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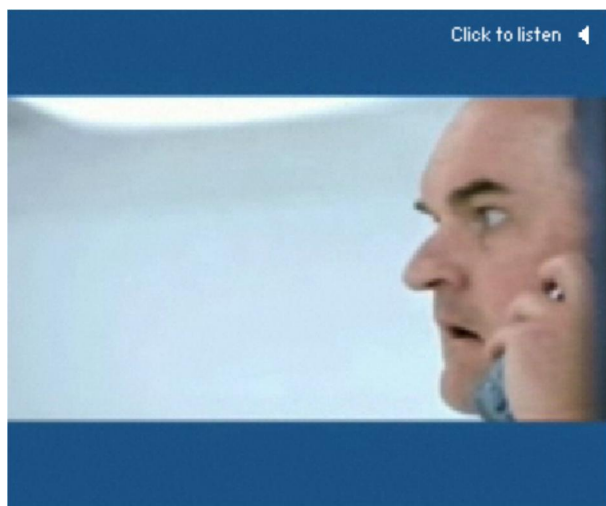
Microsoft launches Windows 7 beta

Public beta available on Friday.

Gregg Keizer, Computerworld (US)

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Microsoft has launched the beta of Windows 7, as expected, after posting the preview of the company's next operating system to its developer download services.

The general public will be able to download the beta starting Friday, said CEO Steve Ballmer in his first-ever opening speech at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. "We will make the beta available worldwide," Ballmer said. "I encourage you all to get out and download it."

Microsoft made it clear that the beta will be available for a "limited time," and said it will cap the beta after the first 2.5 million downloads.

IT professionals and developers who subscribe to the Microsoft Developer Network (MSDN) or TechNet services, however, get a jump on the public at large; they can grab the beta right away, said Ballmer.

The beta, which Microsoft called "feature complete," requires a PC with a 1GHz processor, 1GB of memory, 16GB of available hard disk space and support for DX9 graphics with 128MB of memory, according to Microsoft, which also warned that the recommendations could change for the final version. The beta only supports an upgrade from Windows Vista Service Pack 1 (SP1).

Microsoft declined to get specific about upgrade paths for the final version of Windows 7, or to spell out how many editions it would produce and what it would charge for each. The beta is "roughly equivalent" to the Ultimate version of Vista, it added.

Both 32- and 64-bit versions of the beta will be available for downloading, but only English, German, Japanese, Arabic and Hindi editions will be posted Friday. Other language versions are expected at the product's launch.

To install the beta, users must have a DVD drive able to burn disk images to a blank disc. The beta, said Microsoft in a follow-up blog it published Wednesday, will be available as an .iso file. It did not spell out the size of the download.

The beta expires on 1 August, 2009.

Not surprisingly, Ballmer was bullish on Windows during his speech, even in the face of an economic downturn. "No matter how long this recession lasts, our digital lives will get richer," he said early in the keynote. "[And] Windows will remain at the centre of peoples' technological solar systems."

His announcement of **Windows 7 availability was no surprise**. Expectations that he would take advantage of the CES stage began to build last month, when **clues on Microsoft's own website** pointed to a release no later than 13 January. Less than two weeks ago, copies of a Windows 7 build believed to be the same as the beta **leaked to file sharing sites**, where they proved extremely popular.

Microsoft has not named a launch date for the operating system, other than to say it would deliver Windows 7 by about this time next year. On Wednesday, Ballmer said nothing about ship dates.

Some pundits and analysts, however, expect Microsoft to have learned from its mistakes, and believe it will ship Windows 7 in time for the back-to-school and holiday selling seasons later this year. Vista missed both of those crucial selling periods during 2006.

The pace of Microsoft's revelations about Windows 7, the **designated successor** to the **problem- and perception-troubled Windows Vista**, has been quick. The company **first talked up Windows 7 last May** during a one-day marketing blitz, for example, and issued "pre-beta" copies just over two months ago to developers at a pair of conferences in October and November. Shortly after that, it promised it would expand testing to the public by releasing a beta in early 2009.

Also on Wednesday, Microsoft announced the public availability of the beta of Windows Server 2008 R2 , the server software that shares a code base with Windows 7.

The Windows 7 download will be posted to Microsoft's site on Friday, 9 January.

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