

# Better Vista with Windows 7

**Windows 7 may be better than Vista – but that’s damning with faint praise! Graham Jarvis reports.**

Towards the end of October last year Microsoft launched Windows 7, the long awaited replacement for the much reviled Windows Vista operating system (OS). So far, so good. Unlike its predecessor Windows 7 has received good press and praise, but time will tell as to whether this mixture of euphoria and relief is so well deserved. After all not much on the face of it seems to have changed, apart from a claim of improved security over Windows Vista and the much loved and reliable XP and some additional bells and whistles.

Back in June 2009, Adrian Kingsley-Hughes agreed with this view in his article for ZDNET, ‘What’s really new in Windows 7? The answer, not much!’ He sees an operating system as a ‘springboard’ to other applications. The question he raised is about whether it has any new features that cannot be found elsewhere, and he asks where it makes it easier to use those applications. He also ponders whether Microsoft’s new offering includes features that cannot be found on other operating systems. It gives a no holds barred overview.

Regarding the ‘new’ graphical user interface (GUI), for example, he believes it is an evolution from Windows 95, believing that Windows has come a long way since then, but “the new additions [on Windows 7] feel more like bolt-on improvements rather than a radical shift in thinking.” So while the look and feel of Windows 7’s user interface might be new, he thinks it’s actually based on “old school thinking” and doubts that anyone will want to upgrade simply to get hold of Internet Explorer 8. Like me you can download that to your current PC or laptop, even if you still have Windows XP or Vista on your machine.

## Are there any improvements?

The article cites a number of improvements though, which we can discuss later on, but it still questions whether they can actually be considered ‘new’. With Windows 7 Microsoft has improved the search functionality of the operating system, but he rightly points out that you can download Google’s desktop onto XP or Vista. In his view you can “gain a better search experience” by doing so.

Like with other operating system iterations Windows 7 strives for performance improvements – once again that’s not unique. However, he casts no doubt that it performs better than Windows Vista. This is in direct contrast to the views of Dan Bowyer – a partner and software engineer at The Engine Room. He felt that “Vista’s experience was hideous; it was slow, unreliable and cranky”.

To him Vista was just a better looking version of Windows XP, arguing that there was never any value to be gained by upgrading to it. “All of our customers had problems with Vista; it maxed out the memory, crashed too often and asked users if they’d like a certain function to run too frequently”, he adds. That doesn’t sound like an experience most customers would want to endure. An easy life is always preferred, isn’t it? Thankfully Windows 7 is expected to eradicate Vista’s nightmares – for Microsoft and its customers, but time will tell.

Meanwhile, Kingsley-Hughes suggests that you will probably find most of the features of Windows 7 on your current installation of Vista or XP, and if they don’t exist they can be found by downloading third party software. So it sounds like, in spite of features like the introduction of touchscreen technology, there’s no great impetus to buy Windows 7.

## Wait for while

Although it can work on old machines quite well, it’s advisable to wait until you need to buy a new Windows 7 installed PC or laptop before adopting it. Software upgrades can be costly, time-consuming and new software will often has its own issues. Although Bowyer claims that he’s discovered very few software bugs in Windows 7, Which? Computing magazine advises people to wait a year before installing it, unless you like downloading patches and updates on a regular basis. Having thought about this comment, most PCs do this anyway. Even so the new operating system will be a more stable beast in a year’s time.

I personally find that XP is reliable enough; it does crash, but not very often and it enables me to run most of my software applications without any much or any trouble. Yet sometimes it would be useful to have more memory (RAM), but adding RAM these days can be a futile exercise. Hardware has become so commoditised

that it’s often cheaper to simply buy a new machine (and that’s when I’d be happy to run a more tried and tested version of Windows 7). For now my current desktop PC is sufficient for the work that I do.

## Stimulating PC sales

Nevertheless Windows 7 is expected to continue to reinvigorate the sales of new PCs, laptops, notebooks and netbooks. Each of which will most likely be installed with the new operating system. Sales are already beating those of its Vista and XP. This is a clear indicator that it is gaining traction and popularity with consumers and businesses, and therefore Microsoft is simultaneously managing to restore its reputation. That’s because Windows 7 is considered to be the good quality product that Vista should have been, but failed to be.

## Hard to upgrade from XP

It’s relatively easy to upgrade from Vista, and apparently in some cases without charge, but some people claim that is not so simple if you plan to go from XP to Windows 7. So you are advised to back-up all of your data. While Windows 7 customers have upgraded without first removing XP from their machines, some experts suggest that you should remove XP from your machine before installing a clean copy of Windows 7. Some of your existing hardware devices might not work when you move over from XP to it. So check the compatibility of your various devices. You might need to update their drivers.

Michael Jackson, Director of telemarketing agency EbonyBailey, recently decided to upgrade from XP. “I was using XP as Vista basically made my PC feel like an old lady in the cold rain being battered by strong wind”, he comments. His existing webcam refused to work as it was incompatible with Windows 7. So he had to buy a new webcam in order to make Skype video-based calls. He also appears to be having other teething problems with Windows 7, and that’s even though he reformatted his hard drive and completed a clean installation of it. He complains that even with 2GB of RAM his computer’s memory is ‘maxing out’.

In spite of these niggles he’s optimistic about his future ‘relationship’ with Windows 7. “Once I have resolved this issue, either with more RAM or finding out what is making it run so heavily, I am sure I will be more

than happy with it”, he explains. Meanwhile, he applauds Microsoft for “stripping away a lot of the gunk that seemed to drive most people to throw their PCs out of their windows and buy an Apple Mac.”

He appreciates that there’s nothing really that new or revolutionary in comparison to Vista, but he likes some of the bells and whistles that come with Windows: “I like the ability to ‘pin’ applications to the bottom task bar, and I can have multiple desktop images instead of staring at the same thing all the time.”

### Bells and whistles

I might be at risk of sounding very sceptical and negative about Windows 7. That’s not necessarily the case, but it’s important to go beyond the gloss and the fanfare of a new product launch to discover whether the software is really as innovative as the software vendor claims. It could be just a small stepping-stone of a succession of improvements, part of Windows ongoing evolution since the first ever version of Windows was installed on to a PC. With every piece of software there are some ‘bells and whistles’, features that might be useful or may not just attract gadget-lovers. Windows 7 is no exception to this rule.

Remember that most people only use a small amount of the operating systems and software applications that are installed on their computers. How many Windows Vista or XP applications do you really use? Do you use the complete functionality of Microsoft Word and Excel? I doubt it. So don’t be surprised if there are some Windows 7 applications that you either never utilise or ever get to know anything if much about.

Bearing this in mind, it’s important to take a look at its most celebrated features – those that are setting the critics’ enthusiasm on fire with joy and relief that Vista is next to dead. Still, some of them might enthuse the technology geeks amongst us more than the general business and home users.

One of these features is Aero Shake. If you have several windows open, you can grab the title bar of one of them, furiously shake it and all of the others will minimise. In Windows XP to see your desktop, you’d need to move your mouse down to a clear spot on the task bar and then right click to bring up a menu. You’d then click on ‘Show the desktop’ to minimise all of the opened Windows. While Aero Shake sounds cool, I wonder whether Aero Shake actually reduces the time and effort to complete the same task.

Since I started to write this article I’ve won a neat Samsung N140 netbook at Fast’s FastForward Summit. It has the Windows 7 Starter edition installed. Many of the features offered by Microsoft’s Aero application are not installed with this edition of the operating system. IT magazine Computerworld says that it lacks many of the features that a complete version of Windows XP has too, and it believes that consumers and maybe business users will not be too pleased with this situation. The following Windows 7 features are also missing: multi-touch capabilities, Windows Media Center, and XP Mode virtualization.

A survey by electronic shopping website Retrevo.com has revealed that more than 56% of 1,100 respondents would not be happy with the lack of features on Windows 7 Starter. If they want a netbook they’ll probably have little choice but to buy one with this cut-down version of the full Windows 7 package. Apparently 23 out of 28 netbooks sold on Amazon have this edition of the new operating system installed on them.

This might not enamour some customers towards Microsoft. Eric Lai, the journalist

prefer to opt for a Linux-installed Netbook instead. They are expected to grab one third of the market.

For those wishing to upgrade to the more complete versions of Windows 7, but have a number of programs that would normally only run on XP, there’s the XP Virtualisation Mode. It’s a compromise that allows people to become gradually accustomed to the new user experience and features that Windows 7 offers. Some reports don’t recommend it, fearing that the strength of Windows 7 security features are reduced in this mode. Yet security is often only as good as the PC user who might inadvertently introduce a virus to his or her machine. PC users are ultimately responsible for securing their own machines.

The Pin feature of Windows 7 allows users to literally pin their favourite applications to the bottom left side of the taskbar and to jump lists by dragging and dropping them to wherever you’d like to keep them. The pinned applications can be opened with a single click. Again, what’s new here? With Windows XP I have several applications down the bottom left of the taskbar, and with one click they open.



writing the article, suggests that this might be a deliberate Microsoft strategy. The company is probably hoping that netbook owners will want to upgrade to at least Windows 7 Home Premium via its Anytime Upgrade Programme. This can be found on Microsoft’s e-commerce website. However, Lai believes that some customers might

Windows 7 doesn’t dismiss all of the Windows Vista’s features, including the Live Task Bar Preview functionality. It’s something that would have been useful on XP. Just point to one or more open and minimised applications on the task bar and it will show you a preview of them. So you don’t need to keep flicking through the win-



dows to find the one you need to find that Word or Excel document you're working on. It'll save bags of frustration and time. You'll also be able to more easily locate any open programs than you might be to do with XP.

Snap is another application that aims to improve the user's experience. Microsoft says it's a "new way to resize open windows, simply by dragging them to the edges of your screen." This apparently makes it easier to place and view two windows side by side than it was previously. If you tap a Window to the top of your screen it will elongate vertically, fill the screen or situate the windows next to each other. Microsoft says this will make it easier for people to compare the content of the different windows, saving time while enabling them to become more organised than they might otherwise be if they were to keep opening or closing, maximising and minimising certain documents, spreadsheets, web pages, etc.

HomeGroup is probably going to be one of the most popular applications, depending on how many computers you have connected to your home or office WiFi network. It allows you to share photos, files, devices and printers – and according to Microsoft it takes the headache out of doing so. Windows 7 is also meant to take away the pain that many XP and Vista users suffered, making it quicker and easier to connect to a WiFi or LAN network.

The Microsoft Windows Media Centre will allow you to record internet TV programmes, watch online TV, play videos and music. You can also benefit from a collection of free software, namely Windows Live Essentials. With this package, you are given VOIP and instant messaging package, Messenger, Windows Live Mail, Writer for composing blogs and adding video and photos to them, Movie Maker, a search toolbar and for home users there's a family security applications. This allows parents to monitor their kids internet activities.

However, one of the best things about Windows 7 – other than its improved search capabilities with Bing for finding files and applications – is its more economic and efficient electricity power consumption. So there are some good things about Microsoft's new operating system, but most people I've talked to agree that it's more evolutionary than revolutionary. It certainly improves upon the experience that people had with Vista, but not all of the features appear to be that innovative. So it will be interesting to see how Windows 8 will fair in 2012. It apparently already in the offing, and it will offer 128-bit support.

## OS Alternatives

No matter how successful Windows 7 becomes, Microsoft will always have its critics. The open source community will be amongst them. Competition in this market is going to become heated, particularly in the mobile space. For those that aren't enamoured by Microsoft or Windows 7, Google's Chrome OS or Apple Macs might be two potential alternatives. Yet given that at least 95% of most PCs have a Microsoft operating system of one kind or another installed on them, it's no surprise to me that Windows 7 is do so well when compared to Apple's own operating system for Macs called 'Snow Leopard'.

Even though Microsoft may have lost some customers to Apple as a result of the Vista debacle, sooner or later most of us will have Windows 7 installed on our PCs, laptops, mobiles, and other pertinent devices. Everyone might eventually have to migrate over to the new operating system as Windows XP is nearing the end of its life and support cycle. If the current rapture for its new operating system continues, Microsoft will push retailers, its channel partners, enterprise and consumer customers much harder towards adopting Windows 7. That is unless it eventually turns out to be as bad as Vista. So far it beats it!

### Further reading:

**What's really new in Windows 7? The answer, not much!**  
<http://blogs.zdnet.com/hardware/?p=4658>

**Top ten reasons to buy Windows 7**  
<http://www.microsoft.com/windows/windows-7/compare/top-ten-reasons.aspx>

**Which version of Windows 7 is right for you?**  
<http://windows.microsoft.com/en-GB/windows7/products/compare>

**Windows 7 – Revolutionary or Evolutionary?**  
<http://blogs.zdnet.com/hardware/?p=3345>

**Can You Upgrade An Old XP PC to Windows 7? Should you?**  
<http://blogs.zdnet.com/Bott/?p=1375&tag=trunk;content>

**10 Things You Should Know About Moving From Window XP to Windows 7.**  
<http://blogs.techrepublic.com.com/10things/?p=1000>

**Vista Jilted for Windows 7 Midway Through Upgrades.**  
<http://software.silicon.com/os/0,39024651,39591879,00.htm>

**Windows 7: Not Perfect – But Ready For The Prime Time.**  
<http://software.silicon.com/os/0,39024651,39612408,00.htm>

**Get Ready for Windows 7.**  
<http://www.devx.com/ebook/Article/42941>

**Analysts: Windows 7 Could Spur Enterprise PC Sales**  
[http://www.pcworld.com/businesscenter/article/170945/analysts\\_windows\\_7\\_could\\_spur\\_enterprise\\_pc\\_sales.html](http://www.pcworld.com/businesscenter/article/170945/analysts_windows_7_could_spur_enterprise_pc_sales.html)

**Windows 7 Passes MAC OS X In Market Share Race.**  
[http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9141424/Windows\\_7\\_passes\\_Mac\\_OS\\_X\\_in\\_market\\_share\\_race](http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9141424/Windows_7_passes_Mac_OS_X_in_market_share_race)

**3 Lessons a CIO Can Learn From Windows 7.**  
<http://www.zdnetasia.com/techguide/print-friendly.htm?AT=62059504>

**Endless Problems with Windows 7.**  
<http://www.lockergnome.com/jkls/2009/11/26/endless-problems-with-windows-7/>

**Is Windows 7 Security Full Proof?**  
<http://itvoir.com/portal/boxx/knowledgebase.asp?iid=1710&Cat=23>

**Microsoft Confirms 'detailed' Windows 7 Exploit**  
<http://blogs.zdnet.com/security/?p=4938>

**Hackers bypass Window 7 Activation.**  
[http://news.zdnet.com/2100-9595\\_22-365200.html](http://news.zdnet.com/2100-9595_22-365200.html)

**Windows 7's First 100 Days: So How Were Yours?**  
<http://blogs.zdnet.com/igeneration/?p=3325>

**What Microsoft Won't Tell You About Windows 7 Licensing.**  
<http://blogs.zdnet.com/Bott/?p=1514>

**Windows 7 vs. Ubuntu 9.10 – Strengths and Weaknesses.**  
<http://blogs.zdnet.com/hardware/?p=6034>

**Podcast: Will Windows 7 Redeem the Sins of Vista?**  
<http://blogs.techrepublic.com.com/hiner/?p=3136>

**Windows 7 Boots More Slowly Than Vista.**  
<http://blogs.techrepublic.com.com/itdojo/?p=1075>

**The Single Biggest Reason Why Windows 7 Won't Be Another Vista.**  
<http://blogs.zdnet.com/Bott/?p=1421>

**Windows 8 in 2012, Maybe with 128-bit Architecture?**  
[http://www.microsoft-watch.com/content/windows\\_7/windows\\_8\\_in\\_2012\\_maybe\\_-\\_but\\_with\\_128bit\\_architecture.html](http://www.microsoft-watch.com/content/windows_7/windows_8_in_2012_maybe_-_but_with_128bit_architecture.html)