

## Vista "upgrade" drops compliance checking, requires old OS to install

Microsoft's quest to closely control the way Windows Vista can be used on PCs has taken a turn for the worse as new information indicates that the company is breaking tradition when it comes to Windows Vista upgrades. With Windows Vista, users will not be able to use upgrade keys to initiate completely new installations. It is a change that will affect few users, but enthusiasts will certainly be amongst those pinched.

Upgrade versions of Windows Vista Home Basic, Premium, and Starter Edition will not install on any PC unless Windows XP or Windows 2000 is already on the machine in question. In years previous, upgrade versions of Windows could be installed on any PC. If a PC did not have an older version of Windows installed, users could provide an older installation CD of Windows for verification. After dropping a qualifying CD in the CD-ROM drive, the installation routine would verify the disc and you'd be on your way. With this approach, one could use an "upgrade" copy of Windows to lay a new Windows install on a computer.

One again, Microsoft appears to have made licensing decisions without considering how people actually use their products. Last fall the company trotted out changes to its retail licensing that would have punished users who frequently upgrade their PC hardware had the company not relented. Now Microsoft seeks to complicate our ability to start a crisp, new install with an upgrade version. Why?

A 'per device' obsession

Microsoft has been adamant in recent years that Windows is licensed per device and not per person. One practical ramification of this viewpoint is that the company typically does not allow users to install one copy of Windows across multiple machines, even if only one machine is in use at a time. According to Microsoft, only the full retail license of Windows Vista can be transferred to new devices (retail pricing here). OEM versions are ostensibly tied to motherboards, and upgrade versions are now technically tied to previous installations.

What does all of this mean on a practical level? Users who purchase upgrade copies of the aforementioned versions of Vista will find that they can only upgrade PCs that already have Windows installed. KB930985 clearly states: "you cannot use an upgrade key to perform a clean installation of Windows Vista." According to Microsoft, this happens because Windows Vista does not check for upgrade compliance. If you do not have a previous installation of Windows available, Microsoft recommends that you "purchase a license that lets you perform a clean installation of Windows Vista."

For its part, Microsoft seems to be confident that the Vista repair process should be sufficient to solve any problems with the OS, since otherwise the only option for disaster recovery in the absence of backups would be to wipe a machine, install XP, and then upgrade to Vista. This will certainly make disaster recovery a more irritating experience.

Fortunately, the change will not mean that users cannot install Windows Vista to a new directory. Windows Vista's upgrade process includes the option of backing up previous installations, and in fact, in some scenarios a "clean" upgrade is required. "Clean" or not, the requirement that the previous OS be installed puts a bit of a damper on those of us that like the do periodic system refreshes.

What does Microsoft hope to gain out of all of this? I can only speculate. First, the change prevents a dual-license situation with all of the free Vista upgrade coupons out there. If things worked according to the old scheme, people with upgrade coupons would essentially get a "free" OS because they could install the Vista upgrade anywhere, and continue to use the version of Windows XP that came with their computer. Did Microsoft fear that this would happen quite a bit? It seems like an unlikely scenario.

Second, and likely more important to Microsoft, this should make it difficult for users to use a single upgrade copy of Vista throughout the years. I'm quite sure many of you in readerland have done exactly that in years past: build a computer, use your Windows upgrade disc. Build a new box three years later, use that same upgrade disc. Microsoft's preference would be for users in such situations to either purchase OEM copies for each new machine, or pay for a full version of the retail product.