

Now that Microsoft Windows newest operating system, Vista, has finally hit the shelves, I have been getting many questions about what is included and whether or not it is desirable to upgrade. In this article I will go over features and options and some of the reviews to date.

The first thing I noticed in my research is that the system, or hardware, requirements are tremendous. For example, all but one version of Vista (and there are five versions available) require a minimum of ONE GIGABYTE (1 GB) of RAM. I have yet to work on any home user computer that has had one GB of RAM installed; more commonly I see 256 Megabytes of RAM or even 128 Megabytes. The other part to that statement is the word 'minimum', when a software vendor uses that word they mean 'if you choose to install this software with the minimum requirements or less you probably will have performance issues and we will not be able to help you'. Ideally you should have more than the minimum, say 1.5GB or 2GB of RAM, for adequate performance. Only recently have I started putting 1GB of RAM on workstations for office use.

Still in the hardware requirements, the second thing I noticed is that all versions of Vista require 15 Gigabytes of free hard disk space and a minimum hard drive size of 40 Gigabytes. Again, very few home users have this much capacity in their existing computers. The third hardware requirement is a one Gigahertz processor and fortunately most computers do have this, but keep in mind that these three components working together is what most people 'see' as the speed of their computer so keeping all three at or above minimum requirements is essential.

The versions of Vista are as follows: Home Basic and Home Premium, Business, Enterprise, and Ultimate. Home Basic is your no frills operating system, and does not include the new and pretty 'Aero' user interface, many of the backup functions, Media Center, premium games, tablet PC functionality, or Fax and Scan Center. Home Premium does include those functions (except Fax and Scan Center) and they both have parental controls as an added security feature when using the Internet. Vista Business does not have Media Center and parental control but has enhanced networking and backup features including: projector support, presentation settings, joining domains, system image backup and recovery, BitLocker Full Drive Encryption, and Encrypting File System. Windows Vista Ultimate has, of course, everything.

After reading several reviews by IT and non-IT users a few features stand out. These are all navigation related: the Start Menu, enhanced Explorer features, and upgraded Search capability. Almost everyone agrees that the Start menu is easier and more natural to use, but of course it can be switched to the classic XP view if desired. Windows Explorer now shows you 3D thumbnails of items inside your folders for easier searching, and best of all the Search function starts searching as you start typing, is much faster, and easier than the XP version. I still consider these all nice-to-have but not necessarily must-have's in an operating system.

More of an impact for my customers will be the Network and Sharing Center and the Windows Mobility Center, which promise to simplify wireless and wired networking with laptops. They definitely provide better visibility to the status of your firewall, wireless connection and sharing options when away from your home network. There is also the ability to have multiple languages on one computer as well which is most helpful for multi-lingual users.

So far the only issues I am hearing about are pretty much what I expected: compatibility and complicated to setup. I have had several people say there are 'glitches' and 'minor irritations' as well as some file and hardware compatibility issues. Others have mentioned that if you are installing on a Windows 98, ME or Windows 2000 machine that it wipes out your entire hard drive contents, so please create a full backup copy *before* you start.

So while it seems like a good operating system, is it the WOW that Microsoft makes it out to be? It doesn't seem that way. Am I going to upgrade my business customers right away? Not for at least six months or more, but probably eventually. What about home computers? I would say if it is a new PC it is fine and you probably won't be able to get any other Windows operating system at the retail level. If it is an existing (home) PC you are probably going to spend more money bringing the hardware up to minimum specs than if you just went out and bought a new PC with Vista already installed on it. Keep in mind that some of your old software may not run on Vista either.

As always if you would like more information regarding Windows Vista, including a complete list of Vista features by product, please email me: cslader@mdserv.com or call 864-297-8889.