

The Latest Effort from Microsoft

by Fred W. Holzager

Whether you're at home on Berdan Avenue, at work in the Plaza Building or a have a small company located on Route 208, security is always a concern when it comes to your computers and network systems. To some, the concept of computer security means using a password to access your computer, to others, it may mean installing a firewall or antivirus program, but for the general public, the concept represents inconvenience. Well, Microsoft is trying to change that. Typically, you would go to the "store" to purchase an anti-virus application, a spyware program, a pop-up blocker, and a software firewall. Well, you still need to do this, BUT now it will be coordinated by your operating system (*Windows XP*, I mean).

On August 25, 2004, Microsoft officially launched their latest salvo against the onset of "malware" and "at-risk" programs. They introduced the second service pack (SP2) for Windows XP. "What does it do?" you may be wondering... In brief, it offers the end user a security-centric upgrade to their operating system (XP, that is) for the sake of making it simpler for the masses to be "aware".

It is premised upon the Microsoft framework for desktop security:

- **Maintain Windows updates automatically.** Microsoft has been promoting their free update service for a few years. With the advent of some newer viruses, it was determined that there were security openings in the operating system. In an effort to protect its customers, Microsoft publishes updates and service packs on its website. The objective is to update/repair components of the operating systems and applications which have been determined to offer vulnerabilities to the existing security structure.

To access the website for Windows Update, you may either click on the Start button/All Programs/Windows Updates OR Launch Internet Explorer/Tools/Windows Update. **NOTE:** If you attempt to access the site <http://windowsupdate.microsoft.com> using a non-Microsoft browser (e.g., Netscape/Mozilla), you won't gain direct access.

- **Maintain current antivirus definitions.** Microsoft does not provide a built-in antivirus software utility. You must still use your own antivirus program; however, now, the operating system will do its best to keep you assessed of its timeliness and ability to protect your system. Please keep in mind, if you are using an older version of any antivirus program, it is in your best interest to consider an upgrade (not just update). The older versions of many antivirus programs are not designed to detect and/or remove the latest spyware and adware threats, only defined viruses. To the developers, the concept of a virus is a self-installing program, whereas, the spyware/adware programs were considered "user installed" because you clicked on a button or agreed to an End User License Agreement (EULA) *per se*.

- **Use a firewall to help reduce intrusions.** Microsoft, in this instance, does furnish the XP SP2 user with a rudimentary software firewall. It is designed to protect your machine from start up to shut down. It may be disabled if you have one already. Having two firewalls installed (*e.g.*, ZoneAlarm, McAfee Firewall, or Norton Personal Firewall) combined with the Windows XP SP2 firewall will not offer any added security benefit. In fact, it may be detrimental to the performance of your system due to “false positives” and other conflicts.

Many early users of the XP SP2 have reported “broken” systems as a result of the firewall. If you are running a share on a peer-to-peer network or use FTP to transfer files from one computer to another, you may be affected. Microsoft has a special website to assist you in determining whether you should anticipate problems with your programs, www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/sp2/default.msp (the SP2 home page). There, you will be informed of Microsoft’s perception of pending issues and how to prepare for the download.

By the way, Service Pack 2 is quite large. So large, in fact, that Microsoft has gone to the expense of distributing the software on a CD free of charge. If you have broadband, you may wish to download and save the file; however, if you have dial-up, be realistic and order the CD. The CD may also be found at local stores that sell software (*e.g.*, Office Depot).

Microsoft is very capable at marketing, with this in mind, here are the reasons why they suggest the upgrade (www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/sp2/topten.msp):

1. Help protect your PC from harmful attachments.
2. Improve your privacy when you’re on the Web.
3. Avoid potentially unsafe downloads.
4. Reduce annoying pop-ups.
5. Get firewall protection from startup to shutdown.
6. Take control of your security settings.
7. Get the latest updates easily.
8. Help protect your e-mail address.
9. Take action against crashes caused by browser add-ons.
10. Go wireless without the hassle.

Some organizations may make the determination to hold off on the download of the XP SP2 until they can adequately identify potential glitches. If you or your company wish to defer the installation, Microsoft has created a mechanism to temporarily disable delivery of Windows XP SP2 for 120 days from August 16, 2004, (after which, it loads), www.microsoft.com/technet/prodtechnol/winxppro/maintain/sp2aumng.msp. If you need more information or have issues with the installation, go to the SP2 Support Center, support.microsoft.com/default.aspx?&pr=windowsxpsp2, there you will discover a wealth of information to assist you.

If you are interested in learning more about the items discussed above, feel free to contact Holzsager Technology Services, LLC at (201) 797-5050 or by e-mail at support@tech4now.com. For general information about other services for your home or office, kindly visit www.tech4now.com, there you may retrieve additional information bulletins and articles to help you use technology to your fullest advantage.