Be cautious upgrading to Windows 7

October 28 2009, By Troy Wolverton

Before you buy a copy of Windows 7, you'd do well to check whether your computer -- and you -- are ready for the upgrade.

If you're one of the millions of PC owners still running [Windows XP](), your computer may not be powerful enough to run the new software. Worse yet, you have a tedious and long upgrade process ahead of you, essentially requiring you to erase everything on your current [hard drive]() and reinstall it.

If you've got Windows Vista, the procedure is easier -- but not necessarily pain-free. And you might still want to go through the more thorough -- and time-consuming -- upgrade process facing XP users.

Windows 7, which hit store shelves last week, has multiple versions (Home, Ultimate, etc.) that come in one of two flavors: 32-bit and

64-bit. The latter, as you might imagine, can be speedier, depending on the type of software you run. But few programs can take advantage of what it offers, so be cautious in making this choice.

To run the 32-bit version of Window 7, your computer will need to have 1 gigabyte of memory, a 1 gigahertz [processor](#) or better, and about 16 gigabytes of available space on its hard drive.

The requirements for the 32-bit version are about the same as those for Windows Vista, meaning that most Vista PCs should be able to run Windows 7. They're also in line with the specifications of many computers sold in recent years. Even many netbooks, which are typically underpowered, should have enough memory and horsepower to run Windows 7.

If you want to run a 64-bit version of Windows 7, you'll need at least 2 gigabytes of memory and 20 gigabytes of hard drive space, and a 64-bit microprocessor.

But many XP machines won't be able to run the new software. XP requires far less power than Windows 7 -- just a 233 megahertz processor, 64 megabytes of memory and 1.5 gigabytes of drive space.

Part of what made XP popular in netbooks in recent years is that the software's modest requirements meant that manufacturers could save money by building computers with older, slower processors and less memory than on higher-end systems. In other words, even if your [netbook](#) is fairly new, it may not be able to run Windows 7.

Microsoft provides a tool on its Web site called the "Windows 7 Upgrade Advisor" that will check your computer to make sure that it's up to snuff for the new software.

Assuming your computer passes the test, make sure you carve out several hours -- at least -- for the upgrade.

Upgrading from Windows Vista can be fairly easy -- assuming you've already upgraded Vista with at least the first and preferably both of the service packs that Microsoft has distributed for it. If you have, then the installation process can involve simply updating your existing operating system files to Windows 7, a process that can take about 45 minutes to an hour.

Of course, it's a good idea to back up all your documents, photographs, settings and other information before you do the upgrade. Depending on how much data you need to back up, that process can add minutes or hours to your upgrade.

If you don't have an updated version of Vista, you'll need to install the service packs, which fix Vista's early bugs and security problems, before you upgrade to Windows 7. Installing those packs, which are available from Microsoft's Web site, can take a good 30 minutes to an hour each.

If you are upgrading from XP, the process is even more time-consuming. Microsoft requires XP users to do a "clean" installation. That means the installation disc will wipe out everything on your hard drive, including not only the old operating system, but all of your programs and personal data, including documents, songs, photos and bookmarks.

So, before you start the process, you'll need to track down all of your old program discs and back up all that personal information.

(Some software experts advise doing a "clean" install even if you are upgrading from Vista. Although it's more tedious, it can help speed up your computer by making sure that it is running only the programs that you currently need.)

You can download a program called "Windows Easy Transfer" from Microsoft that will simplify the backup part of the process. The program collects your user data and allows you to transfer it to an external hard drive or USB drive or to another computer on your network.

Once you finish installing Windows 7, you can use "Easy Transfer," which is built into the new operating system, to move your personal files back to your computer and put them into their appropriate places.

But there's no simple way to reinstall all your programs. Indeed, if you're like me, you may be at a loss trying to find all your old discs_or you may have software that you downloaded online that may be difficult to reinstall without repurchasing it first.

And, of course, reinstalling the programs is typically only the first step. You then have to tweak the settings within each one to get them working the way they did before.

I just went through this process twice and know how terribly time-consuming and frustrating it can be. It's one of the hidden costs of upgrading. And it's a good reason to think long and hard about whether you really want to do it.

UPGRADE TIPS

Seek advice: A tool on Microsoft's Web site will tell you whether your computer is capable of running Windows 7.

Back up your stuff: It's a good idea anytime you upgrade your OS; it's mandatory if you're running XP.

Take the "Easy" way out: "Windows Easy Transfer," a free program from Microsoft, will collect all of your settings and personal files and

transfer them to an external drive. You can use the same program to restore them after you've upgraded to Windows 7.

Find your discs: If you're going from XP, you'll have to reinstall all of your program files after you finish the upgrade.

Get up to date: If you're running Vista, you'll need to have at least the first service pack installed before you upgrade.

Clear your calendar: Simply upgrading from an updated version of Vista can take less than an hour. But be prepared for the process to take hours longer if you back up your data first or if you are upgrading from XP.
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