

9 Workarounds for Windows 7 Woes

How to deal with the new OS's taskbar, compatibility issues, and more



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After the poor reception of Windows Vista by customers, Microsoft knew it had to retrench for that system's successor, Windows 7. And retrench it did. Windows 7 has entered the market to universally positive reviews from the tech press and customers alike. One reason for the good reviews is that Windows 7 is a more modest upgrade. Another reason is that Windows 7 is a more cohesive and simpler system compared to its predecessor.

So, there's no doubt that Windows 7 is a huge success. But if you're coming to Windows 7 from a previous Windows version, you're going to notice a number of changes—some big, some small. And while Windows 7's changes are mostly improvements, unfamiliarity can lead to a loss of productivity. So, if you're looking for a way to fix some of Windows 7's most obvious annoyances or to change some crucial feature back to the way it used to work, fear not: We've got your back.

Taskbar

When you look at Windows 7's UI, the most obvious change is the new taskbar, which represents a major functional departure from previous Windows versions. Instead of just providing buttons that represent running applications and other open windows, the taskbar also commingles shortcuts for frequently needed applications and other objects. If you're familiar with Mac OS X, you may feel that the new taskbar is a rip-off of that system's Dock. In many ways, however, it simply combines the functionality of the Vista and XP taskbars with the Quick Launch toolbar. Regardless of its origins, one thing is clear: The Windows 7 taskbar is different enough that it will cause some headaches for users who are accustomed to previous Windows versions.

Annoyance: By default, the Windows 7 taskbar displays only a single icon for every shortcut or button, as Figure 1 shows.



So, if you have several Internet Explorer (IE) windows or tabs open, you'll see only one button. That can be confusing. It also means that there's no descriptive caption on the button to describe what the windows are displaying, as was the case with all previous Windows versions dating back to Windows 95.

Workaround: You can overcome Microsoft's less-than-ideal default taskbar behavior and arrive at a display that more closely resembles previous Windows versions. To do so, right-click a blank area of the taskbar and choose Properties. Then, in the Buttons drop-down list on the Taskbar tab, choose *Combine when taskbar is full*. This will cause the taskbar to make two display changes. First, each button (each of which represents an open application or window) will include a caption and not just a nondescript icon. Second, when you open multiple windows of the same application (as with IE or Windows Explorer), each window will get its own button, as Figure 2 shows.



Annoyance: Most people who use Windows 7 quickly come to accept the way it combines shortcuts (links to non-running applications and windows) with buttons (links to running applications and windows). But there is one bizarre limitation: You can't have two links to the same application on the taskbar. This is particularly problematic for Windows Explorer links. You can't place separate shortcuts for, say, the Documents and Pictures libraries. Instead, Windows 7 places links to both of these locations into the Windows Explorer shortcut's Jump List.

Workaround: Fortunately, there's a way around this limitation. Here's what you need to do: Create a shortcut to the Windows Explorer location you want on the desktop. Right-click the shortcut and choose Properties. In the Target field, add the word *explorer* before the folder path. (If the path has any spaces, the path must be inside quotes.) The shortcut's icon will change to the default Windows Explorer icon, but you can of course change it again as needed. Now, pin this shortcut to the taskbar. Instead of pinning it to the existing Windows Explorer shortcut, it will create a new shortcut.

Annoyance: While many users will embrace the new taskbar, some might want to retain a separation between shortcuts and links to running applications and open windows. Or users might miss the Quick Launch toolbar, which [Microsoft](#) removed from Windows 7.

Workaround: You can enable the Quick Launch toolbar in Windows 7. To do so, right-click a blank area of the taskbar and choose Toolbars, then New toolbar. In the Choose a folder window that appears, type the following text into the Folder field: %userprofile%\AppData\Roaming\Microsoft\Internet Explorer\Quick Launch. Click Select Folder. You'll see the Quick Launch toolbar appear in truncated form at the right of the taskbar. To modify this appearance, unlock the taskbar (right-click in an empty space on the taskbar, then clear the *Lock the taskbar* check box). Drag the taskbar where you'd like it. Right-click the Quick Launch toolbar and disable two options: *Show text* and *Show title*. This will make the toolbar look as it did in previous Windows versions, as Figure 3 shows.



Annoyance: Vista includes an excellent utility named Software Explorer, which is part of Windows Defender. Software Explorer makes it very easy to control which [applications](#) start up when Windows boots. This not only streamlines the boot process but also prevents the notification area from becoming cluttered with unneeded icons. Sadly, Windows 7 doesn't include Software Explorer.

Workaround: Unless you want to hunt down a third-party utility, you're going to have to apply some old school (i.e., pre-Vista) skills on Windows 7. There are a number of places where you can streamline the Windows 7 boot process, but one is key: the [System Configuration](#)

utility, a spiritual predecessor of sorts to Software Explorer. To find this utility, type *msconfig* in the Start menu's Search box. When you open it, you'll find a list of startup [applications](#) on the Startup tab that you can edit.

Start Menu

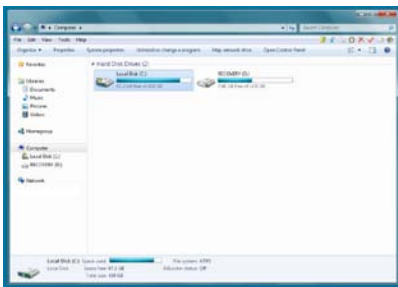
Windows 7's Start menu is largely unchanged from the one in Vista. However, there is one notable exception.

Annoyance: Vista offers an option to use the classic Start menu, but this option has been removed in Windows 7. Vista users who took advantage of that option and users coming from XP or earlier versions might prefer the classic Start menu.

Workaround: An enterprising third-party developer created a replacement for the Windows 7 Start menu called the Classic Start Menu, which is part of the free Classic Shell project (classicshell.sourceforge.net). With the Classic Start Menu, you can get back the Start menu that graced Windows 95 through Vista.

Windows Explorer

If it seems like Microsoft has changed the layout and capabilities of Windows Explorer with each new [Windows version](#), well, it has. And this trend continues in Windows 7.



Annoyance: Like Vista, Windows 7 no longer includes a number of useful toolbar buttons that were available in XP and earlier.

Workaround: Once again, the Classic Shell project comes to the rescue. This Windows Explorer plug-in provides missing buttons like Cut, Copy, Paste, Delete, and Properties. It also provides other old-school functionality, such as the File Copy dialog box. In addition, the plug-in displays free disk space (see Figure 4) and the file or folder size in the Windows Explorer status bar.

Compatibility

Anytime [Microsoft](#) releases a new Windows version, there are fears that device or application compatibility issues will render an otherwise decent upgrade into a disaster. While this was certainly true with Vista, Windows 7 does a much better job of maintaining backward compatibility. Of course, no software is perfect.

Annoyance: An [application](#) won't install or run under Windows 7.

Workaround: Like previous versions, Windows 7 provides a suite of compatibility tools that let the system fool installers and applications into believing that they're running under older Windows versions. Unlike previous versions, Windows 7 has a new troubleshooting [infrastructure](#) that provides wizards for compatibility issues and a host of other common problems. These wizards provide step-by-step walkthroughs in plain English, making it much easier to work through problems.

If you installed a program that isn't working and you want to easily determine whether it can be made to run correctly under Windows 7, type *action* in the Start menu's Search box, open the Action Center, and click the Troubleshooting link. Under Programs, click *Run programs made for previous versions of Windows* to bring up the Program Compatibility wizard. (Alternatively, you can run this wizard by typing *compat* into Start menu's Search box.) The Program Compatibility wizard will then walk you through the steps needed to address the compatibility issue.

Annoyance: An application still won't install or run under Windows 7.

Workaround: Some legacy applications simply won't install or run correctly under Windows 7. In this case, new features called Windows Virtual PC and [Windows XP Mode](#) can help you solve the problem using virtualization technology. Windows Virtual PC is the next generation of Microsoft Virtual PC. It offers some important benefits over its predecessor, including USB support and the ability to run virtualized (i.e., guest) applications alongside native (i.e., host) applications. Windows Virtual PC is available for free to Windows 7 users, but it requires hardware virtualization support in the PC's microprocessor and BIOS.

Windows XP Mode is a specially packaged virtualized version of XP SP3. It's free to the users of the Windows 7 Professional, Enterprise, and Ultimate editions. Because it runs under Windows Virtual PC, any applications you install inside this environment can run alongside your normal Windows 7 applications. It's the perfect solution for those few remaining applications that simply won't run in Windows 7 natively. (Note that Windows XP Mode won't work for many games and other graphically demanding applications.)

Windows Update

Microsoft has done a nice job of improving the Windows Update application in Windows 7, but at least one glaring issue remains.

Annoyance: If you leave your PC unattended overnight and the system automatically installs critical or important security updates that require a reboot, Windows Update automatically reboots your PC. So, in the morning, you might discover that all your applications have shut down and you've lost some data.

Workaround: You can prevent Windows Update from automatically rebooting your PC, although it will require a bit of work because the registry key that controls this functionality is missing from Windows 7. To stop automatic rebooting, open the registry editor (type *regedit* in the Start menu's Search box) and navigate to HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SOFTWARE\Policies\Microsoft\Windows. Create a new key named *WindowsUpdate*. Inside that key, create a new subkey named *AU*. In the subkey, add a DWORD (32-bit) entry named *NoAutoRebootWithLoggedOnUsers*. Set its value to 1. You'll have to restart the [computer](#) for the change to take effect.

The Least Annoying Upgrade

Every version of Windows comes with new challenges and new ways of doing things. Windows 7 represents a major functional improvement over its predecessor, but it's different enough from Vista and XP to cause a bit of grief. Fortunately, there are simple workarounds to most problems. While any change can be traumatic, Windows 7 is, in many ways, the least annoying upgrade Microsoft has ever shipped.