

Microsoft Volume Activation: Microsoft's Benefit, Your Cost

Michael A. Silver

Microsoft's Volume License Activation will require organizations to do additional planning and work to help Microsoft recoup revenue lost to software piracy.

Event

On 4 October 2006, Microsoft announced that volume license customers, who were previously exempted from having to activate their Windows installations, will have to do so with Windows Vista.

Analysis

For Windows releases prior to Vista, companies with Select or Open licenses get something called a Volume License Key (VLK). A VLK allows software installed using volume media to run without activating its license. Users without a VLK must enter a unique product key and contact Microsoft over the Internet (or by phone) to initiate a process that checks to make sure the key is valid and has not been previously used. For obvious reasons, enterprises would not want to go through this when deploying 50,000 PCs. But sometimes a VLK "leaks" and unauthorized parties can use it to run software. When this happens, Microsoft can prevent service pack updates to PCs with that key and can insist the owner of the leaked key re-key all their PCs.

To reduce the effect of key leakage, Microsoft has come up with its Volume Activation plan, which will affect Vista initially but which will likely be expanded to other products later. Customers can choose to have PCs activate to a Microsoft server using a Multiple Activation Key (MAK), or to an internally hosted service, known as the Key Management Service (KMS), or they can choose a combination of the two. If the company uses MAK, the PC only needs to be activated once. If the company uses a KMS, the machine must renew its activation with a KMS at least once every 180 days. Regardless of the method, activation does not require end-user awareness or interaction.

There are some customer benefits. When a MAK key is initially activated, and each time a PC using KMS is validated, a core set of Windows components is checked for tampering, a process that helps prevent malicious software. However, we don't see this as sufficient to offset the labor and hardware that will be needed. Furthermore, while Microsoft works to recoup pirated revenue, customers may wonder what's in it for them. For most, the rare threat of having to re-key and the component checking benefit will be insufficient. Still, while customers can make choices about their activation methods, they do not have a choice about whether to activate Windows Vista. For most, MAK keys will be simpler to administer. For companies that do not want to connect to Microsoft to activate, KMS will be preferable, but planners need to consider mobile users, who may be offline for more than six months.

Recommendations

- Organizations should lobby Microsoft for additional benefits to help them defray the cost of administering this program.

RECOMMENDED READING

- "Exclusives Provide Pressure for Windows Client SA" — Microsoft has once again tried to improve the value in buying Software Assurance on the Windows client operating system by adding exclusive content. **By Michael Silver and Alvin Park**
- "Vista Will Be the Last Major Windows Release as We Know It" — Microsoft's business needs and technology changes will move future Windows versions toward a more modular architecture. **By Brian Gammage, Michael Silver and David Mitchell Smith**

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REGIONAL HEADQUARTERS

Corporate Headquarters

56 Top Gallant Road
Stamford, CT 06902-7700
U.S.A.
+1 203 964 0096

European Headquarters

Tamesis
The Glanty
Egham
Surrey, TW20 9AW
UNITED KINGDOM
+44 1784 431611

Asia/Pacific Headquarters

Gartner Australasia Pty. Ltd.
Level 9, 141 Walker Street
North Sydney
New South Wales 2060
AUSTRALIA
+61 2 9459 4600

Japan Headquarters

Gartner Japan Ltd.
Aobadai Hills, 6F
7-7, Aobadai, 4-chome
Meguro-ku, Tokyo 153-0042
JAPAN
+81 3 3481 3670

Latin America Headquarters

Gartner do Brazil
Av. das Nações Unidas, 12551
9º andar—World Trade Center
04578-903—São Paulo SP
BRAZIL
+55 11 3443 1509