Windows 7 has been quite positive. Vodrazkova said that installation took only ten minutes when the bits were downloaded from a USB key, compared to 20-30 minutes from a DVD.

In preparation for deploying Windows 7, Daquas used the Windows Upgrade Advisor to check hardware and software compatibility, and Windows Easy Transfer to move data and settings from Windows XP machines so that it could be moved back to Windows 7 once install was completed. On behalf of customers, Daquas has undertaken the same process, and Vodrazkova noted that, thus far, no customer has needed to resort even to Windows XP Mode to get software to work. However, she noted that deployment has been limited, since Windows 7 is not yet commercially available.

The company has yet to do installations with deployment tools, since upgrades through this point have been single cases, and has not run into any compatibility issues to date.

Vodrazkova saw two types of benefits from Windows 7 deployment: those for IT departments and those for end users. For IT departments, she cited "ease of installing on new computers" and "less hassle with users." For users, she called out a "more comfortable environment which looks familiar." She also praised Windows 7's ability to find drivers it needs on its own. "It's a self-service system," she said.

She also pointed out how user time savings add up from "two second" improvements "20 times a day" as well as IT pro time savings in searching, installing, implementing, and training.

Daquas is looking forward to combining Windows 7 with Windows Server 2008 R2, which will confer benefits in networking and enable the use of Direct Access rather than a VPN, which the firm currently uses. Vodrazkova liked Jump Lists, which she said, “save seconds of time for every task,” as well as Windows XP Mode, instant search, backup, and trouble reporting. For the moment, she is “just playing with the Problem Steps Recorder,” but plans to use it as a training tool in the future.

“I haven’t met anyone who would criticize Windows 7,” she said. “Even the Linux community is impressed with Windows 7.

Excell IT

Lawrence Frias is the manager of Small Business Services at Excell IT, a managed services and network infrastructure provider based in Mississauga, Ontario, in Canada. The company provides a spectrum of IT services, including help desk and on-site support. Among its six employees, Excell maintains 15 desktops and notebooks. Its 30 or so servers operate mostly on behalf of customers.

The company completed its Windows 7 deployment in early September 2009, moving three-quarters of its PCs to the RTM version as soon as it became available. Excell did some upgrading of Windows Vista machines and clean installs on older Windows XP systems that had hardware capable of running Windows 7. Three PCs were not powerful enough to run Windows 7. Upgrades took two hours per system; clean installs, a bit longer, including application reinstalls. All in all, it took three days to install 12 machines.

Frias expects that his smaller customers will do their Windows 7 installations manually, whereas the larger ones will make use of Microsoft’s deployment tools, which, he said, make image management obsolete. “You just capture the user profile, copy the data, and redeploy on existing or new hardware. You only have to maintain one image, setting up different deployment packages within the deployment tool, tagging things on as you go. Device drivers are installed automatically.”

On his own machine, Frias added some memory, did an application inventory, backed up his data, did a resource assessment, documented upgrade procedures, deployed, and verified compatibility afterward. He described the path from Windows Vista to Windows 7 as the “smoothest ever.”

On customers sites, he has run into only one program out of close to 200 that was too old to run on Windows 7. Running the application in Windows XP Mode solved the problem.

Frias described the benefits of Windows 7. “It’s faster, has better compatibility on upgrade, is more stable, smoother, you name it.” He cited a doubling of notebook battery life moving from Windows XP to Windows 7 because the OS shuts down services not in use. He noted a productivity increase of 15% based on faster switching between applications using a combination of Snap, Thumbnail previews, Jump Lists, and the Taskbar. He found additional time savings in location-aware printing.

“For my clients as well,” he said. “Saving clicks saves time.”

His advice to those planned to deploy Windows 7: “Start planning yesterday.”

Conclusion

Some of the features that the subjects found most useful were what they called “small” things, as if their favorite features weren’t important. For example, almost all cited the Taskbar function and organization and Thumbnail previews as major productivity enhancements, but acted almost embarrassed that they liked things that weren’t more prominently portrayed. In fact, these things aren’t small at all. They are the heart and soul of why Windows 7 is better: a thousand tiny things done right.

Few had any issues at all with installation, but those who did often cited hardware compatibility with old systems. For the most part, people said it was a better trade-off to buy a new peripheral, typically a printer, than to forego the benefits of Windows 7.

What really sold them on Windows 7 was how much easier it is to use than Windows Vista and how much faster it is than Windows XP.

And Microsoft has taken the stance — well advised in my opinion — that this time, the company is going to under-promise and over-deliver. But perhaps oddly, less bandying about and more beef on Microsoft's part is having the effect of making key enhancements seem almost trivial.

The things that respondents loved were the smoothness and speed of transitions, the ease of finding things that they were looking for, and the effortlessness of organizing their work, attaching to networks, and utilizing print resources.

The inference Endpoint drew from the data collected is that the Ignite Program worked. It was highly effective at getting small businesses to use Windows 7 in their production environments and assuage subjects' fears of upgrading, in the process making them likely Windows 7 evangelists in their business communities.

Because Windows 7 is clearly the best OS that Microsoft has ever built — a highly stable environment that delivers information faster, more securely, more flexibly, and in a better organized manner — small businesses can, by adopting it as soon as it becomes available, derive tangible benefits, real ROI, immediately. No need to wait for Service Pack 1 to reap the rewards.

As Cory Strait of Ames Golf and Country Club said, "Don't hesitate"!

Roger L. Kay is the founder and president of Endpoint Technologies Associates (www.ndpta.com).

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