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NT is (sigh) crash-free

Microsoft operating system's stability, speed well worth its headaches / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

MICROSOFT'S WINDOWS NT operating system has one tremendous advantage over both Microsoft's Windows 95 and Apple's MacOS: It doesn't crash. This one difference has saved me countless hours since I switched to NT last month. I no longer sit at my keyboard waiting for my system to reboot. I've stopped wasting time trying to make my machine more reliable.

But moving to Windows NT has not been without its headaches. Even though NT runs many Windows 95 programs, it doesn't run all of them. I have had minor problems getting Intuit's Quicken 6 for Windows working under NT. Quite a few Windows 95 games won't work.

The biggest compatibility problem is hardware. I had to replace my Diamond multimedia card (\$29) with an actual Sound Blaster 16 (\$99) to get music playing again. Hewlett-Packard Co. hasn't written NT device drivers for its new Photo Smart system, and, according to my contacts, it won't.

These advantages and headaches are actually two sides of the same coin. Even though NT looks like 95, the similarities are only skin deep. NT is fundamentally a new operating system, designed from the beginning to be multi-

tasking (able to run more than one program at a time), and multiprocessing (able to run on computers with more than one microprocessor), as well as to isolate programs from one another, making it impossible for one crashing program to take down the whole system.

NT is also designed to be secure. Every time you start up your computer, you need to log in to your Windows NT machine. When you first set up the system, NT creates an administrator account, which you use for running the system and installing software. But when you want to actually use your computer, you are supposed to create separate user accounts. When you are logged in as a user, NT doesn't let you modify system files or installed applications. Used properly, this can prevent your NT system from becoming infected with a virus, even if somebody mails you an infected program and you foolishly run it.

Unfortunately, the security also gets in your way. There's no way to switch from a user account to an administrator account without logging out and logging back in. So a lot of NT users sim-

ply give themselves administrator privileges, or they never bother to set up user accounts. Either way, this defeats a lot of NT's security benefits.

Microsoft sells two versions of the operating system: NT Workstation (\$275) and NT Server (\$700). NT Server is designed to be used for Web servers or file servers in large organizations. It requires at least a Pentium-class computer with a minimum of 160MB of disk and 32MB of RAM. Workstation is designed for the desktop: It requires 110MB of disk, 16MB of RAM, and has had its network subsystem crippled so that it can't be a powerful Web server.

The NT Workstation is being aimed primarily at the engineering and scientific market but it is finding a welcome home with pow-

er users who are frustrated with Windows 95.

NT Server's market is mostly corporations with local area networks.

In my experience, NT Server is the best operating system available for applications such as e-mail, word processing, and computer-aided design, but only after you have loaded your system with at least 64MB of RAM. Running NT Server, my computer is noticeably faster than when it was running Windows 95 – and dramatically faster than with comparably priced Macs.

Combine the speed, the stability, and the ability to run standard Windows applications, and you know why many companies are replacing their UNIX workstations with desktop boxes run on NT.

I wouldn't use NT Server to replace the UNIX Internet system in my basement. It is still much easier to get high-quality, free Internet software for UNIX systems than for NT.

Ted Kusnetzky, director of operating environments research at International Data Corp., says major organizations are also discovering that NT systems don't seem to have the power of UNIX competitors. NT is not as scalable as Microsoft would have you believe. But their approach is different. They would tell you not to put everything on one box.

NT is perceived as having so many advantages compared to UNIX that many companies are willing to sacrifice a bit of speed. First there is Microsoft's staying power. The future of some UNIX companies may be in question, but Microsoft and Windows NT will definitely be around in 20 years.

NT also seems to be evolving a lot faster than its UNIX competitors. NT 4.0 has only been out for a few months, and already NT 5.0 is scheduled to go into beta later this year. That new version will have many features that 4.0 lacks – such as support for plug-and-play devices, advanced power management for laptops, and built-in support for faxing.

I am so pleased with my move to NT that I can't imagine switching back.

If you feel I've gone too easy on Windows NT, send me your gripes at plugged-in@simson.net. Be sure to CC Microsoft at ntwish@microsoft.com. A more thorough comparison between NT Server and Workstation can be found at <http://www.microsoft.com/networkstation/ntwvnts.htm>.



We do Windows

1996 Client/PC operating systems shipped

Windows 95	47 million
Windows 3.x	13 million
Apple Macintosh	4.2 million
Windows NT Workstation	2.2 million
OS/2 client	2.1 million
POS	2.1 million
Total	72.6 million
Windows licenses shipped	6,000
Windows 3, 4, and Internetware	2,000
NT servers	5,000
UNIX servers	2,000 (est.)

Includes server, client, and operator licenses. Figures not include sales and less revenue of OEMs due to the difficulty of measuring them. © 1996 Microsoft Corporation.