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Microsoft's Licensing Model (sigh)

By Richard Lowe

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One of my biggest, most important responsibilities in my day job is ensuring that we have purchased all of the software licenses that we require. It's my job to ensure that we are 100% legal at all times – which fulfills one of our corporate goals to be a completely ethical company.

Most companies make it very simply for me and my staff. If I want to license Norton Antivirus, all I need to do is count the number of machines on which the product is to be installed, write up a purchase order and call the salesperson to order the product. It works the same with Conversion Plus, Adobe Photoshop, Paint Shop Pro, WinZIP and any of the other hundreds of products that we require to keep our company in business.

You would think that Microsoft would want to make it easy for people like me to give them money. I know that if I were in their shoes that's what I would do.

I should stop for a minute and explain that I love many Microsoft products. Windows 2000 (server and professional) are very solid, well-thought-out operating systems, and the Office 2000 suite is easily the best in the industry. Internet Explorer is far superior to Netscape and has been for several years now, and Visio 2000 is one of the most versatile flowcharting tools available anywhere.

Unfortunately, purchasing and licensing Microsoft products is nowhere near as pleasurable as using their office suite. My god, they make it so difficult to purchase licenses that I've often considered (especially recently) switching the entire company to Unix and WordPerfect just to simplify my life.

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Okay, let's take the Office suite of products. In a sane world, you would do this one of three ways:

- You could just buy everything (Word, Excel, Access, PowerPoint and so on)
- You could purchase the "base" kit, then purchase additional licenses for the pieces that you needed. For example, spend \$75 on the base, then add \$40 for Word, and perhaps \$10 for PowerPoint, and then don't purchase Access. This could all be done with a licensing key.
- Just purchase each piece separately.

Naturally, Microsoft didn't choose any of these methods. What you have instead is a number of "suites", each a different mix of products. For example, if you just need Word and Excel, you could purchase Office Standard. If, on the other hand, you also need Access, then you need to purchase Office Premium. To make matters even worse, depending upon how many of each product you want to purchase you can use different discount scales.

It's enough to make one pull his hair out in frustration. But wait, it gets even worse with the operating systems. You want Windows 2000 server, then you need to purchase a license for the server, a license for each workstation (Windows 2000 Professional) and a Client Access License (CAL) for each workstation that needs to access a server. And, of course, depending upon how many of each you buy you get a different discount scale.

Oh, we're not finished yet. You also have the choice of ordering Backoffice, which contains many of the server products sold by Microsoft. It may (or may not) be cheaper to get one Backoffice license than, say, an Exchange license, a SQL license and a Windows 2000 server license. Then you've got to remember if you purchase Backoffice or the separate products for your server in order to purchase either Backoffice CALs or the individual CALs for each product. And, of course, each product has its own discount scale depending upon how many you purchase.

Now, with the impending release of Windows XP and the release of Office XP, it has, believe it or not, got even more confusing.

Take a deep breath and see if you can follow this. We purchased some 500 copies of Office 95, which we upgraded to Office 97, then upgraded to Office 2000. We looked carefully at Office XP and quickly decided we did not want to install it on any of our systems. We are happy with Office 2000.

However, we might want to upgrade to the version of Office following that, or even the one after that (Microsoft seems to be releasing a new version

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every couple of years). In the past, we would simply pay an upgrade fee to go from wherever we were to the new version.

No more. Now, we have to purchase what is basically upgrade insurance by a particular deadline (it was September but this seems to have been moved to February). We also have to pay to upgrade everything to Office XP at the same time. If we do not do this, we will wind up paying over 200% more if we decide to upgrade at some point in the future.

Okay, so Microsoft is forcing us to pay now for a product which we may or may not want in the future. Personally, I believe they know that Office XP is not a product which most people want – in fact, I don't know of any system manager anywhere who is even considering upgrading to the new version. Why not? The user interface is significantly different (requiring retraining), the performance is poor (requires more hardware to operate) and the benefits TO THE USER are completely nonexistent.

It gets worse. We have decided to go ahead and get the upgrade insurance and upgrade our product on paper. However, we definitely do not want to install Office XP on any machine at any time. Thus, we simply want to make the purchase to retain our rights to upgrades in the future.

We are allowed to install the older versions as much as we want under the terms of the license agreements as long as we purchase enough licenses of the new version to cover it all. So we went to purchase Office XP Professional, then found ourselves in an interesting position.

We originally bought the Professional edition because we wanted Publisher. Unfortunately, Microsoft has decided to remove Publisher from Office XP Professional (in fact, they have also removed Frontpage – no huge loss considering that Frontpage XP is not an improvement over 2000).

This introduced lots of confusion into the picture. After much study and hours of phone discussions with Microsoft, we determined that we could install Office Professional 2000 with Publisher for each of the Office Professional XP licenses that we purchased. If, however, we did upgrade to Office Professional XP, then we would need to purchase one additional Publisher license per machine.

It would be so much easier if we could just purchase 500 licenses for Word, 500 for Excel and 500 for Publisher. We would be happy to purchase a maintenance agreement for the whole mix. We don't need Access or PowerPoint, yet due to the way Microsoft has it all structured we have to purchase licenses for them. Sigh.

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Now I have to go figure out how to upgrade and license my Windows NT and Windows 2000 machines. It's enough to make me look into the mirror to see if I have any more gray hairs.

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Microsoft's W2K MCSE Policy

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Like over 800,000 other people, I spent an incredible amount of time and effort studying to be an MCSE (Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer). I took six classes, studied several books from cover to cover, took practice tests and used the knowledge in my job and on my own time. Why did I do all of this? Because I wanted to have one of the most prestigious certifications in the field – the MCSE!

For those of you who don't know, the MCSE consisted of six tests designed to ensure that system administrators meet a minimum level of experience and knowledge with Microsoft products. The concept is this gives guidance to managers as to who they should and should not hire, and ensures that those people know how to use Microsoft products.

In my experience, people who honestly pass the MCSE exams are indeed better qualified for their positions than others with equivalent experience and skills. Of course, boot camps, brain dumps and similar methods of cheating the process tend to allow people to dishonestly pass the exams. This, however, is true with all certifications (and tests for that matter) and not unique to the MCSE series.

In their attempts to get people to upgrade from Windows NT 4.0 to Windows 2000, Microsoft has run into quite a bit of resistance from the industry. While there are very significant reasons to upgrade, Windows 2000 requires major changes in network configurations, applications and user training, which has tended to slow acceptance. In addition, since Windows 2000 was released around the time of large expenditures on the Year 2000 bug, system managers found themselves without funds or manpower to upgrade their networks.

In order to force people to upgrade more quickly, Microsoft has, in its infinite wisdom, decided to retire the Windows NT 4.0 certifications. Thus,

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on December 31, 2001 any and all MCSE certificate holders who still have not upgraded will need to remove those four letters from their resume and business cards.

It now appears that over half (at least 400,000) of these MCSE's will be invalid in under five months! I know from experience that the change from Windows NT to Windows 2000 is not an easy one, and given that many people actually have to work for a living it's not surprising that so many of them have not had a chance to obtain the new certifications.

There is also a large amount of anger about the policy. It appears that Microsoft is only interested in increasing it's bottom line, which translates into selling an endless procession of upgrades to the operating system and the office suite. It's plainly obvious that Microsoft feels it's dollars come from these upgrades, and thus those engineers who cannot or will not upgrade their certifications have little or no value.

Even worse is that Microsoft has started the path towards Windows XP certifications! A large number of MCSE's have not even started (much less finished) their training for Windows 2000, and now they have to figure out how to upgrade that to Windows XP! And, of course, it's a sure bet that the next version of Windows will follow very quickly after that.

Me and several of the people who work for me have obtained the MCSE certification for Windows NT 4.0. Given that we all work very long hours (a 60 hour week is a short one) and have lives, it's a miracle that even some of us found time to pass these exams.

And now Microsoft is saying that we are no longer valuable. They are directly implying that we are not worthy of their greatness because, well, we are too busy actually putting their products to work to take the time out to study and pass the exams.

We do want to pass the exams and we do want to become certified on Windows 2000. Every single person that works for me strongly desires to pass these tests. Our objection does not come from the fact that the tests exist or that Microsoft is raising the bar or improving their products.

Our objection is the underhanded, sneaky and downright unethical way that Microsoft is forcing us to put pressure on our company and our employers to needlessly upgrade over and over again. The pressure comes from every aspect of Microsoft – from forced upgrades via their licensing practices to their forced certification policies.

Let's play devil's advocate for a minute and see what we can learn. Perhaps

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Microsoft has to do this because they are more intelligent and have a wider vision than the rest of the world. Microsoft knows they have a far superior product, and in order to ensure that we lesser beings provide the best value for our companies, they are requiring us to upgrade our knowledge. Heaven forbid that companies (especially large ones) actually keep Windows NT 4.0 installed on their networks (much less Windows 95 or 98). To allow that would be completely irresponsible of Microsoft, wouldn't it?

Okay, enough of that! Now I'm getting sick to my stomach!

The problem that many of us are facing is that we are stuck with what we've got. We have already invested so much in Microsoft products that it would be extremely difficult to switch to something else. In addition, Windows NT 4.0 SP6a is a reasonably reliable operating system, and the Office 2000 suite is

exceptional.

However, every once in a while I get a little whimsical thinking back to the good old days, when I used to run our multi-billion dollar company on two large VAX machines. That's ALL of our applications, every single one of them. Plus hundreds of users, over fifty printers and fax machines and numerous other things. In fact, we ran payroll, accounting, order processing, delivery scheduling, human resources, printing, communications and everything else on those two machines!

To top it all off, we ran for over ten years on these VAX machines without a major operating system upgrade! Yes, there were problems, but constant retraining, reinstalls, service packs, hot fixes and weekly major security alerts were not among them. And compared to the clustering in OpenVMS (the operating system for the VAX and Alpha hardware), the "clustering" in Windows 2000 is a complete joke!

And now I need over 150 servers running Windows NT 4.0 and Windows 2000! The really sickening thing is I'll bet I could run everything on a dozen or so Unix or Linux servers, or, again, two big Alpha (the successor to the VAX) systems. (It's really too bad that Digital Equipment Corporation, which made the best hardware and operating systems on the planet, could not market their way out of a paper bag).

I think that's what is annoying is and many of our peers the most. The constant need to spend an outrageous amount of time to keep up with the new releases from Microsoft.

I know it doesn't fit into Microsoft's hostile "do it our way and pay us for the privilege" business model, but we would much prefer a different approach

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to the MCSE certification model. Instead of constantly rolling it forward constantly, invalidating the certifications of those who cannot keep up, why not just append the operating system to the certification?

Why not just make a "MCSE Win4.0" and an "MCSE Win2000"? To me as a manager, it would be far more valuable than the current catch-all scheme. Look at it this way, I could scan a resume for "MCSE Win3.1", "MCSE Win4.0" or "MCSE Win95". Wouldn't that make it easier for me as a manager? You bet!

However, it wouldn't help Microsoft's bottom line, would it?

Fortunately, I am not in the business of helping Microsoft's profit margin. In fact, on my list of worries, that wouldn't even be in the top million! My job, and the job of each and every person in our company, is to support our users by giving them tools which enable them to do their jobs.

To do that, we will get certified on Windows 2000, and probably Windows XP after that. However, we will do it on our schedule, fitting the training and testing time around our jobs and personal lives. In the meantime, we will

take a closer look at other alternatives to Windows and Office, because, well, well really don't like this situation. We may, or we may not, change to those alternatives, but before this we were not even looking ... now we are.

Additional Information

The Certification Debate

<http://internet-tips.net/Careers/certifications.htm>

There is a huge debate out there in the computer world – to certify or not to certify. Here's my two cents.

Microsoft's Licensing Model (Sigh)

<http://internet-tips.net/Microsoft/licensing.htm>

You would think that Microsoft would want to make it easy to give them money, wouldn't you? Think again.

What's Up With Microsoft?

<http://internet-tips.net/Microsoft/whatsup.htm>

Microsoft stock has been going down all through 2000. Here's an opinion as to why.

Richard Lowe Jr. is the webmaster of Internet Tips And Secrets at <http://www.internet-tips.net> – Visit our website any time to read over 1,000 complete FREE articles about how to improve your internet profits, enjoyment and knowledge.



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