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Tip of the Month

Microsoft has released their new Internet Explorer browser – **IE 8**. Here are some major improvements and features:

1) **InPrivate Browsing** - If you don't want IE to record your browsing history, including cookies, files and passwords, select InPrivate Browsing on the main menu before you start searching.

2) **InPrivate Blocking** – Turning this feature on will prevent websites from sharing your data (IP address, location, type of browser you're using, which pages you clicked on, sites accessed, etc.) with other websites.

3) **Compatibility view** – Many sites may not be ready for IE 8. Click the compatibility view button (image below, located next to the Refresh button on the address /search bar) and you can browse the page as it would appear in IE 7.

4) **Tabbed Browsing** – This feature groups pages according to how you open them. If you open a link on a page in a new tab, both of those pages will have the same color tab making it easy to quickly see which pages are related to one another. Very helpful if you frequently open many tabs.

5) **Back Button** – Better technology has improved the way IE tracks visited pages. Now when you hit the back button, you should see each page you visit, not just the first page of the application/site.

6) **History** – Sort the history section by Most Visited sites, Order Visited Today, Site Name or Date.

Looking Ahead to Windows 7

Microsoft will be releasing Windows 7, their new operating system, before the end of the year and they're hoping that a majority of consumers and IT administrators will jump on the bandwagon and replace they're aging XP PCs (originally released in October 2001).

As a reminder, **Microsoft ceased supporting XP** and will no longer release service packs (as of April 2009) but will continue to provide security updates through the first quarter of 2014. Note that even though Microsoft will provide security updates to XP users, other software and hardware vendors may stop supporting programs run on XP before this date.

So what can consumers and IT administrators do? You could migrate to Vista, which was released in 2007 but was wrought with driver incompatibilities and shunned by most of the population. Another option is to migrate to Windows 7 directly from XP. According to many experts, Windows 7 is the finished version of Vista with better security, stability, and device compatibility all within a much smaller footprint. Upgrading to Windows 7 will be a benefit to all Windows users including those running Vista. Start preparing now for the transition!

Windows 7 Requirements

To install Windows 7, PCs must have the following *minimum hardware specifications*:

- 1 GHz processor (32- or 64-bit)
- 1 GB of RAM (32-bit); 2 GB of RAM (64-bit)
- 16 GB of available disk space (32-bit); 20 GB of available disk space (64-bit)
- DirectX 9 graphics device with WDDM 1.0 or higher driver (for Aero interface)

* Spec requirements may change when Windows 7 is released. We'll keep you updated as we get closer to the final release date.

Websites Worth Watching

1. www.inhabitat.com – Are you intrigued by the design of buildings, vehicles, technology and fashion? Check out this site for a more progressive outlook focused on sustainability and efficiency.

2. www.longwoodgardens.org – Beautiful gardens located on 1,050 acres in Kennett Square, PA. Visit the site to find out about what is in bloom right now, special events planned, lectures offered, volunteer opportunities, and much more.

Windows 7 Organizing Features

The Windows Taskbar *(Figure 1)* has gotten a major overhaul. Instead of individual horizontal bars denoting what program/file is open, a raised icon indicates which program is open. If you have multiple files or windows open in that program they will appear as a stack, one on top of the other (as in the figure below). If you mouse over that icon, you'll see a small thumbnail of each of the open docs/pages so you can quickly choose which one you want to open. If you then hover over a thumbnail, a full screen preview appears. You can reorder taskbar items by clicking, dragging and releasing. And for those who want a completely different look, you can move the taskbar to the sides of the screen rather than keeping it at the bottom.

Figure 1. Windows 7 Taskbar

Device Stage *(Figure 2)* is a welcome addition to the overall interface. This feature allows you to see detailed information about all of your devices that connect to your computer from printers to cameras to mp3 players and cell phones (Smartphones).

Once you connect the device to the PC, you can get instant information like battery life remaining, GB space left, what document is printing (or is trying to print), how much ink is remaining in your printer and much more. Instead of having to dig through menu after menu to find information about your device, simply right click the small icon on the task bar and select the information you need.
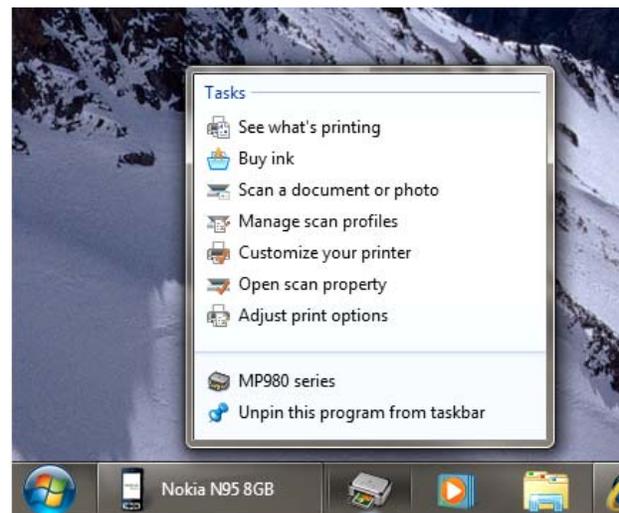

Figure 2. Device Stage in Windows 7

The **Library** section *(Figure 3)* is a welcome addition to Windows Explorer (program used to view, copy and move files between folders and drives). The idea behind Libraries is that if you have many similar files located all over your hard drive(s) or network drives, you can add the folders where those files reside into a Library and then access them all in one location.   The important feature is that there will be two versions of the file – one in its original location and one in the Library. Any updates to the file in either location will **automatically update the other file** ensuring that you are always working on your latest update.

The Library works best for getting a snapshot view of a particular group of files or documents. You can still use Windows Explorer the original way by navigating nested folders. Organizing your files in the Library just gives you more flexibility in how you access your information without constantly searching.

Example #1: You have image files located in multiple folders organized by department, year and/or event. Create a Library, select those folders and you'll be able to access all of the images in one location rather than clicking on each individual folder for department, year and event.

Example #2: If you had two hard drives or multiple network drives and archive email on all of them, you could create a new Library for archived email and include all of the folders and files pertaining to archived email (for Outlook users that would be all of your .pst files). Being able to access your archived email in one location rather than clicking on the folder tree for each drive is a timesaver.

There are 4 default Libraries setup for you when you first install Windows 7: Documents, Music, Pictures and Videos. You can create as many Libraries as you need.
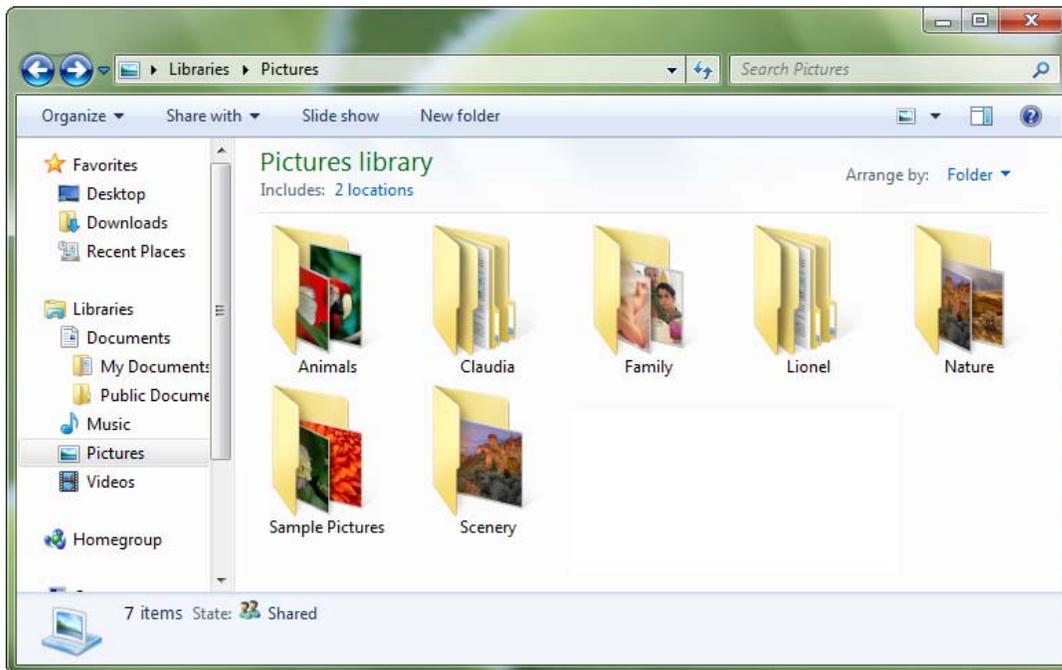

Figure 3. Windows 7 Libraries

Windows 7 Security / Usability Features

DirectAccess and **BranchCache** were devised to ease the inconvenience of working remotely.   Both require Windows 2008 Server (BranchCache needs an additional file server or intranet website in the branch office). **DirectAccess** is a more secure way of connecting remote PCs to company servers. Although the standard VPN connection provides a secure, encrypted tunnel between networks, it requires user input and troubleshooting regularly. DirectAccess serves to correct some of the issues associated with VPN connections by authenticating the user once and automatically reconnecting if the session is terminated unexpectedly. Another benefit of DirectAccess is that it allows administrators to manage remote PCs even if the user is not logged on; enabling companies to send updates to remote PCs whenever the PC is turned on but not in use. **BranchCache**, as the name implies, allows files to be cached on a separate server away from the main office, so when a file is retrieved the first time it remains in cache mode for quicker retrieval at a later time or by other individuals.

BitLocker, introduced in Vista, is a handy way to encrypt data on PCs and laptops. The program can now encrypt removable drives (i.e., USB drives) so if many of your employees leave the office with company data on flash drives, you'll be able to ensure that if the drive gets lost or stolen, the information cannot be read or distributed. Important: If you encrypt a drive in Windows 7 using BitLocker, you can **open the file on any computer** (available in the final release) as long as you know the passphrase or have access to the 40-digit recovery key.

In addition to encryption, BitLocker is also useful for biometric scanning. If you have a biometric scanner, individuals can log on to a PC using their fingerprint scans instead of (or in addition to) passwords.

HomeGroup is a new networking feature geared for environments without a server. If all of your computers run Windows 7, you can easily set up a network to share files, printers and resources. Once you create a HomeGroup (assign a password and designate which folders and libraries to share), any PCs that join afterwards will be prompted to join as well. Some highlights for PCs joined in a HomeGroup include the ability to listen to music stored on one PC on other PCs and automatic installation of and access to a USB-connected printer. HomeGroup files and folders are accessed through Windows Explorer.
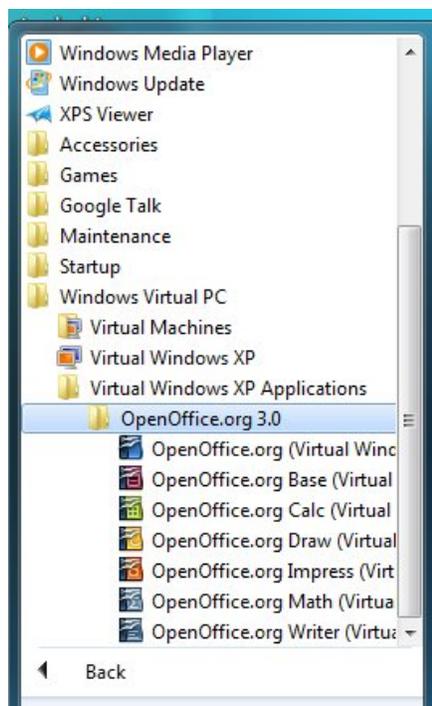
Figure 4.   Windows 7 Start menu showing Open Office installed in XP Mode

XP Mode *(Figure 4)* is geared for those who have legacy programs that do not have drivers for Windows 7. This feature isn't new; Microsoft has offered a free version of Virtual PC since 2006 and has offered the 'compatibility mode' feature since 2000. In order to offer the most flexibility to organizations to switch to Windows 7, however, Microsoft has included the ability to run certain programs in a virtual XP mode on a Windows 7 PC and has made it more user-friendly. Of note, documents created in the virtual environment can be saved to a Windows 7 folder.

XP Mode is only available in the **Professional**, **Enterprise**, and **Ultimate** versions of Windows 7 and requires a processor with virtualization support (Intel processor with VT-x extension or AMD processor with AMD-V technology) as well as a minimum of **2GB RAM**.

If these requirements are beyond feasibility, you can always try running your program(s) with **Microsoft Virtual PC 2007** or in **'compatibility mode'**. Running a program in compatibility mode essentially fools the application into behaving like it is running on whichever OS you specify. By using Virtual PC 2007 or 'compatibility mode', your applications may not run as fast and there may be glitches with using either of these solutions so testing is required before rolling it out.

Some Notable Improvements over Windows Vista

1) User Account Control or UAC in Vista was intrusive and annoying. Windows 7 allows you to customize the UAC panel however you see fit.

2) Vista was sluggish, had more programs installed than were necessary, and had many device incompatibilities. Microsoft has removed many programs that are used infrequently by users and has instead given the ability to download programs from Microsoft's Live site for free. Since Windows 7 has the same basic underlying structure as Vista, many driver issues have been addressed as well so although there will be driver issues, there won't be as many as when Vista was released.

3) By removing the bloat and fine tuning the underlying code structure, PC boot time has been improved (i.e., it won't take as long to start your computer in the morning).

4) You can actually use the backup program in Windows 7. There are more options for how you want to backup your data and restore previous versions of files and/or your system.

5) Paint got an update – it's now a worthy beginners tool for graphic editing

6) AppLocker (Application Control Policies) allows you to create rules to control what software can run on a PC and assign those rules to specific users or groups through Group Policy.

Conclusion

As with our past advice, waiting until the first update (service pack or SP) after a release of an OS is a good idea so if your PC is functioning well with XP don't rush out and get Windows 7. **SP1 should arrive sometime around summer 2010** giving you enough time to plan your migration.

If you need a new PC however, migrating to Windows 7 should definitely be considered since it is proving to be stable and secure and has received many positive nods from the IT community. If you have older hardware or software that you must continue using, however, check to see if new drivers have been created before upgrading. Contact us for more specific details about any of the features listed in this newsletter or for a consultation as to how and when you should implement Windows 7.