

VNUNet – Vista-Compatible Apps

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The mad rush to commercial implementations of Windows Vista does not seem to have happened despite Microsoft's mild protestations to the contrary.

The operating system has reached the dizzy heights of a little over seven per cent of all desktop OS installations, according to Net Applications, and possibly fewer than one per cent in the commercial area, according to Sunbelt Software.

There are several possible reasons put forward for this: hardware being too old to cope with Vista's requirements, everyone waiting for Service Pack 1, the cost of re-training staff on the new platform and the lack of interest in some of its whizzier aspects.

However, the real killer for many organisations is the lack of certified applications for the platform, and the incapacity to get many existing applications to work under Vista.

We are not just talking about personal productivity apps that make one or two people's lives easier.

A year down the track, and things like the very widely used iPass client for mobile users (enabling users to aggregate Wi-Fi, broadband and modem charges for mobile connectivity) is still not Vista compliant.

For those who depend on connectivity while on the road, this means that Vista on laptops is a no-no unless they want to pay full commercial rates for every connection made away from the office and home.

It is not just iPass, however, and the list of incompatible applications seems longer than the list of compatible ones.

Only around 500 applications are shown on Microsoft's own site as being 'Compatible with Microsoft Vista' and around 1,500 as 'Working with Microsoft Vista'.

OK, such certification is not free. It comes in at around \$1,000 per application (not paid to Microsoft, but to independent testing groups) which may put off the smaller independent software vendor (ISV), but should not be a big problem for those taking Vista seriously.

Even with Microsoft making available packages such as the Application Compatibility Toolkit, which aims to show where problems may lie, there seems an awful amount of slothfulness out there in ISV land.

Where compatibility is possible, finding the right version can be a problem. Many vendors still have dual applications, one that is Vista compatible and one that is not.

For the corporate user, this can mean two different applications that can have different problems. For the vendor, it means two different possible types of call coming into the help desk.

Indeed, one of Microsoft's own Vista launch partners in the UK, Newham Borough Council, pulled its planned 1,500 seat Vista implementation once it saw how many applications would be incapable of running under Vista, or would not be fully supported by the vendors involved.

Why are so many applications not compatible with Vista? It is easy to blame Microsoft, but it is not the main villain of the piece.

The company has made tools and guidance available from a very early stage, even if some involved cost to the ISV. Although it is easy to think that it must be down to the very way that the core application is written, this is rarely the case.

On the whole, it is down to ISVs trying to be all things to all versions of Windows, providing installation routines that try to create an application that will run on anything from Windows 98 upwards.

Essentially, these issues can be aggregated as follows:

Providing functional components that should not be there

For example, where earlier versions of Windows may not have included certain dynamic link libraries or OLE control extensions, the ISV often includes them in the package. With Vista providing many of these files as tightly coupled components that talk directly to the core Vista code, attempts to install the application effectively try to regress the operating system, something that is not recommended. In most cases, Vista will see the problem, and will stop the installation from progressing.

Incorrect usage of the registry

Here, there is a whole raft of possibilities: the Vista registry is quite different to those that have gone beforehand, and Microsoft recommends that great chunks of it are now either not used or are avoided. However, ISVs still write the installation routines to meet previous requirements, and the changing of certain registry keys can upset Vista.

The 'domino' effect

This involves incompatibilities between the install routines of different applications, where installing one application causes another one to cease working, generally due to one or other of the above two factors causing issues down the line.

Start-up company ChangeBASE AOK has built a database of rules that it can use to check through an installation file and remove or modify the problems it finds.

Pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca found possible incompatibilities in the majority of its 5,500 applications and, with the help of ChangeBASE AOK, is in the process of fixing these and finds that the majority now run without issue on Vista.

When this is compared to the manual approach of trying to install an application, changing the installation routine manually, installing it again and so on until it works and repeating ad nauseam for each application, the benefits seem clear.

Add to this that the manual approach just cannot cater for the interaction problems that can be identified through a more automated approach and it is no surprise that the majority of large companies still regard a move to Vista as too tough.

ChangeBASE AOK is not the ultimate answer: the install file needs to be of an .msi (Microsoft Software Installation) format, which counts out some systems that use more proprietary formats.

However, while I was with ChangeBASE AOK, they took a package Quocirca uses that was non-Vista compatible, was packaged as an .exe file and looked at it.

The .exe hid a .msi file within it. ChangeBASE AOK extracted this, ran their tool, identified over 400 possible problems, and fixed the file for me there and then.

ChangeBASE AOK is a small company that is already sparking a lot of interest. It is an obvious takeover candidate in a world where such functionality would mean that a systems integrator, hardware/services company, systems management company or even a certain OS vendor from Redmond may show interest.

However, for now, it remains independent, and is well worth a look at from those wanting to go to Vista, but at a loss as to how existing applications will run.

About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

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