Bits and Bytes

Windows 7 – Revolutionary or evolutionary? That's the title of an article posted by Adrian Kingsley-Hughes on January 20th, 2009, at http://blogs.xdnet.com/hardware/?p=3345. Adrian is a technology journalist and author who has devoted over a decade to helping users get the most from technology. Here are some of the things Adrian had to say.

One thing that Windows 7 brings with it is a revamped interface, and since this is the first thing that most people will notice about 7, it's Microsoft's first opportunity to create a good impression. In this refresh of the Windows OS **(operating system)** Microsoft has made some radical changes, such as introducing a new Taskbar that's not only visually different to the XP or Vista Taskbar, it also brings with it new features such as Jump Lists and a revamped Preview Pane. Is the new Taskbar revolutionary? In my mind no. It consists of little more than a few evolutionary tweaks, and I can't help but feel that most of these changes are of dubious benefit to the end user.

The revamping of the UI **(user interface)** goes much deeper than making visual changes, and Microsoft has added new methods of managing Windows through technologies such as Aero Shake (shaking a window to minimize other windows that are visible), Aero Peek (a way of seeing your desktop without minimizing open windows), and new ways of maximizing and tiling windows. These additions, while small, are in fact revolutionary and something that I found myself quickly growing fond of and missing when I moved to Vista or XP (or Mac and Linux for that matter). Technologies such as Shake and Peek do in fact feel revolutionary in that they change the way you interact with applications.

Another feature that's not entirely revolutionary but has the scope to changing the way that people interact with the OS are the new multi-touch features. Personally I've not too sure as to how widespread support for multi-touch will be, so it's hard to gauge just how much of an impact it will have over the lifespan of the OS, especially given that Tablet PCs are more of a niche product than ever and interest has shifted to low-cost ultra-portables.

Windows Explorer also sees some changes. Two that stand out are libraries, which are used to aggregate content as documents, music, pictures, and videos into virtual folders, and federated search which takes search beyond the hard drive. Revolutionary? No. Useful? I'm undecided on that one. While both no doubt offer some degree of upside, both also have the scope to confuse the end user.

For those times when things go wrong, Microsoft has developed some new and innovative troubleshooting tools that attempts to diagnose and fix problems. While they're not perfect, but they're a darn sight better than any troubleshooter previously shipped with Windows so that puts them into the revolutionary category.

Then there are changes to the core of the OS itself. I'm not going to bore you by listing all the minutia because there's one change and one change alone that will benefit everyone - increased performance. With Windows 7 Microsoft took the revolutionary step of making performance the top priority. Great end user performance is, without a doubt, the killer feature of Windows 7. It's the killer feature because it's one that everyone benefits from. Not everyone will like the new Taskbar, and not everyone will bother to learn how to get the most out of features such as Peek and Shake, but every single Windows 7 user will benefit from the performance improvements. Users will experience a performance boost when they boot up their system, work with files, run applications, play games. In fact, almost every single aspect of the OS benefits from improved performance.

Here's the killer question - is Windows 7 just Vista with a new wrapper, or is it the OS that will finally put the nail in XP's coffin?

To answer this question we need to go back in time a few years and look at why Windows Vista got the bad reputation that it did. Rather than rehash the whole debacle, I think that the main issue comes down to the RTM **(release to manufacturing)** release being plagued by performance and compatibility issues that took Microsoft a good year to fully address. By that time the early adopters had made their mind up about the OS, made sure plenty of people knew how they felt, and that sealed the fate of the OS.

There's very little doubt in my mind that Windows 7 is different. The pre-beta and beta builds **(versions of the program that are released to the public for testing)** that I've handled are some of the best code I've seen come out of Microsoft for a long time. Beta 1 is well-polished, robust, reliable and highly backward compatible with the current hardware and software ecosystem. On top of that, the improvements that it brings, while not all being revolutionary, are good additions rather than being hollow and superficial (I'm looking at you Aero!). That said, a system that's still running XP because it couldn't handle Vista is unlikely to be much better with 7. OK, performance-wise, things might be a little better, but the fact remains that the XP to 7 upgrade is likely to mean spending on new hardware and software - which might be too much of a price to pay under the current economic climate. If you're looking at 7 and thinking that it's a magic bullet for compatibility headaches then you're in for a disappointment.

Windows 7 still needs to pass the real-world security test (it'll be interesting to see what effect the tweaked UAC **(user account control)** will have on security) but that's a test that every OS is continually up against. Here it's hard to offer up any more than a "wait and see" ...

But what will existing XP and Vista users make of 7? So far, feedback from people running Beta 1 has been very positive indeed, and there doesn't seem to be any one feature that's attracted too much negative feedback.

Two issues not mentioned in this article - the ability to disable or remove Internet Explorer and no e-mail program included in the operating system. Not including an e-mail program in Windows 7 has a lot of people very irate. Not providing an e-mail program is Microsoft's way of trying to force everyone to use their Windows Live program (includes programs for Mail, Messenger, Photo Gallery, Writer, Family Safety, Toolbar, Movie Maker Beta, plus more to come).

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Having a problem with your computer? Having a problem doing something on the computer? Stop by one of the Open House Help Clinics we have at the John Ruehle Center and see if we can solve your problem. These clinics are from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on the first Saturday and the third Wednesday of the month. The clinics are open to the public so you can invite a friend or neighbor. There has been a significant increase in the number of people taking advantage of this service. If everyone arrives during the first hour there will probably be a wait.