

Editor's Corner

Windows 7 Service Pack 1: To Install or Not to Install

As we reported here a couple of weeks ago, Service Pack 1 for Windows 7 is now available for download (or on DVD for those who have a slow modem connection). I've received a number of email messages from readers who want to know whether they have to install it, whether they need to install it and especially whether bad things could happen if they do (or if they don't).

First of all, the service pack is not mandatory. You can install it through Windows Update but it won't be pushed to you automatically; it's an optional update so you have to select to install it. Should you do that? It depends. This service pack doesn't add a lot of cool new features, but it does improve some behaviors and performance of the OS. Many of these only affect a limited number of users. If you need to print XPS documents that contain a mixture of pages in the landscape and portrait formats, you might have had problems getting them to print correctly before. The service pack fixes this problem. There's also a fix for problems some folks had with HDMI audio devices after a reboot. If you check the "restore previous folders at logon" option in Explorer's folder options, you might have noticed that the folders show up in a cascaded group when they're restored. That can be annoying - you want them to come back positioned as they were before. Well, the service pack fixes that. Finally, there's added support for a new processor extension called AVX and new hard drives that use 4KB sectors.

All in all, not terribly exciting. Of course, SP1 also contains all the security updates that have been released individually for Windows 7. If you've been installing those as they became available, you already have them and don't need SP1 for that. However, if you've had auto updates turned off and haven't been keeping up with the monthly patches, installing SP1 is an easy way to catch up and get your system security up to date.

I installed SP1 on one of my main computers. The other, which has had all incremental security fixes installed, I left alone. The full download from the Microsoft download site ranges from 538 MB for the 32 bit (X86) version to 903 MB for the 64 bit (X64) version, so it may not be a quick download, depending on the speed of your Internet connection. It took about four and a half minutes on my FiOS connection. The installation itself went smoothly on my Dell Inspiron (a.k.a. the Bedroom Computer) and took around half an hour. The Windows Update version may be smaller because it downloads only the files needed for your particular system, but if you prefer to download the service pack from the Microsoft Download Center, you'll find it here: <http://www.win7news.net/GU4Z98/110310-SP1>

The file is an executable, so all you have to do is double click on it to start the process. You should be logged on as an administrator and make sure that no other users are logged on, and you'll need to close all your programs before you start installing. If you should happen to have installed the SP1 beta, uninstall it first. We'll tell you how to do that in this week's "How To" section below.

I had no problems with the SP1 installation and based on what I'm hearing from readers who have installed it, and from monitoring the web forums, it's going well for the vast majority of Windows 7 users. However, something could always go wrong. A service pack updates critical operating system files, and a power glitch or hardware failure during the installation could have a devastating effect. Thus I recommend you back up all important data to an external disk or network location before you proceed with the installation. I know most people probably won't do it, and most won't suffer any ill effects from that decision, but it stinks to be the one who loses irreplaceable data because you tried to save a little time. Also, if you're updating a portable computer (laptop or Windows 7 tablet), be sure you plug it into A/C power before you start the installation. Even if you have a full battery, it's best not to risk a power failure during installation. Finally, you might need to temporarily disable your anti-virus program. Some AV programs can interfere with the service pack installation. If you do, don't forget to

turn it back on as soon as you finish installing the service pack.

Ed Bott did a good job of describing the few problems that people have encountered in installing SP1, many of which have to do with Windows Update "inconsistencies," over on ZDNet. He also includes instructions for fixing the Windows Update problems with the Windows Update Troubleshooter and the System Update Readiness Tool. See his article here:

<http://www.win7news.net/GU4Z98/110310-Ed-Bott>