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Waiting for Windows 2000: Possible interim NT release may offset concerns

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The old cliché "What's in a name?" is resonating at Microsoft, where the new moniker Windows 2000 really means the year 2000. Several sources confirmed that the software giant is now aiming to release the chronically late server-desktop operating system in February 2000.

The company may look to fill the gap, however, with an interim release -- possibly called Windows NT 4.5 or even NT 5.0, Windows 2000's previous name -- which would include all of its ostensibly stable features.

According to sources who requested anonymity, many ISVs and large corporate customers are pushing Microsoft to go the point-release route. If there is an interim release later this year, the ship date for Windows 2000 -- which one source said Microsoft now has pegged for Feb. 25, 2000 -- will be pushed back even further.

"This product is horribly late, no matter how you look at it," said Michael Gartenberg, an analyst at the Gartner Group, in Stamford, Conn.

According to Ed Muth, group product manager for enterprise marketing at Microsoft, Release Candidate 1 (RC1) for Beta 3 of Windows 2000 will be released in March of this year, and therefore Beta 3 will not be released at least until April. RC0 was released in December 1998. Muth would not discuss a final ship date for Windows 2000.

Several factors have come into play for this latest of many delays, and the complexities of Microsoft's Active Directory services and IntelliMirror technologies are at the top of the list.

But delays beget more delays, and as the industry continues to push ahead without Windows 2000, Microsoft is aiming at a moving target, observers said.

"The hardware is rapidly changing underneath it, which makes it almost impossible to complete the product they outlined," said Rob Enderle, a senior analyst at the Giga Information Group, in Santa Clara, Calif.

For instance, Intel's Pentium III will not be available until March 1, and the mobile version of the chip will not debut until the last quarter of the year at the earliest, according to Enderle. Microsoft is touting Windows 2000 as the first NT system designed with both mobile and desktop users in mind.

"The Pentium III timing, coupled with Y2K overhead and the fact that this is the most complex and largest product ever attempted, is weighing heavily," Enderle said. "I don't know of another product that has more lines of code than this."

One source, who asked not to be named, added that "the creeping internal 64-bit stuff in the beta versions we have seen, along with reworking the whole OS with Windows 2000 naming instead of Windows NT -- [and] rewriting docs, online help, scripts, etc. -- seems to be a factor in the slippage."

Steve Ballmer, Microsoft president, and Brian Valentine, newly promoted vice president of Windows development, are the driving forces behind the Windows 2000 machinations.

Ballmer, who has taken responsibility for product shipping dates, nixed a fourth-quarter release of Windows 2000. And once Valentine evaluated what features would have to be omitted to accommodate a June 1999 release, the February 2000 date -- as well as the possibility of an interim release -- became a reality, according to sources.

An interim release without the complete functionality that was originally promised in Windows 2000 would be a mixed bag to many IT managers, but Muth said Microsoft has no immediate plans to offer one.

"The absence of Active Directory would be very hurtful if that [absence] included things like IntelliMirror and the object repository," said Roger Abell, technology support analyst coordinator for the Arizona State University School of Engineering, in Tempe, Ariz. "On the other hand, an NT 4.5 could be a welcome thing. But there is so much pinned on Active Directory that [its absence] would give a lot of pause for thought."

Microsoft Corp., in Redmond, Wash., can be reached at www.microsoft.com.

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