

# Upgrdade or Not? The XP Question

By Aaron Turpen

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By Aaron Turpen of Aaronz WebWorkz

Beyond the question of expense (Windows XP runs from \$99 for an upgrade to the Home version all the way to \$300 for a full version of Professional), the question of whether you need to have the latest and greatest from Microsoft is a big one. The operating system has been out for a few months now and the press has had a field day with some of the problems first encountered. One of the most common is the story of someone who's installed XP or bought a computer with it already installed, upgraded their system, and had to spend hours on the phone with Microsoft's technical support to "re-certify" their operating system. While this does happen, many of the stories are overblown. As a test, I made a call to Microsoft's 800 number on a Monday afternoon at lunchtime, presumably the busiest time for a tech-support company, and found that it took less than twenty minutes to resolve my phantom problem and "re-certify" my operating system.

No, the real question behind upgrading your computer's operating system is whether you really need to go to the time and trouble to do so. Truthfully, the average home user who has little or no problems with their current system has no reason to upgrade. You should also think twice if you have older peripherals or software (scanners, printers, CD burning tools, etc.) that you do not wish to replace after the upgrade. Many items more than two years old will not work and may not have a patch available to make them work. Many companies such as Hewlett-Packard have announced that they do not plan to make patches for older printers because of the economics of the issue.

If, however, you have a buggy operating system such as Windows Me, you have newer hardware, or you do a lot of networking or file sharing with your system, you will want to consider an upgrade. Windows XP is great for networking and file sharing. As good as Windows 2000 is. That means if you're already running Windows 2000, you may not need to upgrade.

If you're planning to upgrade, you'd better sit down and take note of what it will cost you in both money and time. Prepare to have an entire day set aside for this task, even if you're a "guru." You'll need to consider a few things:

How old is your computer and its current operating system? The system requirements for Windows XP are fairly hefty in comparison with older versions of Windows and if you have a version of

Windows 95 or older running, you will not be able to “upgrade” but will instead have to do a full install with a more expensive, full version of XP.

How old is each piece of hardware and each peripheral on your computer? Check the vendor’s websites to see if these have drivers for XP or if the hardware will have to be replaced.

Which version of Windows XP will you need? The Home version is good for the average user, but if you need more options and networking/sharing setup, you’ll want to install Professional instead.

Do you upgrade or start from scratch with a whole new installation? This may seem like a simple question since if you can upgrade...why pay the extra money for the full version? Well, sometimes having a full version of the operating system on hand is better, especially if you plan to “dual boot” (have two operating systems on your computer at once) or if you ever have a disaster and have to build your computer up from scratch. Some people have also found that a clean installation alleviates hardware incompatibilities or problems that an upgrade caused. For most people, though, an upgrade will be OK.

Lastly, what kinds of upgrades to your system do you plan to make before replacing it entirely? This question is crucial, because to save hassles, you may want to make these upgrades to your computer BEFORE you upgrade the operating system to XP. You’ll also want to make sure that you have all the latest drivers and updates for your existing items (that you plan to keep) installed or ready to go before you upgrade.

Finally, as a final note on upgrading, try to get a complete backup of your system before you make the upgrade. This could save you a lot of problems should anything go wrong. The best way to do this is to buy a hard drive equivalent to what you’re using now (e.g. you have a 20 gigabyte drive now and are using 14 of them, you will need at least 15 gigabytes for your backup drive) and install it into your computer. Then make a complete “mirror” copy of your current drive to the new drive (there is software to do this, or you can do it by hand). Now remove the new hard drive and proceed with your backup. If anything goes wrong, you can plug the new drive in (using it to replace your old) and your system will be back the way it was. That \$150 drive you just purchased could save you days or weeks of frustration and hundreds in technician bills. When things are running smoothly, the new drive can also be used as a continual backup device or as a new drive, doubling the space on your system!

In all, expect to spend at least a working day for the upgrade and between \$200 and \$500 in hardware and software (including the Windows software itself).

Aaron Turpen is the proprietor of Aaronz WebWorkz, a web services company offering design, hosting, and consultation for small businesses online or off.

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