

Double whammy for Windows

BY ALAN STEVENS

Windows customers clinging to older versions of the software have suffered a double blow. First came the widely reported move to stop support for Windows NT, and then came Microsoft's decision to drop its expected Service Pack 5 (SP 5) update for Windows 2000 in favour of a more general roll-up of existing security patches.

Although the end of support for NT shouldn't have come as much of a shock, a lot of companies were caught out according to Robert May, managing director of IT solutions provider RAMSAC. He said nearly 80 per cent of UK companies were still employing Windows NT somewhere in their organisation.

'NT's reliability has made it a popular choice for business users, and an equally popular target for virus writers and hackers,' said May. 'The ending of updates puts such systems at risk.'

He also pointed to widely adopted security standards such as BS7799, which oblige companies to use only supported software, and said companies that haven't upgraded yet should do so as a matter of urgency.

But Microsoft's decision to drop SP 5 came as more of a surprise and is likely to affect many

more users. Indeed, while NT is used mainly on servers, a Gartner survey conducted last October showed that almost 60 per cent of enterprise desktops are still Windows 2000-based.

According to Microsoft, the replacement update roll-up, planned for release in the middle of 2005, will be easier for enterprise customers to deploy, requiring less upfront testing than a full service pack. The bad news is that expected security and performance enhancements, delivered in Windows XP SP 2 and scheduled for Windows Server 2003 SP 1, won't now be made available to users of the older operating system.

The existing SP 4 update will be the final service pack for Windows 2000 and a prerequisite for deploying the update rollup when released. Microsoft is urging all customers to apply SP 4 if they haven't done so already. Companies can use the slip-streaming capabilities of Windows 2000 to combine and, therefore, simplify deployment of both updates. 30 June 2010 is the date Microsoft discontinues support for Windows 2000 and flings it onto the scrapheap alongside NT.