



Windows Vista security for beginners

When it comes to security on Windows Vista, we're all beginners. This is Matthew Stibbe's story on how he set about making sure his computer was safe and sound on the new operating system.

I've been running various beta versions of Microsoft Windows Vista for a few months now but on January 30th, I switched over to Vista and the new 2007 Office system for good. Well, actually, I have a dual boot so I can switch back to Windows XP in case I run into any problems. So far, I haven't had to use it.

Because I was installing Vista on a clean partition on my computer, it was not an upgrade but a fresh install. If you are planning to upgrade an existing version of Windows, it should be a straightforward process but there are a few things you need to do to make sure it runs smoothly.

First, run Microsoft's Windows Vista Upgrade Advisor to check that your hardware and software are compatible. Second, remember to backup your files, pictures and music before upgrading. It's unlikely you'll lose anything but it is good practice. Better safe than sorry.

Power users

About ten years ago I picked up a badge at a trade show that read "What I want is more money and power and less **** from you people." This is pretty much how I feel about security threats like viruses, spyware, spam and evil hackers.

One of the most important improvements in Vista is 'User account control.' It sounds prosaic but it carefully controls what you (and any unwanted programs) can do to the computer. If you can't install a program or change a system setting, nor can the bad guys or their viruses. So, user account control stops you doing that unless you login as an administrator.

I have set up an administrator account with a strong password and two user accounts, one for me and one for my wife. Account control protects the system and lets me get on with the power and money stuff.

By making it easier to work as a standard user without administrator privileges, Vista keeps the keys to the kingdom out of the hands of the bad guys but lets you get one with the money and power business. I don't have children, but if I did, I'd use this feature to limit what my children could do on the computer too.

Security centre

What I really like about Vista is that it does many things automatically that used to be chores. For example, I had to download anti-spyware software, a phishing filter for my browser, a spam filter for my email and so on. Vista has all this out of the box.

Not only that, but also all the default settings are safe ones. For example, phishing protection is turned on in Internet Explorer 7 and Windows Firewall is active from day one. All the warnings and questions are written in plain English and seem to offer sensible explanations of the options on offer. I suspect that many problems occur when security software cries wolf too often.

Some people just turn it off or click yes to everything, which is almost as bad as having no protection to begin with. Vista does a better job of communicating but I have to keep reminding myself to read the messages and think about it carefully before clicking 'yes'.

I use Outlook 2007, but Windows Mail, the replacement for Outlook Express, looks like a great improvement. It has the same junk mail filtering as its big brother. This blocks 10-20,000 junk mails that arrive here every month without breaking a sweat so I know it is good.

Virus protection

There is one omission in the Vista defences - anti-virus software. The old rule still applies, you must have anti-virus software. Because Vista is so new, there is less choice than for Windows XP. Microsoft would like you to use its Live OneCare product, which has a free 90-day trial.

There are other products available, including: Trend Micro PC-cillin, Grisoft AVG Anti-Virus (this is free for private, non-commercial use), Kaspersky Anti-Virus and CA Anti-Virus 2007. Some of these products are beta and other vendors are working on Vista-compatible anti-virus software.

Still running

There's one last thing I really like about Vista and security. It doesn't sound like a big thing but it really matters to me. It has been running continuously for well over a week now. I haven't had to reboot or reset any programs and there have been no problems at all. Instead of shutting down at night, I just put it into low-power sleep mode. XP didn't crash much (although the more programs I installed the rougher it seemed to run) but I really like the fact that Vista seems so much more stable.

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