

The Legal Intelligencer

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2009

BY SILAS MCCULLOUGH

Special to the Legal

Is Microsoft Windows 7 in Your Firm's Future?

Have you seen one of those cute ads promoting Windows 7, Microsoft's newest software to run personal computers? Those precious children make it look all so easy and fun, giving you pause to wonder if upgrading your firm's desktops is really going to be that effortless, and more importantly, worthwhile.

Windows 7 is the next version of Microsoft's core operating system – destined to succeed where Vista failed and becoming the upgrade of choice for the wizened Windows XP found running on desktops in most firms. As an operating system, Windows 7 is software that makes a personal computer provide essential functions, such as access to files, networks, printers, and all other devices that it may talk to. Without an operating system, a PC is as good as a door stop, albeit an expensive one.

Up until the release of Windows 7, there were just two options: Vista and XP. Vista was supposed to be the successor to XP, but it never took off because there were so many problems with it. As a result, most firms elected to remain on the XP platform since it was stable, performed reasonably well, and supported all of their applications. Fortunately, we now have a viable option in Windows 7 as an effective, next-generation operating system. It should be given consideration, especially as PC hardware is replaced in the upcoming months.

To Upgrade or Not?

That is indeed the question, and it depends on whether you need the new features or not. Windows 7 is certainly zippier and snazzier than Windows Vista and XP. The graphical improvements are particularly stunning, and there are some nice productivity enhancements too. Yet no must-have feature comes to mind as a major reason to switch over right away. Then again, there are five features spread between Ultimate and Enterprise editions that could sway your decision to go for the switch to Windows 7:

- The Ultimate edition provides multilingual support and BitLocker. Multilingual support allows you to switch between any of 35 languages. BitLocker can secure data on the PC's hard drive and even on a portable storage device, thus providing protection from theft or loss.
- The Enterprise edition has even more features, such as AppLocker, BranchCache and Federated Search, that may be your reason(s) to upgrade. AppLocker specifies exactly what software is permitted to run on a PC and helps prevent the installation of unwanted software. BranchCache makes it faster to access files located across distant offices. Federated Search allows for expansive searching of the firm's information resources.

When to Upgrade?

When to upgrade depends less on the PC hardware, but more on the software applications that your firm uses. Most of the legal application providers, notably the major document management systems – Autonomy iManage and OpenText DM - have

not yet certified their software to work on Windows 7. Preliminary testing shows few problems, but proceeding without certification complicates vendor support. The vendors will likely certify their applications by the second quarter of 2010.

If you decide to upgrade your existing PC hardware, there are three methods to consider:

- Upgrade over the existing Windows installation (OK for Vista, but not an option for XP).
- Do a brand new installation from scratch (OK for Vista, required for XP).
- Move to a managed services model where upgrades are included in the IT management services.

Keep in mind that upgrading an existing Windows system may not be as simple as you would like, since its success depends greatly upon what hardware and software is already installed on your PC. Most firms will likely undertake a fresh installation, which will be time-consuming, requiring good planning, re-installation of applications and transference of data. If your firm has an IT department, then you may want to consider going to an automated Windows 7 build process using Windows deployment technologies. This approach makes the future Windows 7 environment more cohesive, manageable and flexible.

New PC hardware will be able to run Windows 7, but you should ensure that you are entitled to downgrade rights to Windows Vista or XP while you wait for software vendors to complete their certifications. Be aware, though, that Microsoft has stopped selling Windows XP and is providing limited support until April 2014. Visit <http://www.microsoft.com/windows/windows-xp/end-of-sale.aspx> to learn more. Vista won't be far behind.

The writing is on the wall that Microsoft intends to move on to Windows 7, so you should plan to upgrade your firm to Windows 7. Undoubtedly, law firms will lag behind other types of businesses in upgrading while waiting for the legal application vendors to certify their products to run on Windows 7. As a consumer, you may not have any choice other than Windows 7, since the PC manufacturers are moving to it very rapidly for their consumer PCs.

Early Adopter?

If you would like to move forward with Windows 7 in order to test it out, then the easiest approach is to upgrade an existing Vista installation. Regrettably, most firms won't have this option as they still run Windows XP and so they will need to do a brand new installation. Even with a new installation, proceeding with installing the current applications should get you to a reasonably close Windows 7 environment for testing purposes. The good news is that those firms that have already been testing Windows 7 have reported good results. Most problems have been with virus scanners and non-mainstream printer drivers, which will be resolved by their respective vendors over time.

Which Version of Windows 7?

Before going out and upgrading all of your firm's PCs to Windows 7, you first need to know which version is the right one for your firm. Windows 7 comes in five versions: Starter, Home Premium, Professional, Ultimate, and Enterprise. Starter and Home Premium are consumer-grade while Professional, Ultimate and Enterprise are designed for business use. All except for Enterprise may be purchased individually and as

upgrades to an existing valid Vista or XP license. NOTE: When purchasing new PCs for your firm, take care to fully understand the difference between the Windows 7 licenses either provided as part of the PC purchase, known as an OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) license, or as a volume license, which is required if your firm needs to manage the installation and deployment of Windows 7 centrally.

Starter is inexpensive and the least powerful but will be found predominantly on those increasingly popular netbook devices. Netbooks are compact personal computers that have limited capabilities, but provide Internet access plus convenient portability. Home Premium is designed to serve the needs of the home user and will be loaded on most consumer grade computers, particularly those sold during the upcoming holidays. When using Home Premium, firm resources should be accessible remotely through Citrix, Outlook Web Access and other Internet portals just like a home XP or Vista PC can be today.

Professional, Ultimate, and Enterprise are oriented towards business use. Professional is appropriate for a sole practitioner or small firm, as long as you do not need to securely safeguard the data on your hard drive or support multiple languages. If that is the case, then Ultimate is the better choice for you. Enterprise is a special version designed for corporate environments with all of the features of Ultimate, and then some. Most mid-size to large firms will use Enterprise.

For more information, visit <http://www.microsoft.com/windows7> to learn about the features offered in each version.

Do You Have to Buy New PCs?

Not necessarily. Microsoft offers a handy tool that will evaluate the suitability of upgrading your current PCs to Windows 7. The Windows 7 Upgrade Advisor is a free download located at <http://www.microsoft.com/windows/windows-7/get/upgrade-advisor.aspx>. After you install and run the Upgrade Advisor, it will report back whether Windows 7 will run on your PC, if there are any compatibility issues and recommendations on how to proceed. Even though your PCs may qualify to run Windows 7, keep in mind that performance may be hampered if they are old.

Despite the wait for vendors to certify their software, Windows 7 will become the operating system of choice over the next few years. It performs well, is stable, and appears to have little difficulty running the current set of legal applications. The time required to upgrade combined with the inherent complexity of Windows 7 will be the major challenges in designing and deploying your next new desktop environment.

Silas McCullough is general manager of legal professional services at mindSHIFT Technologies, Inc., a provider of professional and managed IT services, legal applications integration, software-as-a-service (SaaS), and VoIP to small and medium-sized organizations. He can be contacted at 212-253-3570 or silas.mccullough@mindSHIFT.com.

