Microsoft Updates Pay-As-You-Go PC Plan

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AMD and Via will support the next iteration of FlexGo, Microsoft's pay-as-you-go computing initiative, executives said Tuesday. The new release will also add the concept of "borrowed time".

Speaking at the Windows Hardware Engineering Conference (WinHEC) here, Microsoft said the next release of FlexGo will be designed for Vista, with enhancements to allow users to live on "borrowed time" until their next payment.

FlexGo is Microsoft's program to allow users in impoverished countries, such as Brazil, India, and Mexico, to rent or lease a PC in much the same way users lease a cellular phone from a carrier. The initiative is linked to "Microsoft Unlimited," a month-old program launched in Beijing by Microsoft chairman Bill Gates, which aims to increase the percentage of the world's population with access to a computer, from 1 billion people now to 2 billion by 2015.

"The model has really resonated in certain countries, with a significant increase in the available market and new buyers," said David Foster, the general manager of the FlexGo program.

FlexGo is available in two forms: via a monthly subscription, and through a pay-as-you-go model. The previous version was designed around Windows XP, while the latest version will be tied to Vista and rolled out by the first quarter of 2008.

From a user perspective, the second FlexGo version will look virtually

identical to a normal Vista usage model; in fact, the FlexGo layer can be added on top of or within any Vista SKU or image, allowing OEMs to design multiple FlexGo platforms for multiple customers.

Each FlexGo PC contains a Lower Provisioning Module (LPM), essentially a meter that monitors the total time the PC has been on. It begins when the PC first enters a standby, hibernation, or power-off state, only interjecting itself in front of the user when the user is at the limit of his subscription. The latest version will allow the option of permitting the user to continue using the PC on so-called "borrowed time" until he pays his or her bill, said Martin Hall, a program manager for Microsoft. That will meet the company's goal of designing a much more flexible version of FlexGo, he said.

AMD and Via will be added to the hardware partners supporting the FlexGo model, said Jeff Westerinen, the director of hardware architecture for the new business and products group at Microsoft. AMD already has a program in place called "50x15", which also aims to increase the PCs penetration. Infineon, a leading vendor of the Trusted Platform Modules in many corporate PCs, has also signed on. Intel was the first hardware vendor to support FlexGo, using its "Cash Creek" motherboard.

In 2008 and 2009, FlexGo will add secure execution environments, Westerinen said.

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