

Straight Talking - Hands on with Windows 7

By Clive Longbottom, Service Director, Quocirca Ltd

I've spent the last couple of days with Windows 7 - and it has been a bit of "The best of times, the worst of times".

Windows 7 became available for IT professionals subscribing to Technet for IT pros on Thursday 6th August, and (for a change), it looked like Microsoft had sized its servers enough so that people could download the Windows images without everything grinding to a halt.

I've been running various versions of Windows 7 on a couple of laptops for some time, and have been reasonably impressed with its overall look, feel and response, as well as the fact that it actually runs the majority of applications that I threw at it. In comparison to when Vista first came out, Windows 7 did not seem to need a massive amount of resources, it didn't seem to suffer from a dearth of device drivers, and application compatibility - while not brilliant - was far in excess of where Vista was. Indeed, after the original alphas and beta of Windows 7 were released, Microsoft agreed that including a virtual PC capability running Windows XP was a good idea, enabling companies to carry on using applications that would not run natively under Windows 7.

But - back to the experience of upgrading to Windows 7. The pre-retail versions of Windows 7 cannot be easily upgraded to the full version, so I decided to bite the bullet and upgrade my main desktop machine first. This is a 64-bit Mesh quad-core AMD-based system, which was currently running Vista Ultimate 64-bit. The upgrade is almost completely hands-off: once the image is loaded up and you have said that you want to carry out an upgrade rather than a new partition installation, you can go and make a cup of coffee, have a walk, read a book, or, it would seem, build a small extension.

It has to be said that in my case, the upgrade was not a rapid experience. It took over 2-and-a-half hours, but I was relieved and somewhat surprised when the machine finally rebooted, with everything working.

So, back to my laptop - a Lenovo X200 tablet set as a dual-partitioned device with Vista Ultimate 32-bit on one partition and Windows 7 Ultimate RC on the other. I decided to use the "Other" installation choice, and point the installation at the Vista partition. The "upgrade" (well, over-write) was very rapid, and again, it looked like I had a clean machine on the final re-boot.

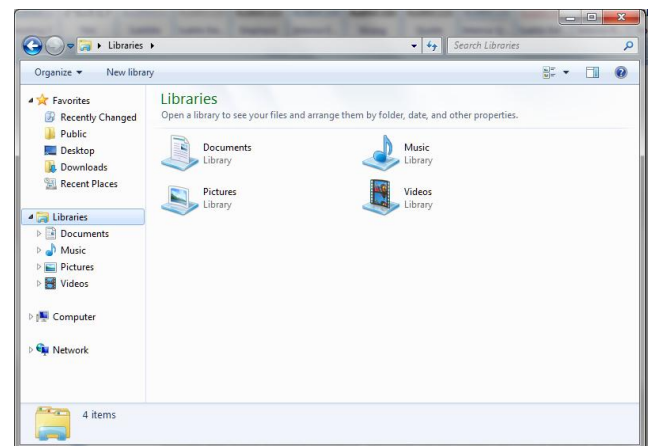


Figure 1: Microsoft Libraries

But, then the problems began. It was apparent that I had no biometric fingerprint capability, no touchscreen, no wireless WAN. This was not a massive surprise to me - installing previous versions of Windows 7 on my two Lenovo machines has left me with the firm impression that Lenovo has not had its finger on the pulse. Whereas other analysts I have spoken to with HP or other Tablet devices have found it easy to install Windows 7, my experience with Lenovo has been horrendous. Its main site has no Windows 7 drivers on it. If you managed to find the site where the Windows 7 drivers were being dribbled out, there was no explanation of what was really needed and what not - and the drivers were very slow to come out. On Lenovo's support forum, its engineers stated that they did not see why Lenovo should be issuing drivers for an unreleased operating system, but that full support would be available when the final version of Windows 7 was released.

I've got news for you guys - it's here: your web site still only has Vista drivers, your Windows 7 beta drivers don't work in many cases, and for a range of mobile devices that are aimed firmly and squarely at the upper echelons of the business world. You're running the risk of messing up, big time.

However, Microsoft cannot escape all the blame here either: if it can provide out of the box support for the majority of other tablets, I would have thought that a bit of pressure from Microsoft on Lenovo would have been productive.

So, I have a fully working desktop machine, and a laptop with no biometric security, and no WWAN capability. What's my view of Windows 7?



Figure 2: Multi-clocks

It's fast, it's got the looks. It should be capable of running the vast majority of Windows-based applications that a business could want to run. It has a much better security model than Windows XP, which is the platform that most businesses are still dependent on. It isn't the resource hog that Vista was, and so can run on far more existing machines than Vista can.

However, there do seem to be a few problems - Explorer seems to be slightly fragile, and the dreaded "Explorer has stopped responding" appears on both machines with alarming frequency, but does rescue itself successfully on the whole. IE8 renders pages differently to Firefox or Chrome, and the compatibility mode will not be intuitive to the average user. For those who have stumped up the dosh for Vista Ultimate, they'll find that DreamScene is no longer (but there are hacks on the Internet to get it to work again).

Will Windows 7 be Microsoft's saviour? Will it be "Vista II: The Sequel"? Looking at the last set

of financial figures to come out from Microsoft, it looks like consumers and businesses alike have decided to wait for Windows 7 to come through. With Microsoft having pushed out the betas and release candidates to many large organisations and IT professionals over a prolonged period, a large proportion of the real testing of Windows 7 has already occurred. Uptake of Windows 7 is likely to be far more rapid than it has been for other Windows versions - and Microsoft can finally draw the veil over the incredibly poor Vista.

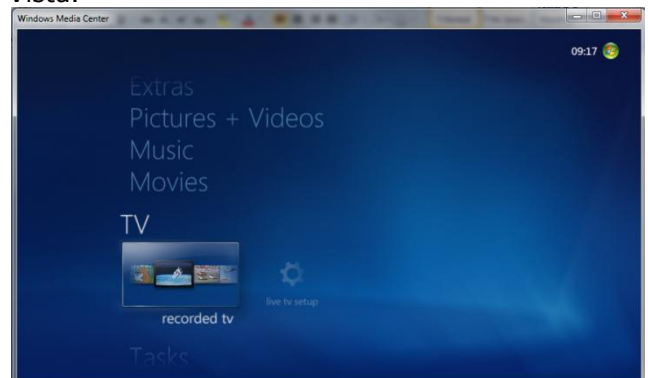


Figure 3: Media centre

However, the way of using technology is also changing, and Microsoft will still have to show that it can respond to this. Full-blown clients are being moved into the data centre with virtual desktops and thin client computing. Software as a service and cloud computing will take a lot of functionality from the data centre and put it elsewhere. Microsoft will play hard for the virtual desktop, but also has to ensure that the client device itself will be Microsoft based. If it can do this, it wins in multiple ways - it will have the virtual desktop environment, the servers these sit on, and the client device users are accessing resources from.

Windows 7 looks like it will offer a scalable solution that can play in a range of access devices and in the virtual desktop arena itself. The Linux camp and others such as Google with its announced Chrome OS will doubtlessly fight hard to stop this, but at least Microsoft is now in a better position to respond.

May battle commence!

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