TECHNOLOGY

Windows Home Server — A First Look (or Second)

Column: Accountant Tech Talk

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It was with some flair that Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates introduced Windows Home Server to the mass of attendees at this year's Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas last January. Since I was there, I suppose that was my first look. After the introduction, the product was demonstrated on the floor of the show. It's an interesting attempt by Microsoft to address some real concerns for home users (and maybe small accounting firm users), hence the name Windows Home Server. Those concerns are storage, backup and remote access. I finally got my hands on the release candidate software last week and have had a chance to load and test it, hence my second look albeit a much more in-depth experience.

My impressions: Charlie Kindel and his team have done a pretty good job with this one. As near as I can tell, this product is some sort of hybrid taking the technologies from several other Microsoft products and bringing them together in a package. It looks to me like Small Business Server with a foundation of Windows Server 2003 and some nifty wizards for setting up users and shares, with some Storage Server and Data Protection Manager thrown in perhaps. A stated design goal was to keep these setup wizards so basic that even Mom could handle them.

Perhaps they added some of the Windows Storage Server technologies allowing for adding storage 'on-the-fly' when existing drive(s) fill up. I tested this by connecting both an external USB drive and an internal IDE drive. In both cases, the Windows Home Server saw the drive and gave me the option to add it to my existing drive. After adding the drive, the total space on the original drive (C:) was larger by the size of the drive I added. Pretty nifty! When I run out of space, which it seems I always do, I just add more storage and the software technologies (referred to as Drive Extender) expand my single drive. No more remembering which drive a particular file or folder is on. This physical drive spanning makes the whole process much easier for the end user. Design goal achieved.

I noted that adding a drive like this didn't seem to provide protection against a drive failure; rather, it appeared that if a drive failed I would lose the data on that drive. I did, however, have the option of duplicating folders, which, when selected, put a copy of the folder and its contents on both drives. This process would provide protection against a failed drive, but it would require twice as much space for protected folders. Windows Home Server also employs the Volume Shadow Copy technologies introduced in Windows Server 2003. If a file is changed or deleted, it can be recovered using the Previous Versions Client — good stuff. For backup, there must be components of Windows Data Protection Server in there, particularly the Single Instance Store (SIS) technology that reduces the size of these 'snapshots.' I tested this feature by executing a manual backup of a connected machine. I was impressed at the speed of the backup and also tested a restore after completely wiping the drive of my test machine. I booted the machine from the Windows Home Server recovery CD and then walked through the restore wizard. The restore went fairly quickly and put the connected machine right back to the state it was in. This is all pretty good stuff, as well.

Windows Home Server is designed to run 'headless,' meaning you plug it in and configure it by connecting to it remotely. This process worked well, although I did have to connect a keyboard, mouse and monitor to the machine to accomplish the installation. The final design goal was that of remote access. This must have also come from Small Business Server's Remote Web Workplace.

I connected an old Linksys router to the Internet and walked through the wizard included in Windows Home Server for configuring my router for remote access. The wizard did its job, and the router was configured to forward traffic to

the Windows Home Server. I tested this by typing the IP address in a web browser and got the logon page (see Figure 1). After logging on, I had a page that gave me the option to view content of shared folders or connect to computers as shown in Figure 2.

I also had the option of registering a domain-like name with the Windows Live service. This is a pretty amazing free service that uses Dynamic Domain Name Service (DDNS) to funnel traffic to my Windows Home Server without having to remember its IP address. So I type in a friendly name and get to my home server. If you want to look into this go to http://domains.live.com and check it out. As part of my testing, I used this remote interface to upload and download some files, and the process worked seamlessly.

Finally, the Windows Home Server monitors the health of your connected machines, including the health of the hard drives. If the connected machine is running Windows Vista, it will report the complete status of the Security Center. The biggest challenge for those of you who are intrigued by this new product may be getting your hands on one. Initially, Microsoft announced that the product would only be available through original equipment manufacturers (OEMs), which means you can't purchase the software only and load it on an existing or new piece of hardware. But, as you know, Microsoft has been known to change its mind, and I would be surprised if there isn't a retail release of the software in the future.

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