



Losing support

June saw Microsoft cease provision for its most popular OS, Windows 98, as the software maker pushes its customers inexorably towards XP. But, driven to upgrade, many are discovering there's something missing from their new installation. Wendy Brewer investigates

Buy a new PC and chances are it will come with Windows XP Home or Professional preinstalled. Most buyers automatically assume that this means they're getting a full copy of XP but in many cases they're not.

Thanks to Microsoft's 'medialess' operating system policy, manufacturers and resellers are prevented from supplying customers with a full copy of the OS on disc and, in some cases, resellers don't even include a backup CD. This means users have no way of installing the full copy even if they want to.

Microsoft took the decision to stop providing full copies of its OS on disc with a new PC was taken back in April 00. But it was done under such a veil of secrecy that many *PC Advisor* readers are still contacting us about the issue, completely unaware that the system is in place.

The software giant labelled this move an antipiracy measure, but many industry insiders considered it a ploy by Microsoft to prevent (or at least make it more difficult) for people to run a Linux operating system alongside its own OS.

The upshot: purchase a new machine with a standard installation of Windows XP Home Edition and you will be missing a number of utilities that are present on the full CD version. (XP Pro users get the full monty, though still no OS original discs.)

Perhaps the most important omission is that of a backup utility. If your PC fails, you upgrade the system or you need to reinstall the OS for another reason, you simply won't be able to. Feedback from

customers and resellers led to the decision, says the company. However it has left those very same resellers passing on the message to customers – and suffering the backlash.

The maker's take

Microsoft has left it up to vendors to choose whether they include a recovery CD and each has handled this in different ways. Some, such as Time, have gone for the hardnosed approach: standard OEM software is installed on to its PCs and it does not provide a full copy of the software with any of its systems.

When questioned, the company's representatives simply reeled off Microsoft's antipiracy policy. However, customers determined to get their hands on an OS disc can do so. Time may not provide a 'reload' or recovery CD free with its PCs but it does kindly allow customers to purchase one for a whopping £60. Never mind, at least the money is put back into software and product development, eh?

A few manufacturers include CD copies of the OS with their PCs. But one vendor that does told us that under Microsoft's licensing terms it was not allowed to advertise the fact anywhere on the disc.

The existing setup is great for Microsoft. The reload CD does not contain any Windows XP software so users can't copy or transfer it to another machine. For Time this means it can push its support packages (which are taken up by around 85 percent of its customers) and charge

the other 15 percent of customers for the reload disc when they do hit a disaster.

This CD basically triggers a recovery image of the operating system which is loaded on a completely separate partition on the hard drive and allows users to restore their PC back to its factory settings. (Of course, if your hard drive fails, the CD won't work at all). Plus, without a backup utility you won't be able to restore any settings you've customised.

Systemax offers its customers a customised version of Windows XP that includes its own support applications and "a few other details". It also provides customers with a full copy of the OS on CD. As the company's spokesman Joe Miranda points out: "From a warranty issue it's far better for us to offer XP on a CD so the customer has access to driver files. In a way it's the same as having details on the hard drive, except the disc won't get corrupted."

If only Microsoft was this concerned. Evesham only installs the standard version of XP on the hard drive but provides users with a full copy of the software, allowing them to add the missing utilities at a later date. A couple of other vendors offering full copies of XP asked not to be named for fear of incurring the wrath of Microsoft.

The differing attitude of vendors should be noted. Our advice: if you can't afford a PC with XP Professional Edition, with which you get the entire OS installation by default, check exactly what you are getting before you buy.



Looking for assistance

If you're thinking of circumventing these problems by eschewing the complexities of XP for the familiar face of Windows 98, think again. Microsoft supports its products for a finite period and it used to be anyone's guess how long that would be. Helpfully, Microsoft now defines support lifecycles so users aren't suddenly left with only a few months notice before either upgrading or trusting to luck from

there on in. Having a lengthy notice period – generally three to five years after the product's onsale date – means we know just what we're getting and for how long.

In December Microsoft ceased support for DOS, Windows 3x, NT 3.5x and Windows 95. Free support for Windows 98, the most popular operating system, was extended to the end of June.

So where do Windows 98 users turn for help now? For starters, the web

is a great source of troubleshooting advice (try Microsoft's Knowledgebase or our own Helpproom forums at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/ registered). Nose in the corners of dusty bookshops for a manual and grab emergency boot disks from www.mybootdisks.com. (If you don't have the system disks, make it a priority to create your own.) Alternatively, you can acknowledge the shove from Microsoft and upgrade to a supported OS. ■

End of the line: lifecycles explained

From the date of a software package's release to the date when the product enters the extended phase it is in what's known as the 'mainstream phase'. This is what most of us think of when we think of product support. Users have access to free and paid-for live support, online help, assistance with warranty claims and access to free downloads including all patches, hot fixes and updates.

'Lifecycles', introduced in October last year, further simplify matters. The nonsupported phase, created to phase out free

support, has been removed. Consumers will be lucky to find any kind of help for their software once it reaches its end-of-life date. Most vendors encourage users to upgrade to XP as they are then covered by Microsoft's support services.

For business customers Microsoft says that some of its partners such as consulting companies or VARs (value added resellers) may offer longer support periods, but its spokesman gave us no names. To view Microsoft's latest lifecycles go to <http://support.microsoft.com/lifecycle>.

Desktop operating system	Date of general availability	Enters extended phase	Enters nonsupport phase	End-of-life date
Windows 95	August 95	December 00	December 01	December 02
Windows NT 3.5x	August 95	n/a	December 01	December 02
Windows 98/98 SE	June 98/June 99	June 02 (extended June 03)	January 04	January 05
Windows Me	December 00	December 03	December 04	December 05

Operating system	Date of general availability	Enters mainstream phase	Enters extended support phase	Free online support (subject to demand)
Windows 2000 Pro	March 00	March 05	March 07	Eight years+
Windows XP Professional	December 01	December 06	March 07	Eight years+
Windows XP Home	December 01	December 06	n/a on consumer products	Eight years+

Key

- Extended phase **Online self-help and paid-for live support. Patches and downloads only available on business products**
- Nonsupport phase **No online or live support; only online self-help support now available**
- End-of-life phase **All support ends**