

Are You Ready?

IT Asset Management (ITAM) Helps Assess Windows Vista Readiness and Prepare for Deployment

Note: This article was written in February 2008; the perspectives shared (on Vista Readiness, in particular) are reflective of that date.

Over a year has passed since the general release of Microsoft's Windows Vista Operating System (OS). Sales for Vista licenses exceeded 88 million through October 2007, but demand remains strong for its predecessor, Windows XP. In November 2007, analyst firm Forrester Research reported that 84 percent of enterprise PCs in the U.S. and Europe still run on Windows XP, which translates to over 400 million copies.

Demand for the older operating system has been strong enough that Microsoft and other vendors have had to adjust. Microsoft recently extended direct OEM and retail Windows XP license availability from January 31 to June 30, 2008; and systems builder (i.e. smaller OEM) Windows XP license availability does not end until January 31, 2009. The company is also working on a third service pack (SP3) of hotfixes for Windows XP, slated for release in the first half of 2008. And in April 2007, Dell backtracked and resumed offering XP as an option on select new models.

Strong sales of Windows XP are partly due to the common perception among mid-size and larger organizations that Windows XP remains more than sufficient for corporate environments. When combined with concern around its readiness for wide-scale deployment, many businesses have opted for a wait-and-see approach. The perceptions of application and hardware incompatibility as well product reliability and performance have driven many businesses to wait for the first Service Pack (SP1) of patches which has been slated to address many of these issues and which is just being released in February 2008.

The market perception that Windows XP is sufficient, however, is expected to change in Vista's favor in the coming months as (1) familiarity with its new features grows, (2) the first Service Pack is adopted, and (3) Microsoft continues an aggressive marketing campaign to tout Vista's features and benefits and build the business case for moving to Vista. Vista now has a chance to start living up to its hype. Several of the compelling features include:

- **Updated user experience:** New and updated features, such as Live Icons and Windows Flip, are significant improvements to the user experience.
- **Technical features:** BitLocker Full Drive Encryption is a technical feature that, in particular, is compelling.

Available in Ultimate and Enterprise editions, it adds an additional layer of data protection by encrypting an entire hard drive so that lost, stolen, or improperly retired PCs cannot be easily compromised. Windows Vista also introduces new and enhanced Group Policy features and security features such as User Access Control and Internet Explorer Protected Mode among other things.

- **Integration with other Microsoft technology:** While Windows XP works well with SharePoint Server 2007, it works even better with Windows Vista. Vista also allows greater management capabilities than XP when combined with products in Microsoft's Systems Center management suite.
- **IT Support:** Microsoft commissioned a report from research firm IDC in late 2006 (at time of initial product launch) that concluded that Windows Vista "has the potential to deliver significant business value ... through the reduction of IT and user labor, and by improving user productivity and satisfaction." For example, the results from the early adopters that participated in their study showed that Vista will save an average of \$11 (8%) per in service desk related IT labor. They ultimately found "that collectively, Windows Vista out-of-the-box savings of \$236 per PC annually in IT labor, user labor, and improved productivity."

A complete list of "Notable Changes" in Windows Vista Service Pack 1 is available from Microsoft and listed in a hyperlink that can be found on Soft-Aid's web site: <http://www.aid.com/links>

As businesses start to appreciate Vista's capabilities, concerns about introducing it into the user environment will need to be addressed. These concerns include four items: performance, usability, reliability, and compatibility issues.

1. Recommended system and resource requirements ("Performance")
2. End-user experience and product learning curves ("Usability")
3. The maturity of the product (i.e. bugs) ("Reliability")
4. Software (sw) application and hardware (hw) incompatibility (lack of third party device drivers) ("Compatibility")

IT Asset Management plays a direct role in addressing two of the four concerns (with system performance and software/hardware compatibility).

Recommended system and resource requirements (“Performance”)

Many PCs are not ready to support either the minimum or recommended Vista specifications. Software-as-a-service desktop management vendor Everdream (which was recently acquired by Dell) conducted a survey of 145,000 desktops in 1,000 customers in its installed base. They ran a report in late 2006/early 2007 on existing system attributes against Microsoft's recommended system requirements. The results show that about 80 percent of machines did not meet at least one of Microsoft's four criteria for Vista upgrade readiness. Microsoft recommends 1GB of RAM, a 1 GHz processor, a 40+ GB hard drive, and 15+ GB free hard drive space. Everdream also tested the desktops against Microsoft's minimum set of requirements. While Microsoft Vista can operate with a minimum of 512MB of RAM, 1GB is recommended -- a requirement just 30 percent of the desktops met in the Everdream study. One should therefore not be surprised to learn that a Fall 2007 study conducted by analyst firm Forrester Research determined that only a third of enterprises are planning to install Vista by mid-2008. In November 2007, Kace Networks, a systems management vendor, commissioned King Research to conduct a survey of Vista adoption (among 961 IT professionals) and came up with numbers similar to Forrester's; King's comparable figure was 27% of IT departments that planned to be fully deployed on Vista or to install it on new machines. And 90 percent of the respondents at the time expressed concern with migrating to Vista.

Software (sw) application and hardware (hw) incompatibility (lack of third party device drivers) (“Compatibility”)

Vista readiness extends beyond hardware to software. Software application compatibility must also be considered. Microsoft claims to be making progress with software compatibility, said Shanen Boettcher, General Manager of product management in Microsoft's Windows client group, in late 2007. According to Boettcher, 90 of the top enterprise applications are successfully running on Vista, and 2,100 applications are Vista certified (i.e. “compatible”). One should not assume therefore that all desktop software, even for common applications, is ready for use in a Vista environment.

A full review of the IT Asset Management environment is particularly important with Vista, which is the first major desktop operating system release for Microsoft in almost five years. Businesses that have an effective program of IT Asset



Management (ITAM) practices have several important advantages in determining Vista readiness. ITAM facilitates the gathering of hardware and software information needed for that assessment, helps with planning and forecasting the necessary upgrades, and helps avoid unbudgeted expenses, resource constraints, and unrealized savings.

ITAM can provide hardware information to assess Vista Readiness

An essential task to ensuring minimal exposure to Vista rollout issues is gathering an accurate hardware inventory and assessing any gaps with Vista operating system requirements. This is a best practice despite the fact that the operating system (as of early 2008) supports more than 2.2 million devices and more than 15,000 hardware devices have formally received the Certified for Windows Vista logo.

An effective ITAM program includes an auto-discovery inventory tool that supplies the necessary information. The capabilities of inventory tools vary, but most provide the necessary system information needed to make a preliminary assessment of Vista readiness: specifications such as processor speed, hard drive size, and the amount of memory installed. Some tools can also assess the type of video adapter (aka video card) that is installed, which is a prerequisite to take full advantage of some features of Vista (such as Aero and its added video effects).

An ITAM program can also justify the refresh rate of hardware within an organization, lessening unplanned expenses and ensuring that becoming Vista ready is not a wholesale implementation for the organization. An ITAM program will ensure that information not discoverable by the inventory tool is consistently kept up to date in a centralized repository. Basic hardware specifications alone are either not sufficient to make a full determination or slower than alternate methods. Recording purchase dates, model numbers, and



other purchase information can be used to confirm hardware readiness directly with the device manufacturer or systems builder. When one acquires new computers, an inquiry to the manufacturer about a given model's Vista readiness can supplement the data from the ITAM tool; furthermore, having standardized on hardware manufacturers and models, wherever possible, a fundamental ITAM tenet, simplifies this process.

ITAM provides software information to assess Vista Readiness

An accurate and complete list of deployed software is a necessary component of a Vista readiness assessment. Visibility into the key applications and their associated patches in your environment can be used to lessen the potential risks of doing an upgrade. Many publishers will not guarantee application compatibility, particularly for versions that pre-date Vista launch; having the ability to assess (and test, where appropriate) the right set of software applications (particularly the ones that permeate your environment) is therefore a very important exercise.

Whereas the initial version of Windows Vista supported about 250 logoed applications -- that is, applications that were certified to be 100 percent compatible with Vista -- today, that number exceeds 2,500. Microsoft attests that 98 of the top 100 selling applications and 46 of the top 50 downloads on CNET's download.com Web site are Vista compatible. However, one does not need to be running specific lines of business applications to make due diligence necessary. At the time of publication, many common and essential business applications such as the VPN client for Sonicwall's firewall products are not yet supported in a Vista environment.

If effective SAM (Software Asset Management) practices are being followed, processes will be in place to ensure that important licensing and purchase information is being stored and matched with installation data. This information at a minimum should include total license entitlements, purchase dates, and current software maintenance coverage, which can be used to estimate upgrade costs.

A mature SAM program also includes tracking the frequency of application usage through a usage monitoring tool. Organizations that have accurate usage data can rationalize and then reduce the total number of applications. Even when underutilized, a usage monitoring tool can reveal applications that can be removed rather than upgraded or patched. In either case, a monitoring tool helps reduce the number of applications that need to be assessed when preparing for Vista roll-out.

ITAM reduces the time requirements for assessing Vista Readiness

One of the advantages of having the right ITAM tools is that much of the data needed to assess Vista readiness, for both hardware and software, is readily available. The time to assess Vista readiness is reduced compared to products like

Microsoft's free Vista readiness tool ("Windows Vista Hardware Assessment"). That product features application compatibility, hardware assessment, and user state migration tools, but is limited to hardware. Microsoft's tool cannot provide the inventory data to address software application compatibility. In addition, only powered-on machine are collected by Microsoft's tool. A properly run ITAM program with the right tools, by contrast, will provide a more complete set of relevant information. By querying the ITAM database and running/interpreting the appropriate reports, one has the data necessary to begin making these assessments. Some tools even facilitate the process by including upgrade and costing wizards.

In Conclusion: ITAM enables confident upgrade decision-making

Companies can leverage ITAM tools and processes to make informed decisions as to whether and when to begin an upgrade process. While it is understandable to have concerns about upgrading to a new operating system like Vista, an ITAM program helps address some of the above concerns. Once a decision to upgrade has been made, companies can use the information in their ITAM database(s) to plan and budget resources and hard dollar costs. They can leverage the hardware and location information in the ITAM database to decide which computers to replace, and to assess which, if any, existing machines are salvageable with only minor upgrades.

"A move to Vista is pretty hardware sensitive," said Michael Cherry, an analyst at Directions on Microsoft, a consulting firm in Kirkland, Washington, which is why the above steps are important. The ITAM database can help create a roadmap for application upgrades and help monitor the upgrade while it is in process. In addition, an organization with an effective ITAM program will benefit during the upgrade process from having a change management policy to govern software deployment, as well as standard processes to deploy the actual software and replace/upgrade hardware.

The readiness tools and processes in an effective ITAM program apply to more than just Vista-upgrades. Businesses with a well designed and implemented ITAM program have the information readily available for other software and hardware deployment decisions, whether during planning or actual software deployment stages.

Note: This article was written in February 2008: the perspectives shared (on Vista Readiness, in particular) are reflective of that date.

Sources (links listed on <http://www.aid.com/links>):

"Survey: Most Desktops Not Vista ready," Denise Dubie, *PC World Magazine* 3/27/07 <http://www.pcworld.com/article/id,130040/article.html>

"Windows Vista Hardware Assessment Tool v2.1," *Microsoft TechNet* <http://www.microsoft.com/technet/solutionaccelerators/hardwareassessment/wv/default.aspx>

"Microsoft Partner: Use of Downgrade Rights is Surging," Kevin

McLaughlin, *CRN Magazine*, 12/3/07 <http://www.crn.com/software/204600906>

"Vista Resistance: Why XP is Still So Strong," Erik Larkin, *PC World Magazine*, 9/25/07 <http://www.pcworld.com/article/id.137635/article.html>

"2007: All About Windows Vista, Vista's debut year had mixed results," Mary Jo Foley, *Redmond Magazine*, 12/07 <http://redmondmag.com/columns/article.asp?editorialsid=2388>

"IT managers share Windows Vista install plans," Christina Torode, SearchWinIT.com, 11/30/07 http://searchwinit.techtarget.com/originalContent/0,289142,sid1_gci1284342,00.html

"Microsoft: Give Windows Vista Another Chance," Kevin McLaughlin, *CRN Magazine*, 11/15/07 <http://www.crn.com/software/203101143>

"Microsoft bashes Windows XP, Vista benchmarking: Tester blasts back, challenges Microsoft to put up or shut up," Gregg Keizer, *Computerworld Magazine*, 12/5/07 <http://www.computerworld.com/action/article.do?command=viewArticleBasic&articleId=9051180>

"Operation Re-Supply," Keith Ward, *Redmond Channel Partner Magazine*, January 2008. <http://rcpmag.com/features/article.aspx?editorialsid=2398>

"Select group of testers get new builds of XP SP3, Vista SP1," Mary Jo Foley, ZDNet.com, January 24, 2008. http://blogs.zdnet.com/microsoft/?p=1131&tag=nl_e622

"Vista Reaches for the Crown," Lee Pender, *Redmond Channel Partner*

Magazine, January 1, 2008. <http://rcpmag.com/features/article.aspx?editorialsid=2397>

"Analyst: No effect from tardy XP service pack," Jeremy Kirk, *ITworld.com*, January 18, 2006. <http://www.itworld.com/Comp/4063/060118xsp3/pfindex.html>

"Windows Vista Service Pack 1 Review," Paul Thurott's Super Site for Windows, February 2008. http://www.winsupersite.com/reviews/winvista_sp1.asp

"Vista's Success Is Inevitable: Despite slow acceptance, some say it's still too soon to write off the new Windows operating system as a failure," Ed Scannell, *Redmond Magazine*, January 2008. <http://redmondmag.com/reports/article.asp?EditorialsID=628>

"Analysis of the Business Value of Windows Vista," IDC study sponsored by Microsoft," IDC Corporation, December 2006. http://download.microsoft.com/download/2/8/1/281dda34-b8fc-4b4c-9848-c6fa2ba8fa8a/IDC_vista_whitepaper.pdf

David Yashar
Founder and CEO of Soft-Aid, Inc.

Where do your IT assets go when you dispose of them?

- Landfills in third world nations
- Evidence rooms awaiting litigation
- The grateful hands of identity thieves
- The water supply you drink from



Where should they go?

Intechra is the world leader in IT asset disposition. We focus exclusively on eliminating the risks surrounding data security, compliance, and environmental impact, while maximizing value recovery on IT asset investment for businesses around the world. Visit us at www.intechra.com/itak for more information or to schedule a meeting.