

Life without XP

Jason Connolly, business development director at Next Generation IT, looks at the implications of the switch off of Windows XP's life support machine



In less than six months' time, Microsoft will withdraw support for XP, its longest-running and most popular operating system. With time fast running out, Microsoft is stepping up its campaign to urge its customers to move onto Windows 7 or Windows 8 operating systems.

Financial organisations which continue to use Windows XP may face a risk to their compliance with payment card data security and data protection rules if they continue to operate the software after Microsoft withdraws its support.

Microsoft will discontinue extended support for XP from April 2014. After this date, Microsoft will no longer provide regular security patches, technical assistance, or support for XP. Financial institutions that use XP in personal computers after this time could be exposed to increased operational risk.

The reality is that after April 2014, computers running Windows XP will not receive software updates and other critical patches from Microsoft which help protect against harmful virus, spyware and other malicious software that could compromise your business. There are also legal and regulatory risks from storing data on an unsupported operating system. In addition, insurers may not cover any potentially related insurance claims for data loss and security related issues.

Potential problems include degradation in the delivery of various products and services, application incompatibilities, and increased potential for data theft and unauthorised additions, deletions, and changes of data. It is also likely that hackers are waiting in the wings, storing up any knowledge of vulnerabilities so they can make use of them once Microsoft is no longer fixing them.

A practical limitation is that the latest version of Microsoft's internet browser does not work with XP. This means that as websites are updated to make use of the new features in this browser, staff running older internet browsers will not be able to access these sites.

As a further incentive, Microsoft is also about to release version 8.1 of its new operating system, which aims to drive more people off of XP by providing an upgraded operating system that is easier to use than the much maligned Windows 8. Windows 8.1 adds back in the start button that had been removed in Windows 8 to make a more familiar interface for PC desktop users.

Resistance is futile

Businesses are often understandably reluctant to move away from using legacy IT systems due to the cost and time involved in undergoing such a transformational project. Windows XP has been around for many years, and is very stable, reliable

and ubiquitous. That, coupled with the fact that most security vulnerabilities for the technology may already have been flushed out and resolved, are among the other reasons why businesses may stick with legacy IT systems even while newer, supported systems are available.

Because of this, Microsoft has already extended its timeline for the death of XP a number of times, but this time it is determined to retire the 12-year-old operating system. Microsoft believes that only about 50% of enterprise desktops have made the move to Windows 7, and even worse, half of the remaining businesses with Windows XP have not yet started planning to move at all.

The concern is that senior management in those organisations that have yet to start migrating may not fully understand or appreciate the level to which unsupported and unpatched environments are vulnerable to security risks.

Call to action

With time running out, many organisations may make the decision to move too late and will fall foul of limited stock and resources for the rollout of new PCs, as a large proportion of organisations clamber to renew their PC estates before the deadline.

Our advice to businesses is to start planning the migration now. The move to Windows 7 or 8 needs to be planned, tested and executed in an organised manner. There are many considerations, such as hardware and application compatibility, and organisations may need to upgrade or replace incompatible software and peripheral devices such as printers, scanners and line-of-business systems.

Don't panic

For many organisations, this change may be an easy task, and if migrated in a planned and well-thought out manner, the change need not be painful or expensive. For instance, the good news is that all new PCs and laptops are bundled with Windows 7 or 8 and have been since the end of 2009, and many organisations have chosen to downgrade to Windows XP to keep a consistent operating system. This means that it is likely that a significant proportion of existing PCs can be upgraded to Windows 7 or 8 with only the purchase of additional memory.

Any PCs bought before 2010 are likely to need replacing to cope with the increased processing power of Windows 7 or 8. This will be the quickest and often most cost-effective method of migrating for many computers.

Inevitably, there is likely to be disruption to business, particularly if you manage the migration yourself. It would be advisable to speak to a specialist IT company and ask them for their advice to ensure that your business can continue to operate safely and securely after April 2014.