

UnderstandIT

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MICROSOFT VISTA – A FIRST GLANCE

Windows Vista is the first new version of Windows for 5 years. Since Microsoft has a near monopoly on PC operating systems, we thought it appropriate to devote a significant amount of time and space to the new version.

For those who have not yet taken the adventurous step of upgrading their computer system(s) to one of the versions of Windows Vista, we thought it would be appropriate to provide a top level insight into the new operating system. We will highlight some of the many changes, improvements and some of the problems experienced by users that we have encountered to date.

The version we are discussing here is the Business version – other versions may not have all the features or facilities discussed here.

In case you have not had a chance to see a system with Vista installed, perhaps it is worth saying a few words about the visual differences with Vista.

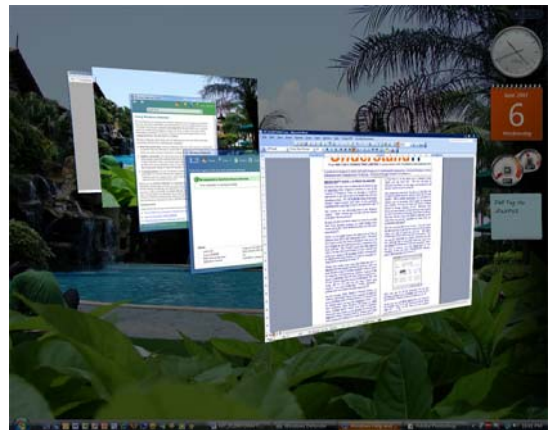
Firstly, as you might expect, the entire look of Vista is different from XP or any of its predecessors. The initial user logon screen has been re-designed, and once you have logged on, the desktop also has a completely new look and feel. The START button has been replaced with a circular Microsoft Windows Logo, and the start menu now displays the program folders automatically in alphabetical order (before you had to manually re-order them in alphabetical order).

As with previous versions of Windows, it is possible to make extensive changes to the appearance of your Windows system – this is achieved either by right-clicking on the empty desktop and selecting “Personalize” from the drop-down menu, or by selecting Personalization from the icon in Control Panel. Here you can change the general appearance of Windows, select desktop background, screensaver, sounds, mouse pointers etc.

Other visual differences include folder icons and other items are which are now 3-dimensional and opaque and fade in and out. Windows also have an opaque border at the top so that you can see the underlying window through the currently active Window.

One very neat feature is that if you have multiple windows open, by using the “Switch between windows” button on the Quick Launch bar, then all open windows appear in 3-D view and by using the mouse scroll button, they will cycle, still in 3-D and you can select which open window you want at that time.

A little “gimmicky” perhaps but very useful, and quite impressive (see screen shot below):



There are also a number of quite useful “gadgets” included in the Business version – things like an on-screen analogue clock, the style of which can be customised, yellow “sticky” notes, useful customizable currency converter, calendar and more.



An online gallery of nearly 1,000 other “gadgets” is provided for you to browse, download and use.

The look and feel of Windows Explorer has changed significantly too. One useful change is that if you use “drag and drop” to move files from one folder to another, each selected file has a tick box against it and then an opaque box appears that tells exactly where the file is being moved or copied to. With the XP Windows Explorer, it was often easy to drop the files into the wrong folder, particularly if you had a complex heirarchy of folders.

The new Network and Sharing Centre (in Control Panel) makes managing your network connections considerably easier and more intuitive. For example, the sharing of resources on your computer (files, folders, printers etc.), whether a network user requires to enter password authentication to access your system, and other features, are all controlled from here. It will also display a full visual map of the devices on your local peer to peer local area network (LAN).

On the Security front, Windows Firewall – a built-in “wall” behind which your computer is relatively protected from some external attacks – is switched ON by default when you load the operating system. You may remember when Windows XP began to suffer from external hacker attack soon after it launched, Microsoft came under severe criticism for leaving this important feature switched OFF by default and a user had to purposely switch it on to gain its protection.

Windows Defender is also included as an additional security feature. According to Microsoft, Windows Defender “...is a free program that helps protect your computer against pop-ups, slow performance, and security threats caused by spyware and other unwanted software. It features Real-Time Protection, a monitoring system that recommends actions against spyware when it's detected and minimizes interruptions and helps you stay productive.”

For those who wish to implement control over programs being installed or other system changes by other users of the system, Microsoft has implemented a feature they call (Uniform Account Control or UAC). This is switched on by default, and allows only the Administrator to make changes to the system.

In practice, if someone without Administrator authority tries to install a new program for example, he/she is forced to provide the Administrator password before they can proceed. This feature can be switched off if there is only one user account on a specific system. It can also be customised so that the administrator can make fine judgements over what changes can or cannot be made to a specific system. In order to change the configuration of UAC, the Administrator or a member of the Administrator's group has to provide the correct logon credentials.

In Control Panel, Microsoft has grouped together all the functions for customising which applications are run by default when particular files are selected, associating file types and protocols with specific programs and customising “autoplay” defaults when different types of disk are placed in the CD/DVD drive – for example, when inserting a DVD disk into the drive, you can specify which program will play the DVD (you might have 2 or more suitable players installed on your system).

Windows Vista is a complete re-write of the operating system, and as we have discussed above, most of the familiar features have been given a major face-lift. Some of the security features lacking in Windows XP or which were corrected by applying a myriad of updates have now been included in Vista, as has the automatic update feature.

On the darker side, one or two clients who have purchased new systems with Vista pre-installed have experienced some serious problems.

Most of the issues with which we have been involved relate to incompatibilities between Vista and “legacy” hardware components (external disk drives, printers, scanners, cameras and other devices that have either been connected to a system being upgraded to Vista, or relocated from an old system to a new system with Vista already installed.

We have one client who had an external disk drive containing important documentation that he wanted to connect to a new system with Vista Business installed. When connecting the drive, Vista found the “new” drive, installed drivers and it was possible to display the contents of the drive. However, when trying to copy or move information from the “legacy” drive to the hard disk of the new system, Vista appeared to be copying or moving the information, but had in fact “hung”. On re-starting the system, to his horror, the information was not on the system's hard disk, but neither were the files on the “legacy” drive. They appeared to have disappeared! The file system on the legacy drive could be displayed, but the files themselves had vanished. The capacity of the legacy drive still showed that the contents were there, but trying to access any file resulted in failure.

We suspect that there was an incompatibility in the driver installed by Vista and the legacy drive which caused this problem. A resolution to the problem is still being sought. The lesson is two-fold. (1) Always make sure that you have back-up copies of important information, and (2) double-check the support for Vista with the manufacturer or supplier of any hardware that you wish to connect to Vista. Ensure that there is an appropriate driver available to avoid such situations.

In conclusion, Vista is visually much more appealing than its predecessor, with many new innovations that make the use of Windows more interesting. Microsoft has also built in a considerable amount of protection for the unwary against hackers, spy-ware and other unauthorised access to the system. Judging by the feedback we have gleaned from various sources, the new version is proving to be reasonably robust. However, as with any new operating system, despite extensive beta testing over a long period of time, there are still bugs in the system and users should be very wary of unexpected problems of the kind described above.

If you need more advice, or help in implementing or using Vista, then please call Alan Finch on (01224) 697457.

We wish to acknowledge with thanks that some of the material contained within this publication has been sourced from Computer Weekly, PC Pro, BBC and other reputable sources..

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