

## Business Plus Article – Nov 2005 2006 – Revolution or Evolution in the world of IT?

The IT industry goes in cycles. Some years, nothing much happens. Software we already have matures and evolves. Other years, technology takes a major leap forward with revolutionary new products. As we shall see, whilst 2004 and 2005 were very much an evolution, 2006 will be a year for revolution.

In this article, we take a look forward at the coming year and at the products Microsoft has up its sleeve to gobble up your 2006 IT budget. Wondering whether you should renew your software assurance contract? Read on.

As 2005 drew to a close, Microsoft released a major update for its market leading email server, Exchange 2003. This second service pack (SP2) is much more than a collection of fixes and tweaks. Instead, it adds significant functionality to an already strong product.

Most notably, on the features list, SP2 adds new **Anti-Spam** and **Anti-Phishing** technology to block the ever increasing flow of junk mail, and some new “**Blackberry killing**” mobility features.

Phishing, for the uninitiated, is the practice of sending official looking emails, pretending to be from a bank or other reputable organisation, in the hope of persuading you to divulge your banking details, which can then be used to fraudulently empty your bank account. SP2 brings to the mainstream technology that allows the system to verify that emails have come from where they claim to.

Many organisations I work with have been trialling or using Blackberry devices to receive email on the move. What separates Blackberry from other PDAs and SmartPhones is the ability for the system to push emails to you, rather than you having to check for them. The downside is that it requires expensive 3<sup>rd</sup> party software and annual subscriptions. With SP2, Microsoft has sought to provide this functionality free of charge, without any additional software. Of course, to use this, you need to have a supported mobile device running the latest version of Microsoft's Windows Mobile software. A plethora of such devices will hit the market early this year.

Perhaps of more immediate interest to many businesses though, is a feature that hasn't been shouted quite so loudly from the rooftops. Historically, Exchange Server has been limited to storing a maximum of 16 Gigabytes of email. If your organisation wanted to store more than this, you had to upgrade to the Enterprise edition. Enterprise Edition includes lots of high-availability features targeted at larger enterprises, and unfortunately this was reflected in the price.

When this limit was imposed in the late '90s, 16Gb seemed like a lot of email for anything other than a large organisation. Nowadays, it simply isn't. Many of my customers have been struggling to keep their mailstores below this limit for a while. With SP2, this limit has been upped to a whopping 75Gb, which should give you some breathing room. Unfortunately to enable this extra space requires you to delve into the Registry (the hidden settings of your server), so it is probably best done by a professional consultant.

Looking further forward, Microsoft aim to release the next version of Exchange Server by late 2006. Snappily codenamed "**Exchange 12**", this new version will be a major step forward in terms of performance and scalability, but perhaps the most talked about feature is something called "Outlook Voice Access", which will allow you to talk to the server and have it read you the emails you want. Like your own private secretary, without the risk of spousal paranoia.

**Windows Server 2003 Release 2** should hit the market early this year. This is an enhanced version of Windows server to bridge the gap until the next major version, codenamed Longhorn, arrives in early 2007. While this is an interim release, and so does not require you to buy new Client Access Licenses to use it, it will feature some fairly important new technologies. Some of these have been previously available as "Feature Packs" to download and others are completely new. There are too many to go into here, but among them are features for replicating files among servers, managing printers more efficiently, and tools for integrating your customers and suppliers network users with your own. This paves the way for Microsoft's grand scheme of an electronic marketplace. Read more at [www.microsoft.com/WindowsServer2003/R2](http://www.microsoft.com/WindowsServer2003/R2)

Early 2006 will also see the first major update to Microsoft's web browser for several years – **Internet Explorer 7**. This will add a lot of improved security features to make the web a safer place, as well as support for RSS (a means of streaming news updates from your favourite sites without having to visit them) and Tabbed browsing, an increasingly popular feature of other browsers that allows you to manage multiple windows. You can actually preview some of these features by installing the MSN Search Toolbar from [toolbar.msn.com](http://toolbar.msn.com).

That will be followed later in the year by the next version of **Microsoft Office**, currently titled Office 12. Expect this to be renamed Office 2006 of something equally dull.

Now you may be wondering, just how much more can they do to Office. Essentially, I just want to type stuff, crunch numbers and do the occasional whizzy presentation. Well, this version sees the first major overhaul to Office's very successful user interface since 1997. Since then, Microsoft has added hundreds of new features to Office, whilst essentially keeping the look and feel the same. The result was that many of the most useful features got buried so deep in the menus that we never found them, and continued to do things the hard way instead.

Microsoft has made several valiant attempts to help us find these features, whilst keeping it all looking the way we know and love. Anyone remember Clippit? The “helpful” paperclip that burst onto the screen with monotonous regularity offering to help you type a letter?

Now, the boffins in Microsoft’s usability labs have decided that enough is enough and since we are all much more confident in using computers now, the time has come for a new, improved interface, putting the helpful new features slap bang in front of you, without any paperclips at all. Read more at [www.microsoft.com/office/preview](http://www.microsoft.com/office/preview)

Lastly, towards the end of the year, MS hope to release the next major version of Windows for your desktop. **Windows Vista**. Again, desktop Windows hasn’t changed since XP came out in 2002. Looking at anything pre-XP now seems almost prehistoric.

Vista promises to revolutionise the way we use our computers. It has a snappy new interface, with a translucent glass effect, giving the effect of layers. The whole paradigm of files and folders gets an overhaul as Windows keeps track of where it put stuff, leaving you to focus on using it.

Vista relies on the fact that modern computers are capable of hugely impressive graphics. Everything moves around the screen in gloriously shiny 3D. Standard icons for your documents are replaced by thumbnails showing you what they are, any of which can be previewed without opening them. Everything is tagged with as much useful information as you care to give it, to ensure you can find it later.

But the user interface is only part of the story. Vista has been designed to start up quicker, and to hardly ever need to be shut down. Most people would agree that XP was a quantum leap in reliability, security and performance, and Vista promises to do the same again.

Pre-emptive management watches for signs of an imminent disk failure, prompting you to quickly take a backup. Likewise the system watches for software failures and automatically recovers from them as quickly as possible.

There is way too much in Vista to discuss here. I will save that for later in the year. If you want to read more, have a look at [www.microsoft.com/vista](http://www.microsoft.com/vista) .

Of course almost all the products discussed here are still in development, so anything could change, or even not happen at all. That said, 2006 promises to be a big year for IT.

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