

## The InformationWeek Windows Vista Roundtable: Part One

What do IT managers, consultants, programmers, and everyday users really think about Vista? We invited six of our readers to give their opinions -- and we got an earful. Here is Part 1 of our 5-part series.

By Barbara Krasnoff, [InformationWeek](#)

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*We've all heard from dozens -- actually, hundreds -- of analysts, journalists, pundits, bloggers, and other opinionated writers about Vista. They've written about its interface, its features, its development, its PR machine... But one segment we haven't heard from are the actual users -- the IT managers, consultants, programmers, and everyday users who are the ones who will have to actually deal with installing, learning, tweaking, and fixing Vista in their workplaces and homes.*

*To find out how Vista is being approached in the trenches, we invited six InformationWeek.com readers to a week-long roundtable discussion. Participants included:*

- **Dennis Barr**, Manager, Information Technology for the [Larkin Group](#)
- **Marc Chester**, Vice President, Business Development for [Data Reduction Systems](#)
- **Bill Flanagan**, independent IT/networking consultant
- **David Gray**, Vice President for Information Technology & CIO and CEO, [UMassOnline](#) for the University of Massachusetts
- **Chris Rutkowski**, IT Manager for [Reliant Behavioral Health](#)
- **Wayne Wengert**, retired programmer/IT specialist

*Over the next week, we'll find out what these IT professionals think about the introduction of Vista, its pros and cons, and the likelihood that it will be adopted in their workplaces. In this, the first of five segments, the participants introduce themselves and offer their initial opinions about Microsoft's new OS.*

**Wayne Wengert:** I am an MSDN subscriber so I had early access to Vista. I had a laptop built for me by a local guy (ASUS 7615, nVIDIA 7600 LE, 160GB HDD, 2GB RAM) and installed Vista Ultimate on it as a new install.

Problems to date are mostly driver related. I am having all sorts of problems with power management (can't wake up out of Sleep, system starts up in the middle of the night for no identified reason,

restart/shutdown often hangs). From what I've been able to find, there are apparently known issues (unresolved) with [ASUS/nVIDIA](#) drivers? This problem is really a pain!

I also ran into another problem that prevents the screen saver from ever kicking in. It turns out that it is also a known problem that occurs when you use a wireless mouse (I have a [Microsoft Wireless Notebook Optical Mouse 3000](#)). There are several suggestions on various newsgroups and blogs but none have worked for me so far. Waiting for a fix on this one.

As to the Vista interface and features, I am having problems making the switch from my old XP habits. Change is always a pain, especially for us old guys, and in time I may get used to the new interfaces, but for now, I find them uncomfortable and, in most cases, I don't see them as an improvement.

For example, the way you have to click that tiny drop arrow next to the lock to get to Restart. The little use I've made of Search is inconclusive. Sometimes I am impressed with getting to what I want quickly but other times, I end up having to open Help and search from there.

Another thing that has caused me quite a bit of trouble is the Administrator mode that doesn't have all permissions. I was trying to install a developer's tool ([FarPoint's Spread](#)) and, after numerous failed attempts, I finally learned that being logged in as Administrator is not always enough. Not a good thing in my opinion.

My current efforts revolve around trying to get applications I've built under [Visual Studio 2005](#) (VS2005) to build correctly under Vista.

On the plus side, I am impressed with Vista's ability to see and connect to wireless networks and the ease of viewing files across the network.

**Marc Chester:** As a Microsoft [ISV](#), we had been encouraged for months to gain experience with Vista. In the summer of 2006, we decided to take the plunge and begin our evaluation of the pending release. We decided internally that we would set up a user with both Vista and Office 2007, both in different stages of beta at the time. While I am not one of our development resources, I have been viewed as a "super user" here at DRS. This distinction earned me the keys to a brand new PC with Vista Beta 1.

Where should I start? Beta 1 showed tremendous promise (beautiful interface, improved security, etc.); the tradeoff was instability. This made daily work tasks a challenge. I began a journey that quickly took me down many paths -- discovering that various hardware and software no longer worked with my slick new OS. This included our online Web meeting client, and our [CRM](#) system, to name two. Mobile synchronization also came on board with many issues that still need to be resolved.

I stayed the course and continued my evaluation, which allowed me to provide feedback to Microsoft regarding issues that I encountered. I followed an update path that included Beta 2 and Release Candidate (RC) 1. Each release pointed to major improvements from my first challenging days with the first beta product.

I am currently using both Vista Business and Office 2007 on my production PC. This is the PC I use for communication, webinars, creating marketing pieces, etc. I am glad to say that the final product is a

## The Windows Vista Roundtable

- [Part 1: First Impressions](#)
- [Part 2: The Inevitability Of Vista](#)
- [Part 3: Vista For Developers](#)
- [Part 4: Is Vista A "Wow!"?](#)
- [Part 5: Final Thoughts](#)
- [Join The Discussion](#)

thousand times better than the beta products I used through the end of last year. So much so, that we are planning on upgrading our sales group here to Vista. Additionally, one of our custom software applications will include upgrades that will allow us to exploit some of Vista's newer features.

Will this be an easy upgrade path for everyone? I think the jury is still out regarding ease of upgrading. All in all, I did not start out to become a Microsoft Vista evangelist, but over time, I have come to appreciate many of the features in this new OS. I can however, recommend unequivocally that if you are purchasing a new PC choose the Vista OS, you will not be disappointed. **Dennis Barr:** My current experience with Vista stretches over the last few months back to June 2006. I've installed at least four versions of the beta and Release Candidate code on a couple of different computers, to see how this replacement for Windows XP behaved on the same hardware as successful, productive installations of Windows XP Pro.

I should preface my remarks by saying that I've been playing around with different OSes for years. I've become fond of using removable hard drives in lock-in carriers for this exercise. I first encountered the removable hard drive mode of doing things in some PC training I had years ago, and I thought that it was an excellent way to have completely isolated installations of operating system code that didn't jeopardize working installations. I try to insure that the hard drives that I use on a given machine are as nearly identical as I can manage, but sometimes that's not always possible. Otherwise, at least the complement of hardware besides the hard drive is identical, so I can get valid comparisons.

I have access to Release To Manufacturing (RTM) code, but at this time I haven't installed it because the ideal target machine doesn't currently have a removable hard drive available. I'll remedy that soon, so my experience with Vista to this point has been with the pre-release code.

What I've found so far is that hardware support seems to be a moving target. For instance, on one of my test platforms, I have a Sound Blaster Live Platinum sound card with a Live Drive [patch bay](#) module installed. This was a top-of-the-line card several years ago, but has been relegated to junk-drawer status by the passage of time. Nonetheless, the first two beta versions of Vista supported it natively with drivers on the DVD (or available when I updated online). The two subsequent builds of Vista, however, had no support for it, so until I downloaded an XP version of the driver from the Sound Blaster Web site, and installed it in XP-compatibility mode, I had no sound. This was rather alarming, and has caused me to wonder what other hardware items no longer have direct support under Windows Vista.

Also, the behavior of the beta and RC versions was significantly slower than that of Windows XP Pro. Responsiveness to choosing items from the Start Menu, for instance, was seconds slower under Vista than it was under XP Pro. Despite the vaunted instant search capability of Vista, Start Menu behavior was a real drag. The later betas seemed to improve responsiveness somewhat, but it never approached the snap that I was used to under Windows XP.

At the same time that I've been playing with the beta and RC versions of Vista on one system, I've been testing [OpenSUSE](#) 10.2. I've used both the [Gnome](#) and [KDE](#) desktop environments, and for the most part, their responsiveness has been on a par with Windows XP. Linux still has a way to go, unfortunately, because its ease of use and application support, despite the words of its partisans, still is not what it is under Windows. For instance, under OpenSUSE, there's no directly supported way to play back DVD movies. Oh, there are instructions galore on different Internet sites, but the ones I've found

## The Windows Vista Roundtable

- [Part 1: First Impressions](#)
- [Part 2: The Inevitability Of Vista](#)
- [Part 3: Vista For Developers](#)
- [Part 4: Is Vista A "Wow!"?](#)
- [Part 5: Final Thoughts](#)
- [Join The Discussion](#)

involve a wink-wink-nudge-nudge disregard for legality. That may be fine for the home user, experimenting on his or her own, but it won't fly in a corporate environment. So, I'm sad to say, the availability of free Linux distributions, as capable as they are, does not provide a viable alternative to Windows for my company at this time.

I work for a civil engineering design firm, and we use a wide range of applications to do our design and project delivery work. One of the main applications in wide use in our office is [AutoCAD](#). Once upon a time, Autodesk, the company that develops AutoCAD, had versions of their main product that would run on the Mac, various Unix platforms, and on IBM-compatible PCs. At some point, they decided that there was insufficient reward for maintaining multiple versions, and stopped supporting the other platforms, instead settling on the Windows environment totally.

From my reading on Vista since its general release, it appears that there are compatibility issues with AutoCAD. This has also been brought home to me when I run the [Vista Upgrade Advisor](#) on my own office computer. It reports issues with AutoCAD, as well as with some of the printers that we routinely use in the office. Since we're an engineering firm, we use a *lot* of wide-format (36-inch) printing for our plan sets. If Vista doesn't support these devices directly and trouble-free, it can't be used here for our work until it does.

Compatibility issues have always been the bane of any new Windows release. We had to wait for at least a year before we could begin deploying Windows XP in the office, because of the lag in getting printer drivers and compatible versions of our software to use with the new OS. To have successful use of a new version of Windows, we can't give up something that has worked under the previous version. That is not progress, and would never fly with our users or management. The barriers to using Vista are really not so different from those that we encountered under previous versions.

As I have time, and available current versions of printer drivers and applications we use in the office, I'll test them against an installation of Vista on my standard test platform. I fully expect that vendors will be releasing upgrades or updates for many products over the next few months, so the issues I've mentioned should become less of a problem as time passes. If Vista compatibility issues follow the pattern we've seen with previous Windows versions, we should be using Vista within a year or so, if not sooner.

One other thing I'm looking forward to hearing is user feedback once I have Vista working in our office. I'm one person; the reaction of other employees to what's new in Vista is something I want to get. The eye-candy of the [Aero](#) interface is, of course, only the most visible indication of what's new in Vista, but it's probably what will get the most reaction, at least initially. **Chris Rutkowski:** Among other things, Dennis Barr said: "The barriers to using Vista are really not so different from those that we encountered under previous versions."

I've been in the micro/PC business for 32 years, and Dennis has hit the nail on the head. The question is (and this relates globally to exchanges of any description between people and/or organizations), "What are the benefits?" and "What are the costs (i.e. barriers of any description)?" It's the basic marketing equation. Every time I've migrated from one environment to another, there have been (and presumably always will be) consideration of what might break, including my own user knowledge, as part of the migration.

In my current role, my employer counts on me to provide rock-solid, dependable and secure infrastructure and applications, carefully balancing the needs of users, the budget, and the security requirements of [HIPAA](#).

Like Dennis, I've been using versions of Vista (and Longhorn) since the first betas. And like most (if not all) of you, my bandwidth is limited so I need to carefully choose what I invest my time in. Given that, I saw the first betas more as curiosities than anything else. I found those first betas pretty annoying; I was put off primarily because many reflexes I'd developed as a power-user of XP were rendered null-and-void by the interface changes. I complained to a co-worker that the interface had been too "Mac-ized"! I assumed that people (both within Microsoft and without) would complain and this would improve. And as it turned out, by the time I installed the RTM version the "XP Expert" part of me felt much better accommodated. (I no longer felt like a cripple, just an old guy with an occasional twinge of arthritis...)

But while I now find the [UI](#) to be OK (and even to have a few nice things to offer), like many others I saw no "showstopper" -- no compelling reason to switch to Vista ASAP. However, neither was there a deal-breaker -- something that made me vow to steer clear of Vista. (Our operations depend on mainstream Windows servers and services: SQL 2005, ISA Server 2006, SharePoint 2003, and an in-house authored line-of-business applications.) So the posture following the RTM is that any new workstation hardware will be ordered with Vista, and we will probably migrate everyone within the next year or so.

As it turns out, some of this may happen sooner than I expected. A current budget review highlighted that a bunch of notebooks used by sales execs are due to be refreshed soon. In this context, I realized that the ability of Vista to encrypt the whole hard drive borders on being a showstopper for us. We're in the behavioral healthcare management business, and while company policy prohibits storing of data on laptops, users are users, and I'll sleep better at night knowing that the laptops are fully encrypted so that regardless of user compliance, sensitive personal health information and business plans can't fall into unauthorized hands.

My personal hunch is that there will quite a few more showstoppers evidencing themselves over the months to come.

**Dennis Barr:** It's interesting that even though no one in my office has Vista on their work (or home, for that matter) PCs, Vista has been a major topic of conversation in the last week or so.

As I indicated in my earlier post, the showstoppers (and I routinely use this phrase to indicate things that keep us *from* moving to a new app or OS) for us with Windows upgrades have always been incompatibility with our existing applications or hardware. As we replace older PCs, we will typically slipstream the new OS in once these incompatibility issues have been resolved. This means that we may have a varying mix of the old and the new for a couple of years as we replace aging desktops and notebooks. I'm not sure how this is going to work with Microsoft's new plan to avoid having such a long interval between successive major releases of Windows as between XP and Vista.

The things that I see inclining me to upgrade to Vista include the drive encryption for our notebook users, its improved driver support (putting the driver at a less privileged level should improve system stability), its better security model, and the fact that it will become the standard in a year or more, regardless of my own preferences. Things that mitigate against moving to it include incompatible applications and devices, the need for user retraining, reduced productivity as people learn their way around the new interface, and its restrictive [DRM](#). The pervasiveness of Vista's DRM is one thing that

## The Windows Vista Roundtable

- [Part 1: First Impressions](#)
- [Part 2: The Inevitability Of Vista](#)
- [Part 3: Vista For Developers](#)
- [Part 4: Is Vista A "Wow!?"](#)
- [Part 5: Final Thoughts](#)
- [Join The Discussion](#)

just makes my skin crawl, even as I acknowledge that content needs to be protected from indiscriminate copying.

In contrasting Vista's [User Account Control](#) (UAC) nag boxes with Linux's [Root](#) authorization, I find that I prefer the Linux way more. I can change the time on my Linux system without having to deal with a UAC-style intrusion, and even if I get a pop-up for some reason, I can continue working on other things -- the system isn't frozen until I accept the prompt. Also, I have to know the Root password; it's not enough to just click "OK" and go on my merry way. With the versions of Vista I've installed for testing, there was no Admin password to enter -- I just had to click "OK" to approve, not enter a password to authorize.

Vista's new Aero Glass interface is also something that has gotten a lot of attention. I personally don't find it all that great; I've been using either hacked UXTHEME.DLL files or Stardock's [WindowBlinds](#) to customize my Windows XP boxes for several years. I've been able to have translucency with WindowBlinds for some time. I can get roll-up windows, drop shadows, thumbnail previews, and most of the other eye-candy that Vista provides using third-party, often free, programs that really impose no more load on the system than any other small utility.

In fact, one of the things that I tried (and succeeded in doing) was to install WindowBlinds on the last Vista build I had to see if I could get the Vista desktop to look more like a Mac. I was able to get something of an OS X'sta look, although the inability to change the (Internet) Explorer toolbar was an aggravation. Reducing my ability to configure the Vista user interface (including the toolbar buttons) just the way I want is something I hold against Microsoft, although I know that for most users it's a non-issue.

Bottom line, then: Vista is here, for better or worse, and in balance the annoyances are probably less persuasive than the bonuses. When the rest of the ecosystem that supports Windows gets all caught up, we'll be ready to move to it without hesitation.

## **[In Part 2 Of The InformationWeek Windows Vista Roundtable](#)**

Will Vista become an inevitable standard for standard for Windows users? How fast -- or slow -- will the transition from XP to Vista be? Is moving to a non-Windows platform an option for many businesses? The InformationWeek Windows Vista Roundtable discusses these and other issues in [Part 2](#) of our 5-part series.