

For Some, Move To Windows 7 Will Be Tough

by Walter S. Mossberg

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On October 22, Microsoft will finally release a new version of Windows that will be as good as the deeply disappointing Windows Vista should have been when it came out in January 2007. The new edition, called Windows 7, is a big improvement over both Vista and the sturdy, 2001-vintage Windows XP still widely in use. It will give Apple's (AAPL) long-superior Mac OS X operating system a run for its money (though Apple might maintain its edge with a new version, called Snow Leopard, due in September).

But how will Windows users transition their current computers to the new Windows 7? While this latest operating system stresses simplicity, the upgrade process will be anything but simple for the huge base of average consumers still using XP, who likely outnumber Vista users. It will be frustrating, tedious and labor-intensive.

In fact, the process will be so painful that, for many XP users, the easiest solution may be to buy a new PC preloaded with Windows 7, if they can afford such a purchase in these dire economic times. In fact, that's the option Microsoft (MSFT) recommends for XP users. (Conveniently, this option also helps Microsoft's partners that make PCs.)

By contrast, if you're using Vista, the upgrade to Windows 7 should be a fairly easy, straightforward process. Because the new version shares most of the underlying guts of Vista, it installs itself on your current machine relatively quickly and smoothly, preserving all your files, folders, settings and programs.

In a test of this process earlier this year, using a pre-release version of Windows 7, I upgraded a Vista laptop with no problems and little effort in about an hour.

But Windows XP users, including the millions who have recently snapped up cheap, XP-powered netbooks, will first have to wipe out everything on their hard disks in order to install Windows 7 on their current machines. In fact, Microsoft doesn't even call migrating to Windows 7 from XP an "upgrade." It refers to it as a "clean install," or a "custom installation." This disk wipeout can be performed manually, or automatically during the Windows 7 installation process.

If you're an XP user, the disk-wiping will cause you to lose your current file and folder organization, and all your programs, though not necessarily your personal data files themselves.

However, in order to preserve these personal files, like documents and photos, you will have to undertake a long, multi-step process, typically requiring the use of an external hard disk, to which all these files will have to be temporarily moved and then moved back.

That means you'll have to buy or borrow an external hard disk, or clean out enough room on one you already own, to hold all your files.

And the pain doesn't end there. If you're an XP user, moving to Windows 7 on your current computer means you will also have to re-install all your programs and restore all the software drivers for your printers and other add-on hardware. That could require locating the original program disks, or downloaded program installers, and then re-downloading and re-installing the numerous updates that have been issued since these

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original disks or installers came out.

And, there's another problem: XP hardware drivers won't work in Windows 7. Microsoft says it can automatically replace thousands of common older drivers with newer Windows 7-compatible versions, but admits that there may be some for which it doesn't have replacements. The company specifically warns that some netbooks may include obsolete drivers.

Netbook owners face another problem. Even though Microsoft says Windows 7 will work fine on netbooks, most of them lack a DVD drive, which is needed to run the Windows 7 installation disk. So they'll have to buy or borrow an external DVD drive.

Microsoft has taken some steps to make this easier. It plans to offer a free "Easy Transfer" program (explained at <http://bit.ly/M5II7>) that will automate the process of moving your personal files to an external drive, and then restoring them to your computer after Windows 7 is installed. But this program won't transfer your programs, only your personal data.

Also, if you don't want to use an external hard disk to temporarily store your files, you can transfer them over a cable or network to another computer. The company even has an alternative where it will stow your personal data in a special folder called windows.old, on the transformed PC. But you'll then have to manually move all of these files back to their normal locations.

Finally, Microsoft officials point out that this XP migration issue may be moot for many owners of older XP computers, because their ancient machines lack enough memory, hard disk space, or graphics power to accommodate Windows 7 anyway.

And, even if a really old machine is marginally capable of running Windows 7, it's a mistake to try and cram a new OS into it and expect a great experience.

But if you do own an otherwise capable computer that happens to be running Windows XP, you're likely facing a painful process should you choose to transition it to Windows 7.

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