

Microsoft's Eiger Could Prolong the Useful Life of Older PCs

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The stripped-down Eiger operating system (OS) will run on older, less-powerful PCs. It will require the maintenance and patching of the full Windows XP product and may not lower your total cost of ownership (TCO).

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

On 12 May 2005, Microsoft began talking to the press about a product code-named "Eiger," details of which had leaked the previous week. Eiger is a lean version of Windows XP designed to run on older hardware. It will rely heavily on server-based computing and have limited local processing capabilities. Microsoft has not yet provided any details on pricing or packaging.

Analysis

Eiger is designed to enable companies that can't afford to replace their PCs to continue running a supported version of Windows. Today, these aging PCs often rely on unsupported Windows NTW4 (which has unpatched security holes) or Windows 9x. Eiger will enable these PCs to move to Windows XP. It will use the same patches, service packs, policies and management agents as full Windows XP — with all their corresponding strengths and weaknesses.

Some reports describe Eiger as Microsoft's foray into a thin client. However, Gartner notes that Eiger is bigger and more functional than the typical thin client. It will take 300MB of disk space, and the recommended hardware configuration will start at a 233MHz Pentium II processor and 128MB of RAM. Because Eiger will have the ability to run some applications locally — including Internet Explorer, Windows Media Player and a Remote Desktop Protocol client (all provided by Microsoft), as well as an as-yet-unspecified but limited list of others that users can load themselves — we believe Eiger is better described as a lean client than a thin client.

Eiger's leanness offers less "surface area" for potential security holes, reducing its TCO compared with that of a traditional fat client. The system will be significantly more locked-down than full Windows XP. Nevertheless, its TCO will remain higher than a thin-client device. Running Office or other applications that aren't local on Eiger will still require a terminal-services implementation, increasing server costs. Optional disk protection technology can be used to reduce TCO by virtualizing changes made by users so that they disappear upon reboot.

Recommendations: Gartner expects Eiger to ship by 1Q06 (0.7 probability). If you have a large number of PCs that are too old to run at least Windows 2000 competently and you don't plan to replace them for two to three years, but want to remain in a supported environment, consider Eiger in mid-to-late 2006. We do not expect Microsoft to price Eiger lower than Windows XP Pro. Be aware that it will differ from Windows XP, and that by using it, you will introduce additional complexity to your IT environment. Also, if you don't use disk protection technology, Eiger will be no more immune to spyware and "malware" than XP Service Pack 2.

Analytical Sources: Michael Silver and Mark Margevicius, Gartner Research

Recommended Reading and Related Research

- "When Thin Clients Can Lower Your TCO" — Although thin-client computing has a lower TCO than even the most well-managed PC environments, in some scenarios the trade-off can be too great. **By Mikako Kitagawa, Mark Margevicius and Michael Silver**
- "Windows XP and Office 2003 Gain Momentum in Gartner's 2004 Client OS Survey" — The results of Gartner's annual survey suggest that Windows XP and Office 2003 could surpass Office XP installations by year-end 2005. **By Michael Silver and Annette Jump**

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