

ACPCUG Newsletter

January 2010

A K R O N - C A N T O N P C U S E R S G R O U P

Main Program: 6 pm

**Net Stumbler and other
black hat tools**

Dave Bohm

January Meeting

**January 7th, 2010,
6 pm**

**John Torok
Community Center
4224 Massillon Rd
Green, Ohio 44720**

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Map to John Torok center



ACPCUG Web site

A new web site for ACPCUG went live in mid December 2009. Thanks to all those who reviewed the site before go-live and provide suggestions and comments.

From The DealsGuy For February 2010 by Bob (The Cheapskate) Click, Greater Orlando Computer Users Group

Our bank, Washington Mutual, was recently taken over by Chase via the FDIC. Our checking and a small savings account were with them, and a Home Equity Loan of just a few thousand. Although our original purpose for the HEL fell through, we had eventually borrowed a small amount for home improvements. We opened the HEL three years ago and have never been late or missed a payment. We usually pay a substantial amount on the principal as well as the monthly interest, but on a few occasions, we only paid the monthly interest, which you can do on a HEL. Shortly after Chase took over, we received a letter from them with two forms they wanted signed to enable them to get copies of our IRS returns for the last two years. They also demanded that we furnish them proof of our income.

I was appalled at the intensity of their demand and decided to ignore it; after all, our record is unblemished, and our FICO score is over 800 and we weren't asking for more money, so I didn't feel we were doing anything wrong? I expected to hear from them by phone, but instead, the next month brought a letter demanding we pay the loan off and there would be no financial penalty for early payment. I also ignored that one. I guess I could have paid it off, but paying money back to your savings does not always happen as planned, so I'm just continuing to pay on the loan, wondering what their next move will be. Am I some kind of criminal?

They then discontinued our credit line, which really doesn't matter to me. Now they're hitting us with extra fees for each payment, called "back dating fees." I've tried complaining to a couple of state agencies, but neither office has responded. My feeling is, beware of dealing with Chase. We're changing our checking to another bank, and since our utilities are automatically withdrawn, we're communicating with them to change bank accounts. The utilities tell me many of their customers are also complaining about Chase.

***Interesting Reading**

Everyone is interested in Flash Memory technology these days, but few end users really understand what it's all about. Information Week had an interesting article that explains some of how it works along with the shortcomings, and what the future might bring. This article might fill in some blanks, but it's written for IT people so read it carefully. Sorry for the long URL, but some readers dislike tinyurls. They tell me they want to know where they're going when they click a URL. <<http://www.informationweek.com/news/storage/systems/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=219501231&queryText=Howard%20Marks>>

Another interesting article in IW is about "The Internet of Things"; keeping track of all kinds of things, using RFID tags, and other types of information tags. It covers different topics and problems not covered in the RFID article I gave you recently, and might give you something to think about. <<http://analytics.informationweek.com/abstract/25/1343/Virtualization/monitoring-technology-creates-internet-of-things.html>>.

***Oops, Nobody Home**

In my November DealsGuy column, I wrote about an interesting 3D address book with a discount. Two of my readers have told me they tried to order it, but were unable to do so, or even get a response to e-mail. We both tried to contact the PR person that I coordinated it with, but to no avail. They don't seem to respond at all and I have no idea why. I have that problem a lot with vendors who send out announcements for a new product, but when that happens I don't usually use that item, but in this case, I had several communications with the person and she assured me everything would work fine. I guess those things happen, but I can't help but feel bad. I'm still trying to contact them.

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***Need To Uninstall Something?**

Mike Ungerman <<http://musings-from-mike.blogspot.com>> (interesting site) of Central Florida Computer Society <<http://www.cfcs.org>> suggested Revo Uninstaller as his favorite product for program removals <http://www.revouninstaller.com/revo_uninstaller_free_download.html>. User Group members in Florida will remember Mike as the founder of the Florida Association of Computer User Groups (FACUG). He put his own money on the line in the hopes that FACUG would be a success that first year, and it has been a resounding success every since, with the help of many other people.

Here is an excerpt from the Revo Web site: “Revo Uninstaller includes; Junk Files Cleaner, Windows Tools, Auto Run Manager, Browsers Cleaner, MS Office Cleaner, Windows Cleaner, Evidence Remover and Unrecoverable Delete tools! You can reach all these tools from the ‘Tools’ tool bar button of Revo Uninstaller.”

Another of Mike’s recommendations

Belarc Advisor is a popular product for analyzing your system, but Mike suggests a similar program, SIW - System Information for Windows, that, in his opinion, presents the data in a more manageable format <<http://www.gtopala.com/>>. Check their Web site to find out about its many features and download the freeware version. This is an impressive program.

***Be Warned About Those Nasty Web Sites**

Hewie Poplock <<http://www.hewie.net>> of Central Florida Computer Society alerted his Windows SIG to this valuable utility, <<http://linkscanner.avg.com>>. Some of the nastiest malware could download unknowingly from innocent looking Web sites, so a timely warning might help. I recently mentioned Site Advisor from McAfee, and Site Hound from FireTrust to warn you about undesirable Web sites. They turn your browser red and warn you about possible malicious code. Also check out LinkScanner from AVG Technologies. They acquired this product a while back, which used to sell for \$29.95 before they bought it, but now it’s free. It works with Windows 2000, XP, Vista and Windows 7. It’s also OK on either 32 bit or 64 bit systems. It’s a plug-in for IE-6 or later and also works with Firefox.

***Can’t Make Up a Web Site For Your Business, Look Into This Announcement!**

Talkbiznow will offer a free online storefront with the launch of Webstore, a service that enables businesses, start-ups and charities to create their own micro-Website promoting products on the Internet. “A Webstore, which can be created for free within eight minutes, dramatically cuts the time and costs required to set up a well-designed business website, which often costs users between £10,000 (\$16,000) and £20,000 (\$32,000) to build.” The biggest use of the new service is expected to come from Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) who are already turning to Talkbiznow in the current tough economic conditions as a low-cost and technologically efficient way to reach new markets, recruit staff and create partnerships.

Talkbiznow users can design their own Webstore and choose audio and video promotional tools to help ensure that each micro-website is tailor-made to meet their specific business brand. Each Webstore will have its own URL address, available to all Internet users. Visitors to a Webstore can pay for products and services via Pay-

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Pal, the online payment system. The accessibility of Webstore reflects the philosophy of Martin Warner, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and co-founder of Talkbiznow, who is committed to offering services for free, empowering SMEs with the technological bandwidth to compete with large corporations.

Warner says: “Webstore represents a unique, non-technical experience to market yourself. Talkbiznow members will be able to create their own storefront. Businesses, charities, events and personal profiles will all be reachable outside the network itself. A Webstore will effectively function as an online business card.” Webstore users choose between elegant off-the-shelf templates to define their product, service, event or brand; also advertise prices and describe their industry. Browsers will find each micro-website intuitively easy to navigate with a Webstore acting as a portal that lies between an advertisement and a business website. Users will be able to upload videos about themselves, or their business, from their smart phones and upload them to the page.”

Talkbiznow enables its users to network, promote, collaborate with each other, and do business online. Services include web conferencing, voice conferencing and file storage facilities. Users can also use the business social network as an online portal to market and advertise services to other users.

For further information on Webstore, call + 44 (0)20 7233 7578, or check the Talkbiznow URL at <<http://www.talkbiznow.com>>.

That's it for this month. I'll have some more new product announcements on my Web site that didn't offer discounts. Meet me here again next month if your editor permits. This column is written to make user group members aware of special offers or freebies I have found or arranged, and my comments should not be interpreted to encourage, or discourage, the purchase of any products, no matter how enthused I might sound. Bob (The Cheapskate) Click <bobclick at bellsouth dot net>. Visit my Web site at <<http://www.dealsguy.com>>.

What's in MS Windows 7

By Randy Esdon, a member of Big Blue & Cousin, Canada
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Hopefully you've heard of the new version of MS Windows called Windows 7. So what is the home user getting should they wish to upgrade their computer? In this article I'll try to highlight some of the basic home user features. This is not a complete highlight of everything that has been added or improved upon, but explains those items the average user might notice.

First off, the core applications that got an update are Windows Media Player, Internet Explorer, Paint, Calculator, and Wordpad. The first two programs I listed usually do get updates and are already available for Vista and XP.

The other three are basic programs that haven't seen any updates in a while. Basically their User interface (UI) and some functionality have been improved. The UI of each program now has the ribbon style of interface, like that of Office 2007. MS Paint added some more brushes, and can now use 'shapes' within the drawings. The best improvements are in the calculator, where they have added selectable tools or modes such as a mort-

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gage calculator, a gas mileage calculator, a statistics mode, and even a programmer mode.

The next item Microsoft worked on was the desktop management area. They added several user friendly features, such as 'Snap to Docking', 'Aero Shake', an updated 'Taskbar', 'Jump Lists', 'Aero Peek', and 'Gadgets' wherever you want them.

'Snap to Docking' has three functions:

- to maximize a window, drag it to the *top* of the screen,
- to restore the window, drag it *from* the top of the screen,
- to compare two windows side by side, drag them to the *opposite sides* of the screen.

'Aero shake' is simple, and provides a great way to focus on just one application. Grab the 'Title Bar' of the screen you have open, shake the mouse, and all the other applications that are open will disappear.

'Taskbar' has been updated to include the ability to switch the order of the screens that are open. For those who multi-task, this is good when you want to prioritize your work. You can also point to a Taskbar icon to see a thumbnail preview of open files or programs. Then move your mouse over a thumbnail to preview the window as a full screen.

'Jump Lists' are smart lists of links specific to each application, such as:

- a history of pages visited - Internet Explorer or Firefox.
- opened files - MS Word.
- Frequently played songs - Media Player. Whenever you open a program, an up arrow becomes available next to the program icon. Click the list, and save time navigating to where you want to start within that program.

'Aero Peek' gives you the power of X-ray vision so you can peer past all your open windows, straight to the Windows 7 desktop. Simply point to the right edge of the taskbar and watch opened windows instantly turn transparent, revealing all your hidden icons and gadgets.

'Gadgets' can now be placed anywhere on your desktop, as opposed to just in the docking bar, as is the case in Vista.

'Home Networking Features' has been updated to make it easier to securely share files between computers. When you save a network as a home network, Windows pops up a dialog box which lets you decide what you want to share at home. To connect a second Windows 7 computer to the same network, enter the key given to you by the first machine, and you have instant secure file sharing. Microsoft has also included the ability of the computer to use different printers depending on what location you're at. This will simplify things for those people who take their laptop from home to the office, and use a printer at both locations.

'Program Compatibility Troubleshooter' has been added to help with using older programs within Windows 7. Basically this feature will ask you a series of questions to help you get a piece of incompatible software working. This has been much more streamlined than in Vista. Simply select the software that is giving you issues, list the problems associated with the software, select the operating system it does work with, and run the test. If the software works, save the settings and you should be set up to use that program in the future.

'Biometrics' features of Windows 7 have been enhanced. This allows users to use fingerprint biometric devices to log on to computers, grant elevation privileges through User Account Control (UAC), and perform

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basic management of the fingerprint devices.

‘Tablet PC’ has many improvements for handwriting recognition. Support for handwriting recognition, personalization, and text prediction in new languages has been enhanced. Support for handwritten math expressions, and personalized custom dictionaries for handwriting recognition have been added.

‘User Access Control’ (UAC) functionality improvements are some of the biggest from a user’s perspective. Basically Microsoft has changed the UAC to have a slider bar the administrator can access, from four levels of security. By doing this, the number of tasks the average user can perform, that do not prompt for administrator approval, have been increased. This has dramatically reduced those unwanted pop up messages that ask you if you really want to do this.

Other items that have been improved include:

- Common tasks are easier and faster. For example with the built-in Windows Search, finding documents is much quicker.
- Less power consumption through better sleep/hibernate support. This provides longer battery time for laptops.
- Improved built-in CD Burning and DVD creation. This includes the ability to burn ISO images.
- For those who are gamers, there is better 3D hardware accelerated graphics support through an updated DirectX.

A Windows backup program has been added that will do a complete image of a drive. This will allow for easy recovery should a computer have a complete hard drive failure.

The ‘Problem Screen Recorder’ is a new feature in Windows 7. This allows you to capture and record the steps you are taking to produce a problem. Then you can email this file to a tech to explain the problem. It can also be used to generate a file with step by step pictures that can be edited so you can make a tutorial on how to use a program.

Overall, the new Windows system runs significantly quicker than Vista. It is also better equipped, with improved features and security functions.

Windows 7 is less demanding in terms of hardware than its predecessor, and has better support for hardware drivers than Vista was when it was released.

Overall I see many benefits to upgrading to the new version of Windows.

Yes, there is nothing outstanding that requires a user of Vista or XP to jump on the band wagon and do the upgrade, but for those who are fed up with the problems Vista presents, and those who are worried that XP has been dropped from Microsoft's supported OS list, i.e. no more updates, Windows 7 seems to be a good choice.

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2009 Come and Gone

By Elizabeth B. Wright, a member of the Computer Club of Oklahoma City, OK

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Yes, another year is coming to a close. And what do we have to show for it? Another Microsoft OS for those who are not already confused, limited software and a world gone wild on the internet. Is that what we had hoped for as 2010 looms on the horizon? While all of the above were probably inevitable, how can we make the most and best of it?

First: the new MS OS, fondly known as Windows7. It's really not too bad, considering the fact that all Windows based computers work under the original handicap of the hardware created by IBM for its personal computers. I have seen my friends and loved ones switching to Apple based computers and loving every minute of it, even though Apple creates new operating systems about as often as does Microsoft. But then, most people switch for the graphics and possibly the word processing capability of Apple (Mac) machines, and perhaps are not as compelled to upgrade to a new OS like Windows customers are. Yes, our photographs are very important to us and Apple made that kind of computing a good experience many years ago.

But what about those of us who like to work with both graphics and number-crunching software? Best to stick to the unending procession of Microsoft operating systems. With powerful enough hardware, including RAM memory and a good graphics card, even Windows can do a passable job with graphics. It has always done exceptionally well with the numbers stuff. And if we can get version 7 and whatever comes next to work with our older software, then maybe we can carry on business as usual. I for one plan to give it a try. But to utilize additional RAM, we are faced with using the 64bit version of Windows 7 with a 64bit processor.

So we might not actually get as much good out of the new OS and newer photo editing software if our hardware can't meet those standards.

Second: limited software. By now most average users have all the programs they will ever use. About the only thing new many people buy is the latest, greatest antivirus program. Businesses use number crunching, word processing and data manipulation software; individuals tend to use graphics, word processing and the internet. Microsoft and Apple, and to some extent Sun Microsystems, have both categories firmly in hand, and we likely will see no new software for average users. But the old MS and Adobe stuff will continue to be "improved" in order to keep those companies in business. No need to beat that dead horse. Programs for Linux based computers are more of the same. As for huge corporations, they depend on specialists to continually fine-tune their programs in order to keep up with the competition. The industry that has developed for just that purpose is something of which most of us are not likely to have much knowledge or interest.

Third: The World Gone Wild. That is the one that worries most thinking people more than anything else. Again, it doesn't need explaining since most of the people reading this are well aware of the idiocy available on the internet. Yes, there is still some really good stuff out there, but so few people are taking advantage of it. The bad stuff, and everyone knows just how bad it is, may be the ultimate downfall of civilization as we now know it. From selling iffy goods to selling sex and extreme violence, the internet is a place where legitimate learning and business is losing the battle. Even the so-called online universities are often nothing but sham cor-

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porations. They tie people up with debt as soon as they enroll, knowing full well that many of their “students” will never finish even the first course, much less graduate. And what are those degrees worth? I guess I can expect a lot of dissent on that subject, but first hand experience with relatives has shown me that my theory is on target.

But of course, the upside is that the internet system will probably implode in perhaps the not-too-distant future. Either governments will hijack it or it will just crumble from its own weight and greed. Do you remember the world before the internet? What you may not remember, or possibly don’t know about, was the existence of computers connected via phone lines and other cabling systems which were military and scientific in nature. Then the rest of us got into the act.

Outlook for 2010: For computer users who want something more than email and surfing, there continue to be ways to improve skills. And many of those choices are still available free on the internet. Check out your favorite program to see what and where you can find training programs, then DO IT!! Make the effort to at least make Microsoft, Apple and all others work for you instead of the other way around.

Microsoft Security Essentials

By Lynn Page, Editor, Crystal River User Group, Florida

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I have been using Windows Live OneCare for a couple of years on my laptop and have been very happy with it. OneCare is being discontinued next year and will not support Windows 7.

Microsoft Security Essentials is a real time security anti-malware application. The main difference between Microsoft Security Essentials and OneCare is that Security Essentials only provides malware protection while OneCare contains additional applications including a firewall, backup, tune up, multi pc management, simple Wi-Fi security configuration and simplified printer sharing.

With the upcoming discontinuation of OneCare, I loaded Microsoft Security Essentials, a free download from Microsoft, on my desktop to try it out. I still run a personal firewall and left one other anti-malware application on the computer. Security Essentials is designed to provide real-time anti-malware protection from threats including viruses, spyware, rootkits, Trojans, and other emerging threats in a single application.

The download of Microsoft Security Essentials is free and installation simple. The program is easy to use. As it does everything in the background. Automatic updates assure that your computer is protected by the latest available technology. Like OneCare Security Essentials makes it easy to see if the computer is secure. The green icon means it’s secure.

The Installation Wizard walks you through the installation which only took a few minutes. Its first step requires validation of your copy of Windows. Then you are instructed to remove any other antivirus or antispyware applications installed on the computer. There is even a link to tell you how to remove the applications. Based on Alfred’s discussion at the October meeting I expected this and had already uninstalled my antivirus application. Since the anti-malware program I have installed does not run in the background I left it on the computer.

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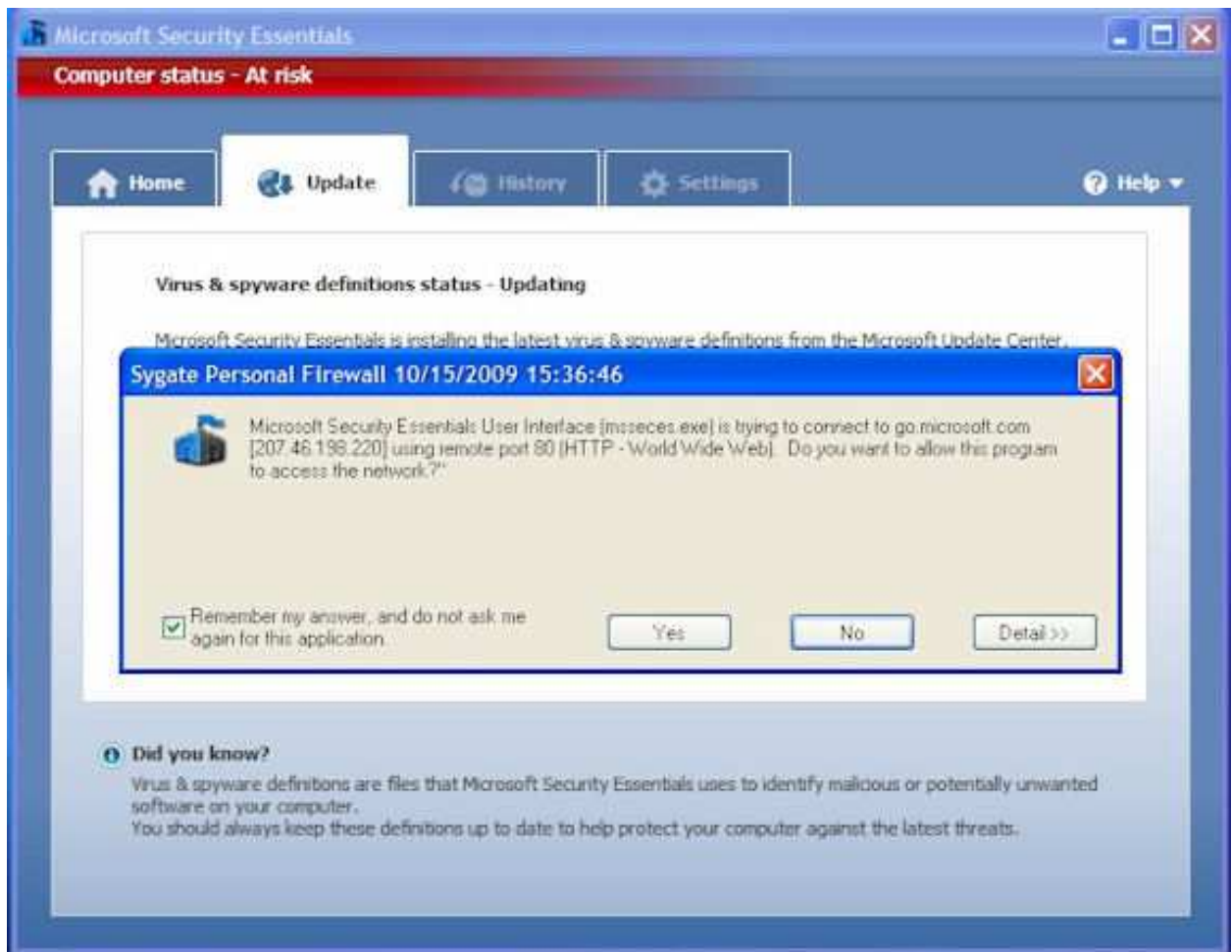
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Microsoft Security Essentials runs efficiently in the background so you can use your computer without interruptions or long wait times. When completing the installation The Wizard you have the opportunity to request a scan of your computer.

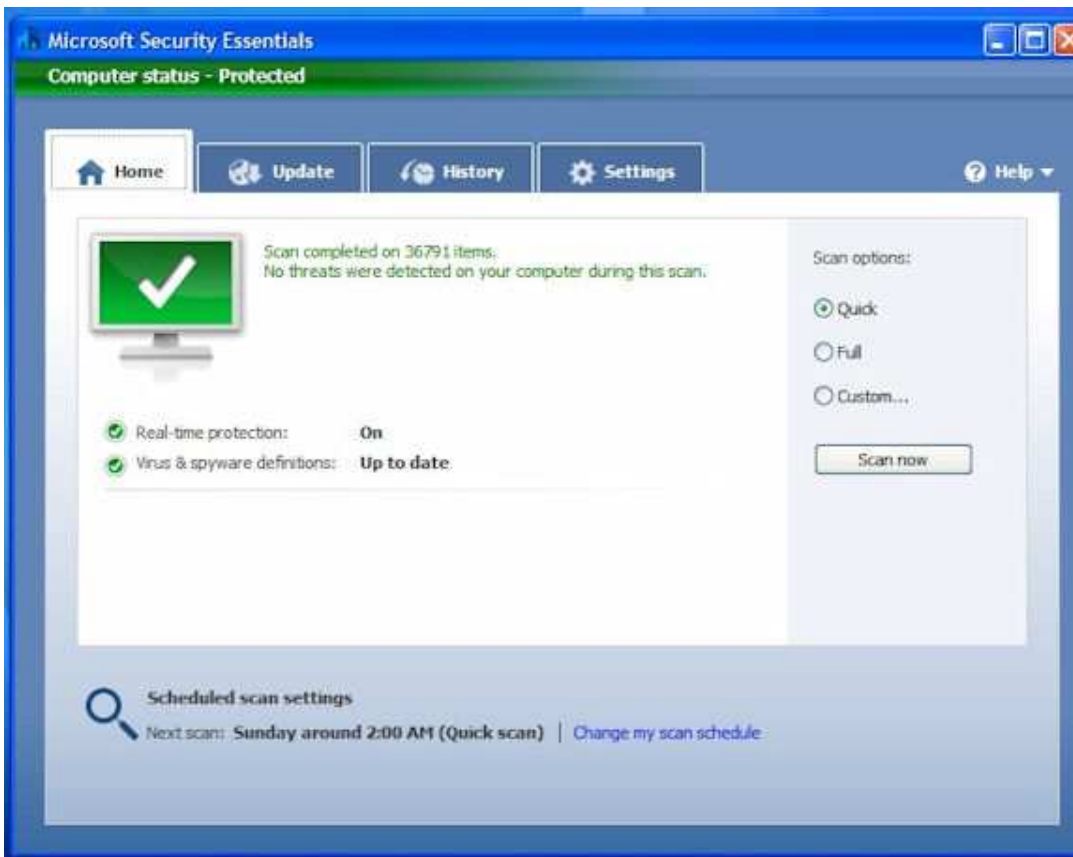
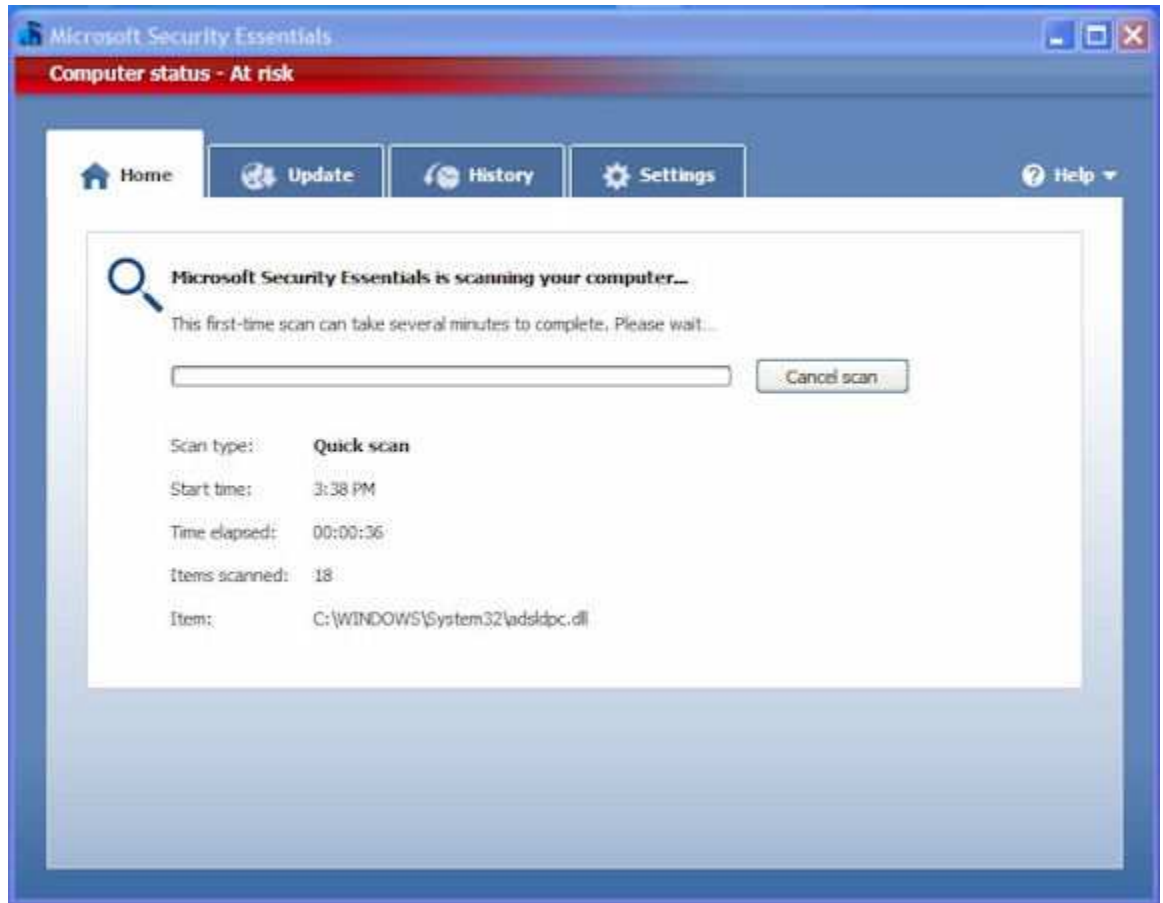


When finished Microsoft Security Essentials starts and automatically checks for updates before running the requested scan. Since it is new application you will have to instruct your firewall to allow it to connect to the internet.



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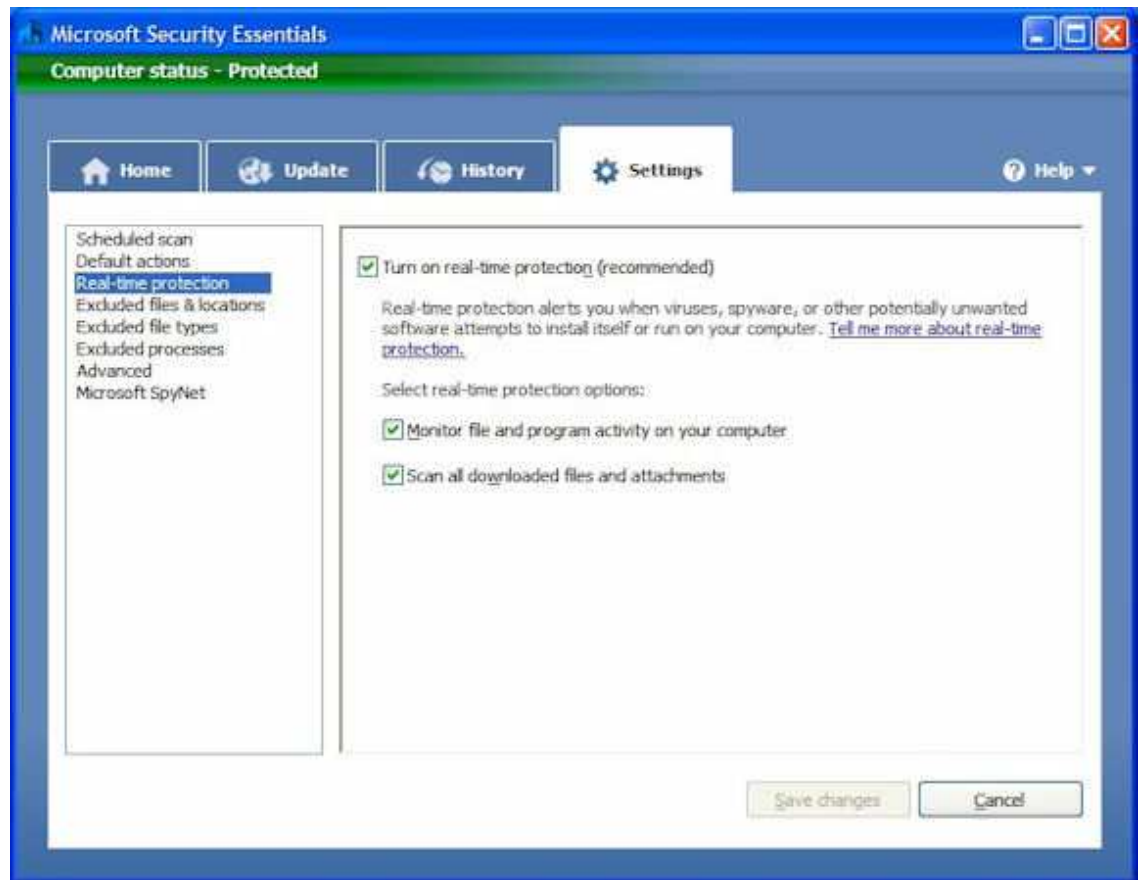
Until the updates and initial scan are complete, Microsoft Security Essentials shows the red warning that your computer is at risk. Once the scan is complete and any problems addressed, the computer status will be green or Protected.



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The Security Essentials interface is tab based. The Home tab displays the application's status. Note that Real-time protection is on and definitions are up to date. Security Essentials performs scheduled scans but you can select and run a manual scan from the Home tab. When running a System Scan, select from Quick, Full, or Custom. I ran both a quick scan and then a full scan on my computer. If a threat is detected Security Essentials changes to show the computer is at risk and that a threat has been detected.



To remove a threat click the Clean computer button displayed on the Home tab.

The Settings tab provides control over the application. I saw no reason to make any changes from the default settings. The one thing you might want to change is the scan schedule. You can schedule a scan by clicking the Change My Scan Schedule link on the Home window or on the Settings tab.

The History tab displays all Detected Items, Quarantined Items, and Allowed Items. Remove the history by clicking the Delete History button.

I haven't been running Microsoft Security Essentials long but my experience with OneCare tells me it will work well and protect my computer from threats. I have already noticed that the computer runs faster during scans than with my previous software.

Moving From XP to Windows 7

By Vinny La Bash, Contributing Columnist, Sarasota PCUG, Florida

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Installing Windows 7 from XP is more complex than a straightforward upgrade from Vista. You need to perform a custom install, and you can do this with an Upgrade package of Windows 7. A normal upgrade won't work, but Microsoft describes the installation process as the option to "either completely replace your current operating system or install Windows on a specific drive or partition". Microsoft also allows a multi-boot system to be installed. In other words, you have the option of running both your current version of XP and Windows 7 if you want. Switching back and forth may not be the best choice as the interfaces are very different.

Completely replacing XP will not eliminate it from your system. The setup program creates a folder on your primary hard disk which it names Windows.old . The process then places all the major XP folders such as Windows, Documents and Settings, and Program file folders in the Windows.old folder. Nothing happens to your data files. You can still access them, but your applications will have to be reinstalled.

No matter which option you settle on, back up everything on your system first, especially your data files. Back up your data files at least twice and keep a copy in a separate physical location. Backing up more than one copy may seem like paranoia, but if anything goes wrong you'll be glad you did.

There are lots of ways to back up programs and data. If you use a third party program go to the manufacturer's web site and make sure the program will be modified to work with Windows 7. If you can't verify compatibility with Windows 7 or you don't use a third party backup utility, you will probably turn to XP's backup utility which Microsoft calls the Windows NT Backup-Restore Utility. Microsoft developed and released it specifically for restoring backups created in XP to restore in Windows Vista. It's pretty safe to believe that Microsoft will adapt it to work in Windows 7. If you can't verify that your third party backup utility will work in Windows 7 or you don't trust Microsoft that it will modify its special XP utility, make copies of all your important data files to CD or DVD.

Read the article called Step-by-Step: Windows 7 Upgrade and Migration on the Microsoft TechNet site. It provides some great information about a utility called Windows 7 Easy Transfer. This program lets you transfer all your data and settings from XP to Windows 7. The Windows 7 installation disks contain a copy of the program and during installation a copy will be installed on your computer. You can then use the program to copy all your data files and settings to Windows 7.

Microsoft has recognized the popularity of low cost net-books, and Windows 7 was designed to operate on systems that many people consider underpowered. You won't need terabyte sized hard disks or 6 gigabytes of RAM to run Windows 7. If your XP system was manufactured in the last four years there is a high probability that Windows 7 will run just fine. To be safe, run Microsoft's Windows 7 Upgrade Advisor on your old system before rushing out and buying Windows 7.

The Advisor does a complete check of your internal hardware, installed programs, and any externally connected devices. If there are any compatibility issues the Advisor will report it, and even make suggestions on how best to eliminate incompatibilities, and select upgrade options. Go to the Microsoft Download Center to download and install a copy of this utility to your system. It will make you much better prepared for the upgrade to Windows 7.

You won't be the only one changing to Windows 7. Don't be shy about asking questions, and please share any good information you get with other members of the PC community. A good place to start is the Getting Ready for Windows 7 section of the Microsoft Answers web site. Don't forget your local PC User Group. There is no better source for good, accurate information. Even Microsoft will acknowledge that.

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Windows 7 Upgrade – My Experience

By Sandy Berger, CompuKiss

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Those of you who follow me know that I am really like Windows 7 and have no qualms about recommending it. This is not a program that you have to wait to purchase until the problems have cleared. I have been successfully using it for months and have just installed it on my everyday computer.

So if you are ready to buy a new computer, go right ahead and buy one with Window 7. However, if you are going to upgrade an older computer, there are a few things you should know.

First, I don't recommend upgrading an older computer running Windows XP. Although Windows 7 may run on your old XP computer, XP is more capable for computers with limited memory and outdated graphics. Also, if you upgrade from XP to 7, you have to do a clean install. (More on that later.)

Even if you are upgrading to Window 7 from Vista, there are a few things that you should know. My recent upgrade experience may help.

Last week I got an advance copy of Windows 7 and decided to upgrade my Vista computer.

There are two possible ways to upgrade: An in-place upgrade or a clean install. A clean install is preferable, but it means that all your data and your programs are wiped out. This is good because it puts your computer into a like-new status. However, a clean install requires a lot of work. It entails backing up everything, reinstalling all of the programs, transferring the data from a backup back to the computer after the upgrade, and readjusting any programs that you had previously customized. After listing the number of programs that I had installed on my computer, I decided that after a clean install it would probably take me at least 2 days to get my computer back to where it was. With time at a premium, I opted for an in-place upgrade. I had already installed all of the updates and service packs, so my computer was ready to be upgraded.

The first thing that I did, (and that everyone should do before upgrading), was to back up my data. I chose to use a program called True image by Acronis to make a complete backup of everything on my computer. I put the backup on a portable hard drive. It was 350GB, so I expected this upgrade to take a long time.

Then I surfed over to the Microsoft website to check out their compatibility upgrade advisor for Windows 7. I installed this Microsoft program on my computer and ran it. It told me that my Belkin wireless network needed a new driver for Windows 7 and that my Logitech webcam might not work properly with Window 7. I surfed over to both manufacturers' websites and found that they had no specific drivers listed for Windows 7. Since I already had the most current Vista drivers, I decided to just go ahead with the upgrade.

I put the Windows 7 disk in the computer and clicked on "Install". I made a few choices, like choosing between an in-place and a clean install. To my surprise, the install program told me that I had quite a few incompatibility problems. In addition to the two devices that I had been warned about, it listed a printer that I had previously uninstalled and several games that also had been previously removed. However, it also listed iTunes as incompatible. I use iTunes everyday to sync my iPhone, so this could have been a deal-killer. Yet, I

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knew that I had the latest version of iTunes, so I just crossed my fingers and clicked “Next” to go on.

After that, the installation was easy. The computer pretty much did all the work, including rebooting several times. While a clean install can be accomplished in about ½ hour, my in-place install over 350 GB of programs and data on a pretty speedy computer took 3 hours.

Once the update was complete, I found myself at the Windows 7 desktop. There was a new desktop background and the taskbar had much larger icons (something that I like about windows 7), but other than that, all of my icons were there and my desktop looked pretty normal.

To my surprise, the Belkin wireless card that I had been warned about worked seamlessly. The Logitech Quick Cam, however, gave me an error. On a hunch, I reinstalled the webcam driver. Although this was the same driver that I had been using with Vista, Windows 7 now seemed to like it. It also functioned perfectly. Oh, and the iTunes program that I had been warned about, also worked perfectly except that I had to reauthorize the computer, which was a simple process.

I am not sure if Microsoft was a little too harsh in their assessments of incompatibilities or if I was just lucky. Since I did my upgrade before the actual launch of the Windows 7 product, Microsoft’s Windows 7 Capability Center was not yet available. As you read this, however, it should be open. Just type “Windows 7 Compatibility Center” in the search box at the Microsoft website and you should be able to check the compatibility of most software and hardware.

The News this Month

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It is prime holiday shopping time, and the deals are out there, tempting us to stimulate the economy. Target advertised a \$200 Acer Netbook even before Black Friday. There will probably be lots of good deals all the way through New Year’s Day, as the retailers are hurting and are looking for ways to get customers into their stores. This holiday season will probably see additional increases in online shopping, as shoppers try to save money, gas and time.

One way I’ve used to save money on purchases is to take advantage of manufacturer and store rebates. Over the years I’ve submitted hundreds of rebate forms and received thousands of dollars back. I’m currently waiting on eight rebates, for a savings of \$124. Normally I would expect a check in the mail for each, but six of them are for Visa prepaid cards.

The prepaid plastic card for rebate payment is the latest rebate trend. They force the consumer to purchase something to redeem them, rather than just deposit them into a savings account, so they provide additional economic stimulation. They also reduce costs for the issuing manufacturer or retailer. One article I read listed the manufacturer’s cost for a rebate check as \$1.85, while a prepaid rebate card cost about 6 cents.

Besides having to buy something else, there are a few additional consumer pitfalls with prepaid rebate cards. It

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is best to make a purchase that is greater than the card's value, as any amount remaining is not refunded, but stays on the card, and it is often impossible to check a card's balance. These cards do expire (as do rebate checks), so they should be used promptly. Some rebates provide a store-branded card that can be used only at that retailer.

Many people dislike the hassle of filing for rebates. It is estimated that up to 60% of eligible consumers never bother to file. I figure that I'm getting a savings on my products at the expense of those that are not willing or able to file and track their rebate submissions. The prepaid rebate card adds a little more inconvenience, but if it allows more rebates to be offered, I'll keep buying and applying.

McAfee's 12 Scams of Christmas

Anti-virus software maker McAfee recently released its list of 12 popular online attacks for this holiday season as a warning to consumers:

- Charity phishing scams - be careful who you give to
- Fake invoices from delivery services to steal your money
- Social networking scams - fake friend requests lead to malware
- The dangers of holiday e-cards - clicking can lead to malware
- Discount luxury gift sites that lead to malware
- Shopping from open Wi-Fi networks can lead to identity theft
- Risky holiday searches - fraudulent holiday web sites provide malware instead of Christmas carol lyrics
- Fake job-related sites prey on unemployed
- Too-good-to-be-true auction-site deals that never arrive
- Password stealing scams - malware that contains keyloggers
- E-mail banking scams
- Your files for ransom - ransomware scams

I've heard of many of these scams, but some were new to me, or were things I didn't really consider. It is good to be charitable, especially during the holiday season, but it is good to be reminded that there are scammers out there ready to take advantage of your generous nature. Just as with banking scams, don't respond to e-mail donation solicitations directly.

It is unfortunate, but you really need to be suspicious about every e-mail you receive and every web site you go to. I've read about holiday e-cards that carry malware, so I typically don't send or open them. I didn't really consider before that cybercrooks might set up holiday sites, hoping to entice me to download wallpaper or screensavers laden with malware after finding their site in a search for holiday song lyrics. It also never occurred to me that crooks might succeed in taking over my PC, encrypt my computer's files, and then ask for payment of ransom to unencrypt them. I think I take enough precautions to make this unlikely.

I've wondered, though, about using public or open Wi-Fi connections for secure activities. All the advice I've seen, including McAfee's recommendations, say that online shopping and banking should not be done at a public Wi-Fi hotspot, but only through a secure Internet connection at your home or work. That makes sense, but where does that leave public Wi-Fi? Is it only useful for benign web surfing? How do you safely access your online bank account when traveling, and don't have a secure Internet connection?

I read one intriguing posting on CNET that accessing an online banking site from a public Wi-Fi connection is

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safe, as the bank employs SSL (secure socket layer) encryption of the data between your PC and their site. This also seems to make some sense. I know that VPN (virtual private network) software like StrongVPN (www.strongvpn.com) and others claim to secure Wi-Fi links. Services like GoToMyPC (www.gotomypc.com) also claim to allow remote connection to your home computer in a secure way. I'd like to find out more about SSL and VPN connections, so that it may be possible to use free Wi-Fi to bank and shop.

New Communications

I installed Skype (www.skype.com) on my laptop a few months ago so that I could use it to allow Gene Barlow to give our group the webinar presentation on Acronis True Image. I think Skype is great for audio and video communication over the Internet, though I've only found a few occasions to use it. I've done some test videoconferences with our editor, Art, and my wife has used it with our netbook computer to call me when she was away on business. The main downside to Skype is that it must be run on both ends for a free call. You can use it to make a call to any phone from your PC, but that incurs a charge. Unless the person on the other end of the connection is willing and able to use Skype, it does not help you much.

I've been making all of my recent long distance calls over MagicJack, and have had no problems with it. I look forward to taking it on a trip and being able to make calls for free over free Internet service in a hotel or hotspot. I even bought a compact corded phone on eBay to use with MagicJack. Its limitation is the U.S. call restriction; it may be able to call International, but I'm sure there would be additional fees involved. The company does advertise it as the perfect communication tool to take on a foreign trip to call back to the U.S. for free. I'm hoping for a chance to try that out one day.

Another great communication tool that I've started using is drop.io (www.drop.io), which I learned about from our editor, Art. It provides a free "drop box" for transferring up to 100 MB of photos or any other files to anyone. You create a drop, upload the files and provide the drop name and password to the recipient, who then downloads the files from the drop.io site. I recently had to provide 300 MB of photos to someone, so rather than mail them a CD, I set up three drop.io drops and sent the access info through e-mail.

I've read about a new online service called Snailmailr (www.snailmailr.com) that may be of use to me one day. For \$0.99, it will print and mail up to two pages to anywhere in the world. That is not bad, considering the cost of postage and the hassle of getting it into the postal system. Since the letters are mailed from the U.S., it would be a great way to inexpensively and quickly send letters here from abroad.

