

The next big thing

Gareth Hall tells us what we can look forward to in Windows Server 2008



Q: Windows Server 2008 is in beta; what are the highlights?

A: There are lots of highlights, but three or four key areas that customers are getting excited about. One important improvement is to the server core. This is an installation option on the Windows Server 2008 CD, and it gives users the option of setting up a machine simply as a core server, with none of the 'extras'. So there's no user interface, no Internet Explorer® (IE), no media player; you get the core functionality without any of the 'fancy stuff'. The core server option is limited to a number of roles where there are no requirements for the extra elements. This means that the core server is quicker to install, has a smaller footprint and presents a lower attack surface for security. It also reduces the number of patches that might need to be applied – if there's no IE, there's no need to ensure IE is patched, for example.

Server Manager is another area where we've made life easier for the system administrator, as it understands the main roles that servers are likely to be used in. What happens is that when you're installing Windows Server, you select the role it is going to be used for. Server Manager then works out what is required for that role and installs the appropriate items on the server. For example, if you've said the machine will be a Web server, IIS7 will be installed. Server Manager understands dependencies, and will make modifications to the firewall to open the appropriate ports. We're seeing lots of interest in this feature from smaller organisations, where the IT people don't have to install that many servers and so

have to do a lot of research to work out exactly what's needed, what ports need to be open, what services started for a particular role.

Q: Is there one aspect of Windows Server 2008 that you think will make a real difference?

A: Can I have two? The first is network access protection, and the second is virtualisation.

I heard a great analogy of what network access protection does from Andy Malone, one of our MVPs. A bloke goes to a nightclub, and he's stopped at the door by a nice bouncer, who tells him he can't go in without a tie. The bouncer takes him into a little room where he can phone his friends to ask them to get him a tie. He has to wait there until he gets a tie and puts it on. Then the bouncer lets him in, but watches him all night to make sure he sticks to the rules and keeps the tie on. Network Access Protection (NAP) does a similar thing, ensuring that machines that are added to your network, such as laptops, meet your security policy by having the right anti-virus software, the appropriate firewall and the most up-to-date patches. And once the machine is added to the network, NAP ensures the security features aren't disabled. NAP solves so many problems, and results in a significant drop in helpdesk calls resulting from non-enforced security.

Virtualisation is my other real winner. It's a great way of dealing with tactical problems and provides first-rate support for running legacy systems

that aren't easily upgraded. It's an all-round winner and provides excellent flexibility. In Windows Server 2008, we're providing hypervisor-based virtualisation running in the server core, and the virtual systems you're running today will move straight across.

Q: What got you interested in IT?

A: I am proud to say I have always been a geek. My dad bought a ZX Spectrum (16k) and I was hooked. I think it's great to be able to work at Microsoft, where you can really make a difference. For example, soon after I joined Microsoft, I was using a very early beta of Office 2003. I put in a report about a particular feature, and the product was changed as a result of my report. So 800 million people got to see that change.

Q: Is there a gadget or piece of software you couldn't live without?

A: My Media Centre PC. It records all the TV we like at home and means we don't watch any rubbish any more (at least, not rubbish that we don't like). I even have a portable one that is great for travelling – I can catch up on the TV I miss at home!

Q: And one you wish wasn't invented?

A: Email on my phone. It's so addictive. It's so hard not to have a quick look in the evenings and weekends.

Q: What would you do if we took your email away?

A: Sleep, see my friends and family, stop ignoring my daughter – all those things that email gets in the way of. ■