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Local Firms Zoom In on Windows Vista

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Forget the people lining up at Best Buy to get [Microsoft's](#) new Windows Vista operating system. The real selling took place yesterday in a packed ballroom at the Washington Hilton, where more than 3,000 people from local companies and government agencies gathered to catch a glimpse of the new software.

Here, the ecosystem that centers on Microsoft was on display. Such tech giants as Intel and [Citrix Systems](#) showed off their services while dozens of local firms that have built their business selling Microsoft products explained how they could help federal agencies and government contractors upgrade to the new operating system. Rows of computers demonstrated the software, and new features were flaunted in crowded training sessions.

A broad business network connects the software giant with technology vendors, system integrators and software developers throughout the region, totaling about 122,000 jobs and responsible for \$3.5 billion in products and services. Microsoft depends on local firms to sell, install and build applications for government agencies and companies. And Microsoft's partners are banking that thousands of clients will need help upgrading their systems.

In the Washington area, Microsoft has 10,000 partners that bring in more than 80 percent of the company's local revenue, according to Reed Overfelt, Microsoft's general manager for the mid-Atlantic.

Enduring development glitches that repeatedly delayed Vista's release, local firms eagerly awaited the expected boost in business that officially began yesterday. This week, Microsoft thanked the partners for their patience with a series of celebrations, including breakfasts and a lavish black-tie gala at the Kennedy Center last night.

"We're just a little piece in the middle," Overfelt said. "This launch is almost a bigger deal for [partners] than it is for us."

CorasWorks and Applied Information Sciences, both of Reston, used the launch to show off the custom services they created to complement Vista's offerings. Both companies say they generate a significant amount of business for Microsoft, which in turn sends customers in their direction.

"They funnel their business to us," said Scott Mitchell, a Applied Information Sciences representative.

Appian, a Vienna-based software company that recently became a Microsoft partner, has created desktop features that link to the new Microsoft Office suite, which also hit shelves yesterday.

Partners that make Vista more useful to businesses will be extremely important to Microsoft during the first year of sales, since analysts predict mainstream adoption may not occur for nearly two years.

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Microsoft's "doing anything they can to accelerate that," said Michael Beckley, Appian co-founder and vice president. "They're trying to give customers any excuse to use the product."

Gary Blatt of Herndon has created a business around the new version of Microsoft's SharePoint software, which helps applications work together. He's created a company, SharePoint Resources, that trains information technology professionals on the programs and then helps place them in jobs.

"Everyone wants to do it, but nobody knows what it is," he said from his booth at the launch event. "I'm trying to hit the masses and get people started."

Getting started is what some IT workers and consulting firms are worried about. Sean Rough, who works for Stanley Inc., an Arlington firm that provides software and network services to federal agencies, attended the launch event to get a sense of how his company can make sure the software it designs for the Army is Vista-compatible. Melissa Nolin, who maintains Montgomery County's computer networks, wanted to figure out whether she needs to replace 6,000 computers before upgrading to the system.

"There are sure to be issues," she said. "It will probably be two years before we move to Vista."

Microsoft has a vested interest in making sure its partners succeed in the local market, Overfelt said. The companies often find and trouble-shoot problems with the software before Microsoft does. Most of the partners have been experimenting with Vista for the past year.

The local economy should benefit from the symbiotic relationship, according to a Microsoft-sponsored report written by market research firm IDC. For every dollar of revenue Microsoft gets from Vista this year, its partners are projected to reap more than \$19.

"We're just the infrastructure that they build on," he said. "They allow us to have an enormous footprint."

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