



Business Plus Article – Aug 2004 Bars on Windows

Long ago, things were so simple. You could visit the High St and buy the home PC of the day, take it home, plug it in, load a copy of MS Office, Doom and the ubiquitous Freeserve CD and that would be it; you were online and set up. Oh how the times have changed! Gone are the days of complacent computing. Now there are bad guys out there; people who want your data; people who want to leverage your computers power to attack the website of their choice. Connecting a new PC to the Internet without first taking the necessary precautions could render it useless within minutes.

PC Security is big business. You need only look on the shelves of your local software retailer to see the plethora of products available to tighten security and keep the hackers out. Anti-virus, anti-spam, anti-hack, hardware firewalls, application firewalls, the list goes on. If you are running Windows, (and let's face it, who isn't?), Microsoft will allow you regular free updates from its Windows Update web site. Many of these fix newly discovered security vulnerabilities that might allow your PC to be exploited or hijacked. Better yet, if you're running Windows XP, in a few weeks time Microsoft will be releasing Windows XP Service Pack 2, the culmination of hundreds of individual fixes and a wealth of new functionality. This is a bit of a departure for Microsoft; service packs always contain fixes, but seldom new features and functionality. So why now? Well XP has been out a few years now, and its successor, codenamed Longhorn, is some way off being completed. So it may be fair to think of XP SP2 as a stop gap, or Little Horn as it is affectionately referred to in Redmond.

So, should your organization roll out SP2 to your XP workstations? The short answer is a big YES. Let's have a quick look at three of the new enhancements:

Windows Update Not new, but different. The very first clue that SP2 has been installed will be the Windows Update settings dialogue that appears immediately after reboot. This is a big improvement over the previous version which would just float a notification balloon in the system tray. Now you cannot go any further without making a decision on your Windows Update strategy. Also new is the Express Option. By choosing this, Windows Update will fetch only the critical updates. If you opt for the Custom Option, you can choose optional components as well as the critical updates. Also note if your updates require a reboot, you had better reboot! Even if you select "Restart Later", SP2 will keep popping up to remind you until it is done.

Internet Connection Firewall (ICF) Although a personal application level firewall was included with XP SP1, it was pretty well hidden and relied on the user actually turning it on. ICF is now on as soon as SP2 is installed. After the post-installation reboot, you will be greeted with the ICF start up dialogue prompting you to either allow or disallow certain programs to receive data from the Internet. With this application level firewall

control, ICF now only opens ports when the appropriate program is running, whereas previous versions would leave the ports open all the time.

Pop-up Blocker SP2 updates MS Internet Explorer to incorporate a pop-up blocker to intercept those annoying dialogue boxes that seem to appear endlessly. Apart from being infuriating, they can be a security risk to the non-educated user. The inclusion of the pop-up blocker is big plus point. Now when a pop-up appears, you will receive an audible alert and a message in the IE status bar that informs you a pop-up has been blocked. From here you can allow the pop-up or, the default action, ignore the pop up. You are also afforded the facility to set a pop-up exceptions list that remembers trusted pop-ups.

These are just a selection of the new features included in SP2. There are many more “behind the scenes” enhancements that are documented in detail on the Microsoft website

<http://www.microsoft.com/technet/prodtechnol/winxppro/deploy/relsprc2.mspx>).

Very impressive; Windows XP SP2 is by far the biggest effort so far in the battle for security Microsoft have made with any of their operating systems. Hats off to Microsoft, they have made things much more difficult for the bad guys, and struck a massive blow for the good guys.