

WINDOWS 7: FINALLY TIME TO UPGRADE?

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WINDOWS 7 FOR LAW PRACTICES: THE "RIGHT" WINDOW OPENS

To say that Windows Vista was Microsoft's "Waterloo" wouldn't be hyperbole. Even conjuring the Tennyson imagery of the doomed Light Brigade: "Cannon the right of them, Cannon to left of them, Cannon in front of them . . . boldly they rode and well, Into the jaws of Death, Into the mouth of Hell, Rode the six hundred," might not overstate the disaster that Windows Vista was (and thankfully, we can now employ the present tense). Windows Vista was an unmitigated business disaster that will undoubtedly live on, seared into the memory of its victims and the inevitable subject of future business school case studies of "what NOT to do."

Personally, I wrote extensively about the product I quickly came to refer to as MOPH ("My Own Personal Hell") and the time it wasted, the angst it engendered and the outpouring of public vitriol at the sheer callous offensiveness of the product (see: <http://rossipsa.com/?p=169> and <http://rossipsa.com/?p=228>).

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Continuing to berate Vista serves no practical purpose, largely since with the release of Windows 7 in late October of 2009, Microsoft seems to have made a comprehensive *mea culpa* for the errors of its previous operating system ways. But with that said, there *is* value in itemizing the core functional issues Vista presented, and which represent the acid-test criteria for evaluating whether a Windows 7 upgrade is even worth considering. These included:

- Incompatibility with peripherals – while this improved and diminished over time, the inability to reliably use even relatively recent vintage printers, scanners and other devices confounded more than a few Vista victims.
- Unreliability – Vista was so bloated with running services and its own clumsy applications, that its *raison d'être* as an operating system was short-circuited. It just didn't really . . . operate. In fact, even the bevy of superfluous add-ons – on-screen widgets, sub-par applets, etc. often crashed, hung, caused intolerable system slowdowns. So the reality of Vista is that it just didn't work – hearkening back to the heady days of Windows ME (which many of us presumed must have stood for “Malevolent Edition”).
- False security – absurd and thinly veiled attempts to create a false sense of digital security, accomplish not through sound protective technology, but rather through a series of marketing department driven warnings and notifications in the form of the dreaded UACs (User Account Control) messages. Some users could literally see 50+ of these permission requests in an hour of work. And the technology behind the “warnings?” Often nothing more than a fraudulent intent to create a sense of security where none really existed. Wow. Just . . . wow.

We could go on, but to what end? Microsoft effectively acknowledged its colossal mistake by continuously extending the life of Windows XP. Enterprise/corporate buyers refused to drink whatever minimalist Vista Kool-Aid Microsoft was offering and stayed away in droves. To its credit, Microsoft routinely indirectly acknowledged Vista's inadequacy, largely by rapidly accelerating the development and release of its successor, Windows 7. After perhaps the largest and longest public beta testing process this side of Google products, Windows 7 rolled out, as announced, in late October 2009, after months of positive reviews of its surprisingly stable “release candidate” versions.

Let's explore the conclusion first – the reason you're attending this session. Yes, Windows 7 is reliable and worth the upgrade/migration process. It works. Finally an operating system from Microsoft that does in fact . . . operate.

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Now the specifics. Windows 7 is built on a Vista 32/64-bit platform. Before you run away screaming, it is important to bear in mind that the deeply hidden operational underpinnings of Vista were sound. The problems stemmed largely from the layers of digital detritus that bogged down the underlying operational functionality of Vista. Blended with perhaps the most irritating operating system interface devised to date by humans, Vista just choked under the weight of its superficial incompetence. With Windows 7, Microsoft made a valiant, and largely successful effort, whether through genuine contrition towards its alienated user base, or driven by SaaS and Open Source competitive fear, to get it right.

Windows 7 excels in several distinct areas including the following, all of which could be said to be the virtual opposite of corresponding Vista functions:

- Reliable access and exploitation of systems with more than 2 Gb of RAM, largely on the basis of a smarter and more compatible 64-bit version than Vista offered.
- Much less intrusive sub-applications and less menu clutter.
- It feels more “XP-like.” While Microsoft would likely be less than supportive of the implications of that statement, long-time XP hangers-on would argue the opposite – that it is a compliment of the first order, referring to the perception of workmanlike operability of XP.
- Peripheral compatibility is dramatically improved, especially in the 64-bit version – lessons were clearly learned from the Vista mistake (should we just call it a “vistake?”). Windows 7 also benefits from years of peripheral evolution to come to grips with Vista silliness through driver refinement.
- Performance – Windows 7 appears to be smart enough to know when to get out of its own way.

One of the consistent complaints about Vista was the plethora of variations and different versions. While Windows 7 does come in several versions, it is decidedly less confusing than its predecessor’s dizzying array of permutations. The versions of Windows 7 include:

- Starter – a stripped down version which is primarily focused on netbook distribution.
- Home Basic – for emerging markets and not likely to be seen in North America – so ignore it.
- Home Premium – for home users adding multimedia functionality primarily.

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- Professional – the first of the business-oriented levels that should be considered by law practices. Adds critical networking support in terms of the ability to join network domains and includes remote desktop capabilities.
- Enterprise / Ultimate – fully functioned versions that add BitLocker drive encryption and network manageability.

Wikipedia has a very detailed comparison chart exploring the Windows 7 version differences here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Windows_7_editions#Comparison_chart. Microsoft's Windows 7 home page is <http://www.microsoft.com/windows/windows-7/>. Uber-techie Paul Thurott's WinSuperSite has an extensive collection of articles, tech pieces, reviews and tips about Windows 7 at this site: <http://www.winsupersite.com/win7/>.

UPGRADING TO WINDOWS 7

Upgrading to Windows 7 for most law practices will be a “bare metal” process on an existing Windows XP system. Windows 7 cannot perform a direct upgrade from Windows versions earlier than Vista – a fresh installation is required. However, as part of the process, the prior Windows system is saved under a Windows.Old file structure – the older files can still be accessed, although the older version of Windows cannot be run (unless of course the system's drive is partitioned and the prior version of Windows is maintained, with a dual-boot structure being created).

But has always been the case, performing an operating system upgrade is cleaner and much less problematic when a fresh installation is involved. The process of overwriting a prior operating system with “in place” upgrades has virtually always yielded a digital mess – the detritus of the old operating system tainting the reliability of the new. So even Vista users – the few that are actually out there in a law practice situation, should serious consider clean installations rather than in-place upgrades.

One of the better guides to performing a Windows 7 upgrade on non-Vista systems states that a three step process is the best approach, as follows, according to Paul Thurott (with the full article as an essential reference here for those using an “upgrade” version of Windows 7: http://www.winsupersite.com/win7/clean_install_upgrade_media.asp:

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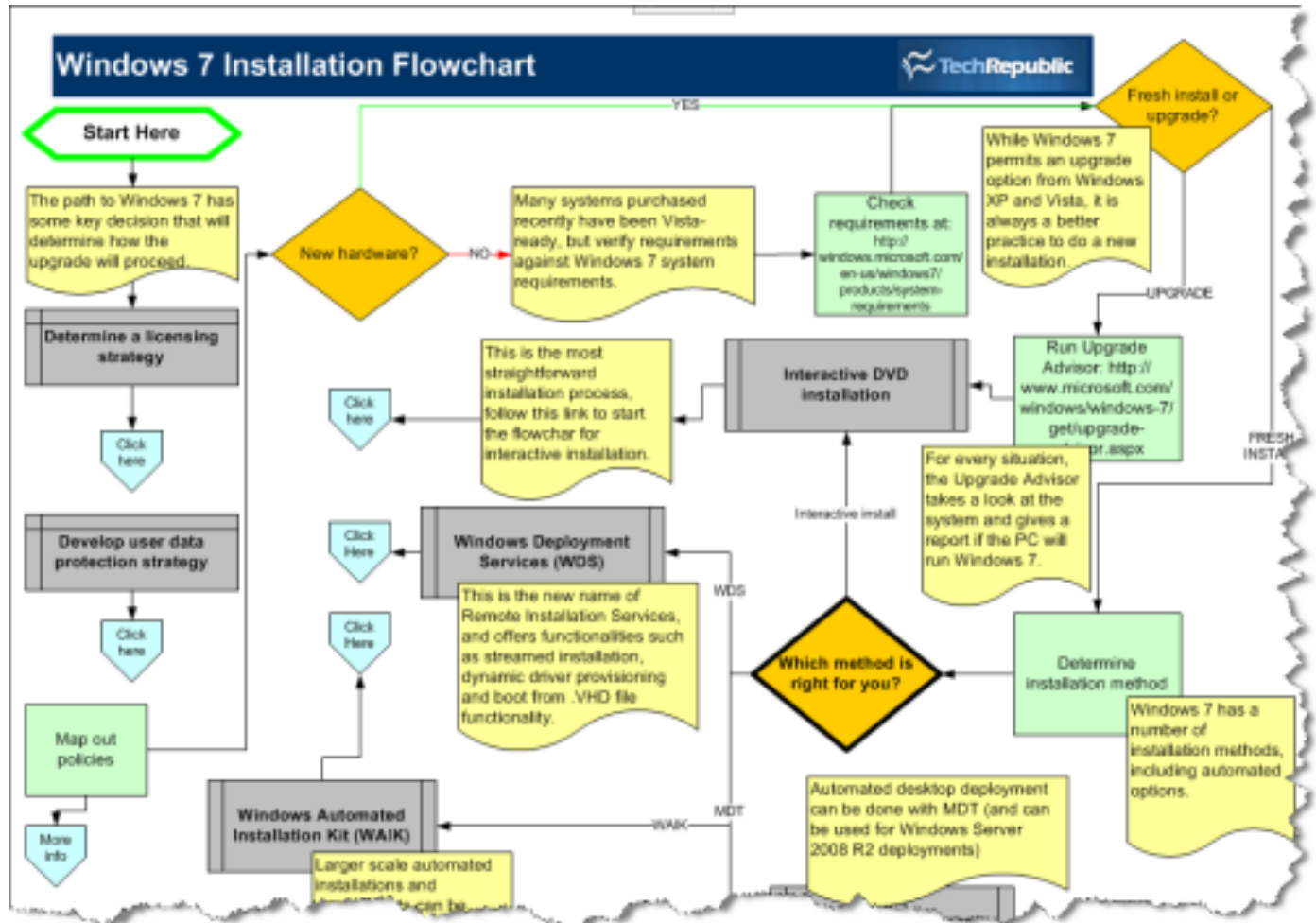
- “1. Backup your crucial data and settings using Windows Easy Transfer (it's on the Windows 7 Setup DVD) and make note of the applications that are installed, because you'll have to manually reinstall them again after the fact.
2. Perform a clean install of Windows 7 using the Upgrade media. I describe this process in this article.
3. Restore your crucial data and settings using Windows Easy Transfer (part of Windows 7) and then reinstall your applications.”

Microsoft has a specific online resource to help small businesses through the upgrade consideration process, through acquisition of Windows 7 in the most license-efficient way (including very un-Microsoft-like simple explanations of the volume license process when five or more systems are involved), and the upgrade compatibility/compliance testing to determine the success likelihood based on your present hardware platforms. Find this information here:
<http://www.microsoft.com/windows/business/upgrade-your-pc.aspx>.

Microsoft also offers the downloadable Windows 7 Upgrade Advisor (<http://www.microsoft.com/downloads/details.aspx?displaylang=en&FamilyID=1b544e90-7659-4bd9-9e51-2497c146af15>). It should be run on each class of PC hardware you may be considering as an upgrade candidate. It will reliably identify potential compatibility hazards including network, video and other componentry that may not be up to Windows 7 snuff.

If your PC systems pass the Upgrade Advisor tests and you're ready for the upgrade process, follow Paul Thurott's step-by-step upgrade guidelines, especially taking advantage of the Windows 7 Easy Transfer tools – free downloads to move from both 32 and 64 bit versions of Windows XP and also from various Vista versions. The link to the most common tool – for the 32-bit version of Windows XP is here: <http://www.microsoft.com/downloads/details.aspx?familyid=734917D8-0663-4C26-89D0-2D00B632EBDB&displaylang=en> with the general Windows 7 Upgrade Advisor page found here: <http://windows.microsoft.com/upgradeadvisor>. The following Windows 7 flowchart is particularly helpful from TechRepublic (<http://blogs.techrepublic.com.com/window-on-windows/?p=1714&tag=leftCol;post-1024>):

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Of course, as always, the easiest way to migrate your practice to Windows 7 is to wait until you're ready for a round of replacement desktops and laptops and acquire them with Windows 7 (Professional or Enterprise only for business use) pre-installed and pre-configured. Much, much easier than the upgrade process and ultimately, significantly more economical in terms of lessened out-of-pocket tech assistance costs and minimization (or outright elimination) of the economic costs associated with downtime related to system "tweaking" and unreliable operation.

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THE BOTTOM-LINE WITH WINDOWS 7 FOR YOUR PRACTICE

Perhaps the most practical consideration is the age of Windows XP, the operating system life jacket that Windows legal users have been clinging to with a steely-eyed death grip throughout Vista's miserable life-cycle. XP's time is finally over – Windows 7 is a “safe” inheritor of the tradition of functional reliability that was the hallmark of Windows XP's existence and is what made it an operating sanctuary for the sane among us who wisely chose to wait out the Vista madness.

Windows 7's operational stability, its extensive peripheral support, its welcome refocusing on being just an operating system rather than over-reaching to be a “destination application,” the ability to address much more RAM (which, in our increasingly multi-tasked law practice technology reality, has become paramount in importance), the improvements in the interface (in a very Mac-like way – meant as a compliment) incorporating the few positive characteristics of Vista (searchable menus, Instant Search/Windows Desktop Search technology *a la* Mac OS X Spotlight), and the much less intrusive and more adjustable User Account Control all team together to present a compelling case for moving beyond the venerable – but tired – defender of the Windows faith, XP.

However, never let a reality check pass you by. The ability to upgrade existing Windows XP systems to Windows 7 doesn't necessarily mean you should rush out to do this on your current PC hardware. The most economical, and frankly rational course to take is **not** to upgrade existing, well-functioning Windows XP systems, but rather to wait until the end of their life-cycles and replace them with fresh Windows 7 equipment. But if you're a Vista Victim, stopping the insanity and upgrading to Windows 7 Professional or Enterprise edition will be one of the smartest things you can do for your practice technology... right now.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES / REFERENCES

For more information beyond those mentioned in this article, please see the following resources:

- Ars Technical Windows 7 upgrade guide:
<http://arstechnica.com/microsoft/reviews/2009/10/windows-7-the-review.ars/2>
- Paul Thurott's WinSuperSite.com Windows 7 upgrade resources including:
http://www.winsupersite.com/win7/win7_upgrade.asp and the section on upgrading from Windows XP to Windows 7:
http://www.winsupersite.com/win7/win7_upgrade_02.asp
- Microsoft's Windows Enterprise resources for larger practices:
<http://www.microsoft.com/windows/enterprise/>
- TechRepublic's article about Windows 7 upgrade decision-making:
<http://blogs.techrepublic.com.com/project-management/?p=1024>

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Lawyer **Ross L. Kodner** is the founder and principal of MicroLaw, a 25 year old legal technology and law practice management consultancy renowned for its work with law firms and corporate/government legal departments worldwide. A long-time ABA GP|Solo and ABA LPM volunteer, he's done everything from serving on the TECHSHOW board, to chairing the Computer/Technology division to founding the National Solo & Small Firm Conference and the Wisconsin Solo & Small Firm Conference. He speaks and writes extensively with over 600 articles and over 1000 CLE programs since the 1980s. He currently writes for the SmallLaw column from the Technolawyer community (www.technolawyer.com/smalllaw.asp) as well as regular features for Law Technology News. The recipient of many industry awards (including five Technolawyer Awards with a Lifetime Achievement Award to his credit), Ross speaks at many events and blogs at Ross Ipsa Loquitur (www.rossipsa.com), finalist in the ABA's 2008 Blawg 100. In 2009 he was the inaugural recipient of the State Bar of Wisconsin's John Lederer Award for Solo & Small Firm Achievement. Also in 2009, his

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first book, co-authored with Sharon Nelson and Jim Calloway was released by the ABA LPM Section: "How Good Lawyers Survive Bad Times" (tinyurl.com/how-good-lawyers).

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