



WINDOWS 8: SUITABILITY FOR ENTERPRISES

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ABSTRACT

Microsoft has introduced Windows 8, a remarkable operating system with touch capability. The striking UI apart, this OS has a number of useful features for both consumers and enterprises. Availability of several compatible devices of different sizes and form factors, including Surface from Microsoft, leaves the customers spoilt for choice.

The purpose of this POV is to understand how enterprises can benefit from Windows 8 and the challenges they face in adoption.

INTRODUCTION

The International Data Corporation (IDC) Worldwide Quarterly Smart Connected Device Tracker provides the following data: Vendors shipped 367.7 million desktop PCs, portable PCs, tablets, and smartphones in the fourth quarter of 2012, 28.3% higher from the prior year. While desktop PCs and portable PCs declined -4.1% and -3.4%, respectively, tablet shipments rose 78.4%.

On the other hand, a survey conducted in the US shows that 31% of internet users owned tablets in 2012, much higher than 2011's 12%. In the second quarter of this year, it is likely to jump to 47%.

In a mobility-driven world, where demand for tablets is growing exponentially, Microsoft recognized the need for a new tablet-friendly operating system and launched Windows 8, which blurs the line between a laptop and tablet.

The OS is considerably different from any of its predecessors. While it supports ARM architecture, it is also compatible with traditional Intel x86/x64 chips. The touch-friendly OS can be used with keyboard and mouse.

THE RUN-UP TO WINDOWS 8

Although Microsoft introduced Windows XP Tablet PC in 2002, it was the iPad and Android-based smart devices that enabled convergence of devices used at home and at work. In fact, the launch of the iPad a few years ago, took the gadget world by storm, and created a whole new market segment. Even today, the iPad commands 43.6% of tablet market share.

However, people who carried these devices to work found that actually doing work-related jobs on them was challenging, and were forced to lug the laptop along as well. Further, there were security and compliance issues related to official work on non-Windows devices.

In a recent survey conducted by Gartner, seventy percent of the respondent organizations said that they have or are planning to have BYOD policies in place. The use of Windows 8 will help avoid device duplication and tackle BYOD-related security challenges as well. Tablets powered by Windows 8 will enhance productivity at work, and enable users to consume content, use apps and play games at home.

Microsoft has plunged deeper into the hardware space, with its Surface tablet that runs on Windows 8. This device is currently the single most popular device using Windows 8/RT accounting for 7.6% of Windows devices worldwide. Not to be left behind, original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) like Hewlett Packard, Dell, Acer and Lenovo have introduced new smart devices that run on Microsoft's latest OS. The recently launched Surface Pro from Microsoft will surely turn out to be a game changer.

BENEFITS FOR BUSINESSES

The Modern UI is not the only eye-catching feature of Windows 8. Microsoft has introduced several functionalities with the objective of making the new offering, an effective operating system for a range of devices.

Security and Compliance

Windows 8 devices that use the Pro and Enterprise editions can be joined to the Active Directory domain; the group policies set in the Active Directory will apply. This enhances security and enables centralized management.

The Windows To Go tool enables users to work on multiple devices that can be booted directly from a USB stick. They can work on their personal devices at home or on the move in a secure environment without retaining any part of their job-related work on those devices. This mitigates the risk of data exposure to rogue computers, a challenge faced by enterprises that allow BYOD. The feature helps slash IT costs significantly while also enhancing employee productivity. On the other hand, users get to enjoy a seamless experience. This feature is available only in the Enterprise version of Windows 8.

Sandboxing is another interesting attribute of the new operating system. By default, all Modern apps run in a sandboxed environment with apps having to declare appropriate capability, such as access to pictures library or a webcam, that the App uses. This feature safeguards user privacy.

Virtualization

Client Hyper V allows the OS to be used as a test platform for both client and server virtual machines. It supports multiple virtual processors, allows users to take snapshots and features dynamic allocation of memory.

Performance

Direct Access enables remote users to connect to the corporate network from any location, without a Virtual Private Network (VPN) connection. While earlier, a physical smart card was needed at the time of set-up, Windows 8 Enterprise provides the convenience of a virtual smart card.

Windows 8 Branch Cache optimizes wide area network (WAN) bandwidth by copying content from the main office and caching it at branch office locations, allowing client computers at branch offices to access the content locally rather than over the WAN.

Centralized backup management

Typically, users can access files in their folders only from the computer where they are stored. Windows 8 provides the Folder Redirection facility whereby the documents folder, generally stored on a local drive can be redirected to a network location. This not only enables users to access files from any computer on the network, but also allows centralized back-up of documents.

User experience

Windows 8 provides uniform user experience across devices by automatically transitioning application data. When a user installs an app on a second device, all settings and preferences made on the first device are automatically transferred thanks to the roaming application data feature.

Control of data usage

Those who use an Internet connection with a limited data plan can activate the metered connection feature on Windows 8. This will prevent device and Windows update downloads on that particular connection, thus reducing the quantity of data sent and received and preventing data overage charges.

Content Sharing

Windows 8 has features that simplify the content sharing process. The Charms Bar which has replaced the 'Start' menu has a 'Share' button which allows the user to directly share data through email or social media.

Enterprise apps

The Windows 8 App Store currently houses more than 44,000 apps. Most of them are primarily for personal users and there are just a handful of business-friendly apps. As more and more organizations adopt Windows 8, the demand for enterprise apps will keep growing. Enterprise App Stores will start appearing in the organization landscape. Similar to the Consumer App Stores, employees will be able to download and install corporate apps which have been pretested and approved by the IT department.

Windows 8 OS has faster boot up and shutdown, and users love the fast, fluid and responsive experience that it provides.



CHALLENGES

The innumerable plus points notwithstanding, prospective users, including enterprises, have some concerns about the 'touch-first' operating system. For one, Windows 8 works best with touch, whereas PCs in most enterprises are mouse-based.

Also, the user interface, though amazing, can also prove to be a challenge, as it is drastically different from any of the earlier versions of Windows operating systems. This translates to a steep usability and learning curve, especially for Gen X users habituated to traditional interfaces. However, tech savvy Gen Yers already familiar with the use of touch screen, will take to Windows 8 quite naturally, as it is just an improvement on their earlier computing experience. There is also no real cause of worry over the older generation's ability to adapt either, as training can remedy the situation. Early research has shown that a week is all it takes to get acclimatized.

Further, some organizations are in the process of upgrading from previous Windows versions to Windows 7 while some others have just completed the transition. Another upgrade, this time to Windows 8, means a fresh round of testing of all the Enterprise systems, which might not be possible because of budgetary constraints. They will therefore continue with Windows 7 for at least a few more years.

Additionally, some of the legacy LOB Systems existing in the Enterprise might not be compatible with IE10, the browser for Windows 8. Organizations might therefore adopt the new OS only after achieving browser compatibility.

OUR EXPERIENCE WITH WINDOWS 8

Starting from the consumer and release preview versions, Wipro has been using Windows 8 months and developing Windows 8 Apps since March 2012. The company's intranet sites have been functioning smoothly and there are no major issues related to browser or App compatibility.

Currently, our Windows 8 lab is in the process of building a suite of Windows 8 Apps. The Windows 8 Content Delivery Framework enables connecting to different Content Management Systems (CMS) and presents the same in a Windows 8 App. The lab is using the new operating system for a range of touch screen devices.

INDUSTRY TRENDS

We see a large number of enterprises showing interest in the new operating system. A client, who is a major telecom provider, has already switched to the new OS. Many businesses using Windows XP, who had originally planned to upgrade to Windows 7, have now decided to go for Windows 8 instead. Meanwhile, a number of Windows XP & Win 7 users, are now planning to adopt Microsoft's latest operating system. Some organizations are conducting pilot tests to check if Windows 8 can support traditional Windows 7 apps. The results have been very encouraging this far.

Then there are others who are likely to make the transition only after the launch of more business apps. Many of these apps are still in the building stage, and in another six to nine months' time, we will surely get to see a whole host of business apps. The new generation of apps are likely to leverage device capabilities like Camera, Motion Sensors and location providers.

CONCLUSION

Windows 8 radically departs from earlier editions of Windows operating systems, and is packed with new user friendly features that can simplify several work-related activities. Although the radical change in the user interface is likely to overwhelm users initially, with a bit of practice they will surely find the experience enriching.

Currently, many enterprises are testing the efficacy of Windows 8. Technology companies on the other hand, are working on business apps for the new OS that will further enhance efficiency and productivity of businesses.

RESOURCES:

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