

THE COMPUTER CORNER

## No. 120. Win 98 versus XP

- by Stan Kaplan, WB9RQR  
105 Martin Drive  
Port Washington, WI 53074-9654  
(262) 284-9346  
skaplan@mcw.edu

As mentioned in the last issue, I am a believer in alternatives. The latest and greatest from Microsoft is, of course, Windows XP. Should you upgrade to it? Alternatively, if you bought a machine with it, should you downgrade to Windows 98? That last statement may shock some, but it is an attractive alternative for some individuals. So, let me discuss it here, and you can make up your own mind.

First, let us define terms. When discussing Win98 here, I will be talking about Windows 98 Second Edition. Any previous edition should not be used. When discussing Win XP, I will be talking strictly about Windows XP Professional Edition. The word is out that the Home Edition of XP is inferior, and has quite a bit of the functionality crippled or missing. Having defined terms, now it is important to ask what attributes are critical when considering an OS (operating system)?

First and foremost is stability. How likely is the OS to crash? There is nothing worse than an unstable platform that crashes, often taking some of your valuable files and data with it. For this characteristic, Win XP is the winner, right out of the box. Word has it that it is much more stable – much less likely to present you with the “Blue Screen of Death” than Win 98. On the other hand, those of us who use Norton Systemworks to keep Win 98 clean of registry errors and other things that go bump in the night find that Win 98 is quite stable. I have three desktops and a laptop in my office that run Win 98 (one is dual-boot with Linux on it too), and I have relatively few problems, under the watchful eye of Systemworks. But, truthfully, one should not have to buy third party software to keep an OS trouble free. So, Win XP wins the stability comparison hands down.

Second are hardware drivers. Does the OS come out of the box with drivers for all the gadgets out there you are likely to use with your computer? Does it recognize the sound card, PCI bus, modem, network and other hardware in your computer? Well, of course XP must win this because it is a much newer OS than Win 98. On the other hand, this might be considered a non-issue. With Internet access, one can find drivers for almost anything in a fairly short time. Driversguide.com is a great place to look – they have thousands of drivers on hand, and links to many more, free for the downloading. Even XP may not have a driver for a card or other hardware device that was manufactured after the OS was released. So, this really is a non-issue. Oh, there will be an occasional piece of hardware that will not work with Win 98, but almost all devices made today will work just fine. I have only seen one such device, a modem, for which there were no drivers available for Win 98. Most manufacturers got wise, quickly, to the fact that many people were not upgrading to XP and so made their devices compatible with both Win 98 and XP. That persists until today.

Third, is support. By support, I mean security fixes and other upgrades of parts of the OS to keep it current (we all know that real support from Microsoft, via phone or email, does not exist). The answer is a dead tie. Microsoft has recently announced that it will continue support of Win 98 for at least several more years (after a hue and cry from thousands of users when Microsoft tried to cut off support so that people would buy XP). Did you know there is a free CD from Microsoft that will apply security fixes to either OS (it detects which one you are using)? It installs all security fixes through February 2004. Yep, go to this site: <http://www.microsoft.com/security/protect/cd/order.asp>, to sign up. They will mail you the CD at no charge. I now routinely use this CD when preparing computers for ARES/RACES units around the state. It works well, and saves much time downloading files. So, support is there for both Win 98 and XP, so that item is a tie.

Next are Microsoft Activation restrictions. If you buy and install XP in your machine, you must contact Microsoft to activate it within 30 days or it will cease to work! If you buy a PC with XP installed, it XP is locked to that BIOS, which means you cannot transport it to another machine. Well, OK, that is reasonable. But having to contact Microsoft to activate a product you paid hard cash for? Many of us find this to be so unpalatable that we shy away from the OS. That is one reason why many large corporations are moving to Linux (over 50%, by 2007). Linux, by the way, is a fine OS, looks and works much like Windows, is even more stable than Windows, and is free! Do a Google search on Fedora, the name of the new home edition of Red Hat Linux.

There is one more issue, availability. Of course, one can purchase XP or a machine with XP on it. Not so easy with Win 98. Insofar as I am aware, Microsoft no longer sells Win 98, and I have not seen it on shelves in the store. So, the only way to get it is to make a copy of a friend's CD. That, of course, is theoretically illegal, though I doubt that any court would find against an individual who does this, seeing as how it is no longer possible to buy a copy from the company. Still, many folks might not want to engage in an activity in the "gray area" of legality. On the other hand, a lawyer friend said he didn't think Microsoft would go after a person making a single copy. So there you have it. Win 98 is not available unless you pirate a copy from someone who has it.

I think I have covered all the issues, and here is a summary of the results. STABILITY: a tie but only if you use Norton Systemworks to keep Win 98 as stable as XP. Out of the box, XP is much better. HARDWARE DRIVERS: not really an issue, so long as you have Internet access. SUPPORT: pretty much equal, at least for a couple of years more. MICROSOFT ACTIVATION RESTRICTIONS: a real negative for XP and not an issue with Win 98. AVAILABILITY: a negative for Win 98 and a non-issue for XP. There it is, folks, now you decide. Happy computing!