The Latest Hardware News

At ComDex, Microsoft demonstrated a 'Tablet PC' based upon the next-generation operating system and application design, and with remarkable stability and reliability. It has a flat form factor like a book or notepad, and only two control knobs. With those two controls, the user can input both text and graphical information - with almost no special training. The device is not dependent upon AC or batteries, which tend to run out of power. If data-entry mistakes are made, the system is cleared by holding the device over your head and shaking vigorously.

Well, now that we have that 'April Fools' stuff out of the way, let's move on to some REAL news.

BroadBand Internet Access from Home Doubles

In the past year, the number of home users who have high-speed Internet access (through Cable and DSL providers) has more than doubled, to just over 10%. If you have not already been deluged with requests from your employees (and executives) to access office files from home, you will be.

As this trend grows, more of the computers on your network are not company computers, but rather home computers running gaming for the kids as well as editing your firm's documents. The coming year will create more administrative problems for your I.T. people as everyone struggles to find the balance between File Security and Virus Control on home computers and the needs for field service calls to the home.

The Latest Software News

As I write this, Microsoft has just announced their new licensing model for the next Microsoft Office Suite. The suite is due out midyear, and is currently code-named Office 10. By far, the most interesting and important feature of this software is the licensing model.

Current plans are that there will be three ways to get this software. You can purchase the retail version traditionally, you can purchase a 1 year subscription, or you can subscribe to a version through your Application Service Provider (ASP).

The interesting thing is the pricing of the 1 year subscription. Microsoft obviously wants this business model to succeed, because the cost of a one-year subscription will be well below the cost of the traditional retail version.

When the year is up, you can renew your license via Internet, telephone or at the store. The subscription renewal price will be the same as the initial subscription price - so users who would normally avoid upgrades will be more likely to pick up the latest version.

Microsoft expects the lower entry cost of the subscription will attract more home and small business users, and of course the renewals will provide a steady revenue stream for the company. Since more people will upgrade to the latest version within a year, there should be much fewer 'incompatible version' problems than we now cope with as we exchange files with our business partners.

Those who choose not to renew their subscription will not be locked out of their files. The software will still be usable for viewing and printing files - but not for editing.

If you recall my ranting from the February issue, you'll see that Microsoft is right on target for their subsequent Office release to be completely subscription-based.

This is a very good thing for all of us, and with any luck it will be the method used by our CAD vendors and our analytical software tools. With Microsoft leading the way, it seems unlikely that they will not follow Microsoft's lead.

Subscription-based licensing will make our software easier to administer, easier to keep up to date, theoretically more bug-free, and will make it less expensive to purchase needed software for short-term use due to the lower cost of entry.

Hopefully...

The devil is in the details of the licensing agreement, and I'm sure that agreement will be in flux as Microsoft searches for the 'sweet spot' of corporate income and customer satisfaction.

> Microsoft is moving it's business model to subscriptions in order to move from the company's desktop orientation to an Internet focus. The next version of Windows (code names **Whistler**) and Microsoft's development tools for software writers include features collectively called **.NET**, which are designed to more easily provide data and services through the Internet.
>
> A major benefit of the **.NET** effort is more data interoperability between your business tools - as long as the developers of your accounting and Project Extranets get on board.

If memory serves, Microsoft was the first to actually charge people for the operating system (O.S.) software necessary to use your computer. Before that time, the O.S. was included in the purchase price of the computer itself. Indeed, computer makers knew that the O.S. was necessary to make that expensive hunk of copper, silicone and glass into a useful business investment.

Since that time, Microsoft has packed more and more features into the base O.S. (originally called MS-DOS, now called Windows), giving us more and more reason to purchase upgrades. No doubt the desktop O.S. will soon be priced using a similar subscription model, although your file servers may well be Linux or UNIX based.

Michael Hogan, AIA - lead chiphead at Ideate, provides custom web solutions and provides consulting services to the AEC industry in Chicago. He welcomes comments by e-mail at mhogan@id-8.com