

Migrating to Windows 7 – or should you wait for Windows 8?

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Quocirca Comment

There are a lot of companies of all sizes still using Windows XP – and they seem relatively happy with it. According to W3Schools (an online education resource), over 38% of desktops are still running Windows XP – an impressive show of loyalty for Microsoft, but one that is causing problems in its drive to move people to a more modern platform. Those still on Windows XP should have that decision under review, as the rationale for staying on the platform is now considerably flawed.

Many organisations have made an active decision not to move away from XP, as it is seen to be adequate for their needs. However, others looked at migrating to Windows Vista, and were appalled at the issues that they found around the need for upgrading hardware, the lack of support for many existing applications and the need to train users on the new interface. Others decided to leap-frog, missing out on Vista and waiting for the next version to come out, which was to be Windows 7. However, when Windows 7 came out, excuses could be found not to move – some valid, some less so.

At the more valid end of the scale was the need to review expenditure based on the recent (and possibly recurrent) recession, and the generally received wisdom with Microsoft releases of waiting for the first service pack to come through to deal with any issues that there may be with the initial version of Windows 7.

At the less valid end was the feeling that as Windows XP had supported the business for so long, why change? The users were used to the interface, the developers were used to the platform and the help desk knew all the problems. Back to the old adage of “if it ain’t broke, why fix it?”

However, a major consideration has to be the age of the underlying platform itself. Windows XP came to the market in 2001, based on

developments that had been going on since Windows NT 4.0 had come to market in 1996, itself based on previous NT code from 1993 – which was, itself, based on work between Microsoft and IBM around using OS/2 as an enterprise desktop operating system. In other words, Windows XP is old, and in most cases, unfit for purpose. No matter how many onion skins of security are layered on top of it, XP will still be a security nightmare, and while it has a large market share, will remain a target for the blackhats who by now know every wrinkle and back door that there could be.

An old chestnut used to be that updating to Windows Vista required heavy re-education of the user base, as the interface was so different to what they were used to. The problem is now reversed – the vast majority of users will be already be using Vista or Windows 7, and new recruits to an organisation will be looking at an interface that is completely alien to them. Even those who have been with the organisation for some time will now be a little jaded with XP and are ready to move forward and might well be using Windows 7 at home or more likely something even sexier from Apple or Google.

However, there are a few major areas that anyone wedded to Windows XP has to consider against the needs of the business and the employees themselves. Firstly, Microsoft has wanted to remove full support for XP for some time. True, it has back-tracked on various dates due to objections from customers, but it has to be accepted that XP is now at the end of its life when it comes to full support. Microsoft will still push out basic security patches – but anything based on improving functionality or applying new capabilities to XP is not going to happen.

To this end, anyone on XP has now to accept that what they have as a web browsing capability is it – no Internet Explorer 9 (XP does

not support anything beyond IE8), although other, more modern third party browsers such as Firefox and Chrome can be deployed. If the business wants access to the latest web sites running technology such as HTML5, then the choice is to go to the expense of installing a third-party browser on the existing platform – or upgrade the operating system itself.

But, at the other end of the spectrum is the dependency that many organisations have on the use of IE6 to access older web-enabled applications – particularly in the slow-moving world of the public sector. With no capability to run IE6 under Windows 7, this may present major issues to the organisation concerned – but the reasons for the death of IE6 have to be looked at as well. Microsoft decided that the basic architecture was fatally flawed, and dropped IE6 to move to a better security architecture – is it right for an IT department to be purposefully running an insecure, 10-year-old platform that is now so crucial to the business' daily operations? However, many of the applications involved could either be updated so that they will run under later versions of IE, or the interface will run under an alternative web browser. If neither of these is possible, then it is more than likely that the underlying application will become (or already is) a constraint on the business, and as such its use should be reviewed.

One of the main objections Quocirca keeps hearing against migrating away from XP is the perception that the hardware requirements are too heavy, and that as much as 50% of the existing desktops will need to be replaced. Agreed – with Windows Vista, the hardware requirements were rather drastically increased against what was required for XP, but Microsoft learnt its lesson the hard way, and Windows 7 should be capable of being run on most hardware being used for XP.

Additionally, a migration to Windows 7 also provides the opportunity to review how desktops are provisioned – it may well be the case that virtualisation of desktops would provide a far better service to the business, with access devices being anything from an existing desktop through new slates and tablets to smart phone devices. Attempting to manage these new devices – often brought in by end users themselves as part of the trend towards the

consumerisation of IT - as part of an ageing and creaking Windows XP environment just doesn't make sense.

The other area raised is application compatibility. When Windows Vista was introduced, over 20% of existing applications did not work natively on the platform. Although Microsoft provided some basic tools to identify where problems may arise, little was offered in the way of tools to rectify them. Although the original statement with Windows 7 was along the lines of "Windows 7 will run all applications that run under Vista" did nothing to address the issues that had been found with XP apps that didn't run under Vista, Microsoft did make available a virtualised, native Windows XP environment that could be enabled within Windows 7 so that non-compliant applications can be run. Even better, vendors such as ChangeBASE (now part of Quest) and App-DNA (now part of Citrix) offer software and services that interrogated application installation routines and clean them up so that the vast majority of applications will run – natively – under Windows 7, with Browsium offering a similar service so that IE6 applications can be run natively in a special instantiation of IE6 with IE 8 or 9 in Windows 7..

So – what is the point of staying with Windows XP? It is essentially unsupported by the vendor, it has a security model over a decade old, it does not support modern web sites, it has poor overall performance, and the interface has been left behind not just by more modern Windows systems, but by the rest of the technology tools that many are using in their day-to-day lives. The question for IT should not be "should we migrate away from Windows XP?", but now has to be "why have we weighed down the business with a system that is stopping it from competing effectively in today's markets?"

Windows XP – while being excellent for the job it was developed for – is no longer fit for purpose. Windows 7 is what Windows Vista should have been, and should no longer be accepted as a suitable desktop for today's business needs. It is not worth while waiting for Windows 8, either. This would just be procrastination of the worst kind – and will just enable the same old arguments to be brought to the fore as the interface changes, enterprises feel the need to wait for SP1, hardware requirements change and so on.

Quocirca's advice is unequivocal – those on Windows XP have to look to migrate in the near future. Whether this is to a direct, desktop-to-desktop replacement, or to a virtualised desktop environment is where the business and IT need to work together to ensure that the right decision is made.

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