

An attractive vista?

What do charities need to know about Microsoft's new operating system? Gareth Jones

Anyone with even a passing interest in IT cannot fail to have noticed the blaze of publicity surrounding the launch of Microsoft's latest operating system, Windows Vista. As usual with Windows launches, it has been met with a mixture of excitement at the new possibilities, hope for a brighter future, and fears about any number of potential problems. But what exactly does Vista mean to charities, and should organisations be looking to upgrade?

Vista is more pleasing visually thanks to the new graphical interface, 'Windows Aero', while navigation and layout have undergone some significant changes and search capabilities have been improved. Much work has been put into security, with an overhaul of user account privilege options and the inclusion of BitLocker Drive Encryption, which prevents thieves from accessing hard drive information by inserting the drive into another machine. However, most of the real improvements have taken place behind the scenes in order to provide a solid base for future technologies. This has given developers new programming interfaces upon which to base their software, and as they do so charities may find they need to either add patches to XP or upgrade to Vista in order to be compatible, though this will not happen for a while yet.

The range of new functionality on offer will certainly change the way Windows is used, but whether these enhancements will bring any real benefit to an organisation is questionable, especially given the work that will have

to go into the upgrade process and the training that will be necessary to ensure employees are up to speed. Paul Appleby, managing director of IT services company Protia, believes it is necessary to look beyond the hype. 'History is repeating itself from back in 2001 when Microsoft touted Windows XP as the next best thing in personal and business computing. At the time Microsoft's enormous marketing department were trying to convince the world that Windows XP was a no-brainer upgrade from Windows 2000 and that it would revolutionise the way you interact with your computer. However, if you exclude the PR and the glossy graphic interface of Vista and look at the functionality, from a 'do I need this' perspective you'll see that XP does just what most organisations need it to, and it's now been patched and service packed to a point that it's fairly secure.'

Mary Foley, development director at CITRA, echoes this view. 'If it is time for the organisation to go for a refresh, then by all means go with Vista, but be aware that there will be bugs and it will need thorough testing. However, our view is that there's no point moving for the sake of moving, as this isn't really an expense that is justified for charities.'

Some concern has been raised at the increased hardware requirements, with analysts estimating that the full range of functionality is on offer to just 5 per cent of the UK's PC market. Much of this load is created by the aesthetics of Aero, though users with older machines have the option of reverting to the 'basic' or 'classic' Windows interfaces. Dan May,

operations director of Ramsac, is another IT solutions provider advising customers that Vista is not a necessity, but does say an upgrade will not necessarily mean procuring new hardware. 'There are system specifications and it's certainly a little more resource hungry than other systems, but it's not necessarily the case that you will need new machines in order to run it. Of course you may need to replace some of the older equipment, and Microsoft offers the Windows Vista Upgrade Advisor tool on its website which will help evaluate your computer's compatibility. In the case of a larger organisation it can be worth having a couple of your heavy users using Vista in order to road test it in preparation for an upgrade in six to 12 months time. Some people think you need to have a standard operating system across the network but there is nothing wrong with running a mixed environment.'

One charity which has decided to make the move is Lionheart, which will be rewiring its network and upgrading to Vista and Office 2007 in April. Head of finance and administration Roger Chester explains: 'We needed new machines anyway and we were not going to get machines with old software, so we actually delayed our programme by a year as we knew Vista was coming out. Vista is a safer platform, the security is better, and as we are constantly using new software it is important that we are up to date. Also, we run Raisers Edge which has been certified for use with Vista and will unlock new features. However, one potential problem is that we use a lot of software provided by banks, for example from Natwest, and goodness knows what its stuff is running on as banks are never up to date.' ■