

Events Aligning to Make Vista Delay More Likely

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Microsoft announced that it may postpone Windows Vista availability in Europe because of antitrust concerns. OEM requests and the problem of multiple code bases could make Microsoft decide to delay worldwide availability.

Event

On 8 September 2006, Microsoft disclosed that it may delay availability of Windows Vista in European Union (EU) countries due to concerns about the product's ability to comply with European Commission (EC) antitrust regulations.

Analysis

The announcement shows how nontechnical issues could delay a product launch. It comes just a week after Microsoft made Windows Vista Release Candidate 1 (RC1) available to select users. Normally, RC1, which seems to be a strong advance over prior betas, would bode well for release to manufacture of Windows Vista before the end of 2006. But Microsoft wants to avoid further litigation. In May 2006, Symantec filed a lawsuit over the storage management function included in Windows from Veritas. Gartner believes that, while Microsoft would go far to settle corporate lawsuits that would delay Windows Vista, it is less likely to be able to resolve legal action by the EC as easily.

The EC says that it has provided clear guidance, but Microsoft maintains that it wants more specific direction to avoid having to withdraw or reissue products or pay fines because of product functions. In the past, the EC ordered Microsoft to pay nearly \$1 billion in fines and required it to release, for European markets, a version of Windows XP without its media player. Since this "Windows XP N" version costs the same as the full product, sales have been weak.

Gartner believes that, by publicizing issues with the EC and specifying security features as the root of the conflict, Microsoft may be preparing to rally consumer opinion while blaming the EC for the slip. It may decide to ship Windows Vista to volume-licensing customers, so companies could start testing and planning processes, and delay only consumer and original equipment manufacturer (OEM) availability — though volume-licensed copies could be affected by any EC requirements. However, Gartner believes that Microsoft would not ship a single product worldwide if it meant disabling security features to satisfy the EC.

Other factors, when coupled with the final EU requirements, could persuade Microsoft to delay broad availability of Windows Vista in all markets, which aligns with Gartner's forecast that Vista will ship in 2Q07 (see "Windows Vista Unlikely to Ship Before 2Q07" G00139575). Microsoft could decide that a single code base for everyone would better serve the market and allow business customers to deploy a single image, usable in most of the world. Additionally, Microsoft may want to appease retailers and OEMs that would rather promote Windows Vista in March or April 2007 anyway to avoid conflict with the 2006 holiday season. These factors create an air of reasonable doubt that may serve to prepare the market for the potential eventuality of a slip.

Recommendations

- Organizations that would need 12 to 18 months to plan and test their Windows Vista deployments should not expect this announcement to hamper their plans. For most, significant work will not start until into 2007, even if Microsoft resolves all issues and ships in 2006.
- Organizations planning deployment of Windows Vista within the first few months could be affected if Microsoft has to delay availability to volume-licensing customers. These organizations should work with their independent software vendors (ISVs) to ensure that

support for their current Windows platform, which may be Windows 2000 or even NT Workstation 4, will continue until they have migrated to the new product.

RECOMMENDED READING

- "A 2008 Windows Vista Deployment Begins With 18 Months of Preparation" — It will take many organizations about 18 months from the time Windows Vista ships to test applications, get ISVs to support applications, build images and run pilots. **By Michael Silver and Neil MacDonald**
- "Vista Will Be the Last Major Windows Release as We Know It" — The current, integrated architecture of Microsoft Windows is unsustainable — for enterprises and for Microsoft. **By Brian Gammage, Michael Silver and David Mitchell Smith**

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