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Microsoft: Hated Because It's Misunderstood (Opinion)

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Rob Enderle, the Enderle Group

Microsoft Doesn't Respect Its Customers

This perception became clear after I spoke with a number of CIOs. Basically they were used to the way they were treated by the big hardware OEMs who would fly them around in the corporate jet, take them out to luxury dinners, and host them in private boxes at big athletic events. The CIOs would also often get nice gifts when they visited the vendor. Microsoft generally didn't fund customers' travel, seldom takes them out, and their idea of a treat is a trip to the Microsoft employee store, where customers are allowed to spend a limited amount of their own money. As an ex-auditor living in these post-Enron times I'm thinking that Microsoft's behavior may be more appropriate, but I have to acknowledge that this behavior hurts Microsoft a lot with their large corporate customers.

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I wouldn't use gifts as reason to choose a vendor. I've seen too many people get in lots of trouble going down that path.

If you are going to make a software deployment decision on something other than price, consider the risk factor in choosing an alternative company and you may find the grass isn't always greener. For instance in considering Microsoft vs. Sun on the desktop, bear in mind that the desktop isn't Sun's space, they are funding it at a fraction of what Microsoft spends, and if Sun's financial problems continue, the company may well decide that the desktop is less strategic than other areas, and should be cut. Also, with respect to StarOffice, while you'll likely be as impressed as I am with what the product does, the little things the product doesn't do may drive you nuts.

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Other factors may be important to you, I'm just pointing out in this piece some of the things that are important to me. Don't just look at where you are coming from but where you are going. No matter how bad things seem, take a look at the potential destination before jumping out of the frying pan. Trust me, things really can get worse.

Products Are Unreliable And Insecure

Way too many people are complaining about breakage of Microsoft products. I'm on current Microsoft products and I hardly ever crash. In looking at virus and crash analysis data, problems appear to be related to drivers, older applications, and code that was developed before the Internet was really understood. Most people believe the source of the problem is Microsoft's platform. Regardless of the truth of this, I agree that it is Microsoft's problem to solve.

But there is something really strange when criminals develop code that

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criminals are blamed less than the vendor. For instance if you bought a car and a gas refinery intentionally developed a formula that would cause your car to explode, I have a hard time believing we would be hunting the manufacturer of the car. I actually can't picture any product developer could withstand a concerted attack brought by a massive number of people; I honestly don't think there is anyone good enough to anticipate every possible attack that could occur. People buy bulletproof cars, but I wouldn't drive one with American flags on it through Iraq ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) right now.

Also, SCO was hit recently with a major denial of service attack and they run a Linux ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) distribution. Oracle was hit the day after they announced their product was "bulletproof."

As a result of recent attacks, the U.S. government is considering regulating both vendors and enterprise ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) users of software. It won't matter what platform you run, you'll enjoy extra costs as you try to comply with that regulation. Governments are ticked off and they aren't just targeting Microsoft.

If Microsoft's lack of security really annoys you, you can fix it without migrating by doing some of the things you would do if you migrated. Learn from the sites that survived the virus and worm attacks:

- Limit the number of applications you put on the desktop.
- Deploy new operating systems on new hardware.
- Keep software up to date (including your firewalls).
- Do regular security audits (including trivial password checks).
- Consider smart cards for verified access.
- Don't copy entire software images from old PCs to new ones; leave that to the hardware OEMs, who have testing and procedures in place to make sure the imaging is done right.
- Don't upgrade memory on existing systems; even the slightest mismatch between memory chips can lead to instability.

You should find your reliability goes up, along with your resistance to attack.

Oh, and you may want to avoid products from vendors who taunt hackers (the word "bulletproof" comes to mind).

Windows product security will get a lot better in 2004, particularly if desktop blades and modular computers become as widespread as expected. But you don't have to migrate unless you want to and, in 2005, your choices will get a lot more interesting. Fix what you've got, jump when you are ready.

Microsoft is Evil?

Many folks think Microsoft is just plain evil and should be stopped. Much of this perception is based on poorly founded beliefs from people who have never been on the Microsoft campus, nor have they ever tested their beliefs against what other companies do. I look at Enron and WorldCom and the executives who swindled those companies and I see evil. I look at the millionaires the .COM era created by ruining retirement funds and see evil. I see CEOs who increase their own compensation while laying off employees and cratering their company's stock and see evil. I look at Oracle's attempt to destroy PeopleSoft through hostile takeover and I see evil. I look at Sun Microsystems, which put in post 9/11 protection just for its executive staff, leaving most of the employees exposed, and I see evil.

Mistakes aren't in themselves evil, they are often just mistakes. People who take intentional actions to hurt or expose people who depend on them are evil. Microsoft has problems, and I've certainly seen some Microsoft employees who cross the line, but the executive staff seems to really want to help. They just seem to make more mistakes in providing that help than any of us would like -- including the Microsoft executives themselves. Mistakes can be harmful, but it is intention that defines evil. Often, Microsoft executives will bust a hump to make up for mistakes when they learn about them. Every time I've brought a wrong to Microsoft's attention, they've stepped up.

Microsoft does have something I call "the big company disease," which is a different kind of beast than evil. We'll leave that to a future column. Until next time, keep thinking and remember to challenge your perspective.

Rob Enderle heads the Enderle Group and spends his time building PCs, exploring emerging personal technology, and helping clients avoid expensive mistakes. You can write him at renderle@enderlegroup.com.

Contact the editor at feedback@internetweek.com; if you send an e-mail, let us know if you'd rather we don't publish it.)

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But there is something really strange when criminals develop code that is openly hostile and designed to break your products, and the criminals are blamed less than the vendor. For instance if you bought a car and a gas refinery intentionally developed a formula that would cause your car to explode, I have a hard time believing we would be hunting the manufacturer of the car. I actually can't picture any product developer could withstand a concerted attack brought by a massive number of people; I honestly don't think there is anyone good enough to anticipate every possible attack that could occur. People buy bulletproof cars, but I wouldn't drive one with American flags on it through Iraq right now.

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Prejudices and misconceptions about Microsoft make it hard to evaluate the company's merits. The biggest myths about Microsoft are that its desktop products are overpriced, it doesn't respect its customers, and reliability and security are poor. And some think the company is downright evil.

In nearly two decades of studying Microsoft, I've been able to dig through the hype that the company generates, as well as the misconceptions its detractors create, to see more of the real company than most of you can ever experience.

It's handy to think of the other side as evil in business competition and litigation (as well as in war and religion). While this can be interesting and provide focus if you are in competition, it can also lead to costly mistakes, because you make assumptions about behavior that is based on a world that is largely fictional. I'm betting your perceptions of Microsoft are largely fictional, and while many of mine may be as well, I have spent more time than most people meeting with and drilling into the company.

What I'm going to attempt to do is provide a different perspective than the one you currently have, because I strongly believe that much of Microsoft's problem comes from a lack of effort by Microsoft in helping people get a balanced perspective. People will tolerate a lot from a company or a person that they believe is on their side. They won't tolerate even the existence of a company or person that they believe to be against them. And too many people clearly think that, whatever Microsoft is, it isn't on their side.

There are three key legs to the belief that Microsoft should be avoided: They charge too much, they don't respect their customers, and their products are unreliable and insecure. Of the three the first is, in my view, the most prevalent.

Pricing

Microsoft's dominance on the desktop leads to the perception that the company's products are overpriced, simply because the lack of alternatives gives customers no reference points for comparison. By being the dominant player on the desktop, Microsoft sets prices. This

means that the buyer can't, through competitive comparison, determine if they are getting a good deal. And Microsoft has not improved desktop products in a way that would justify the cost of upgrading to the latest versions, according to some of Microsoft's most vocal critics.

Moreover, software has no material cost of production that sets a hard floor to overall cost. Making new copies of software product, once the software is written, is nearly free to the vendor. Making a new copy of Windows is just a matter of striking another CD; it's not like making a car, where the cost of steel, plastics, glass and other raw materials set a limit on how low the price can go without the vendor losing money on every sale.

As a result, the prevailing perspective about Microsoft products is that people are being made to pay for a product that they may not want and don't fully use. Sun, very effectively, has coined this the Microsoft Tax and positioned their own product, StarOffice against it. Because I've been asked to do this work in the past by clients, I've found that the Microsoft product is still in general the best choice when all of the financial aspects of the decision are factored in, and once that is done people seem to feel better about the choice.

Do the analysis yourself. Don't just base your cost estimate on software cost, which often is one of the smallest components in any software product or platform decision. You may be both surprised and more satisfied with your decision to use Microsoft software, but at the very least, you'll have justified whatever decision you eventually make.

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