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Open Text to Support new Windows 7 Features in Host Emulators

Organizations that use Open Text's host access software will be able to take advantage of some of the spiffy new features that Microsoft built into Windows 7, such as jump lists and multiple document preview. The company's Connectivity Solutions Group (formerly Hummingbird) will offer support for these features in the upcoming release of HostExplorer version 14, due by the end of the month.

When Windows Vista launched three years ago, terminal emulator vendors struggled to support the new operating system. The companies rewrote chunks of code to handle the new Windows security paradigm and to ensure that established features, like macros, printing, and hot keys, worked as users expected. When Vista flopped, the vendors weren't able to recoup their costs as expected.

The vendors haven't struggled the same way with supporting Windows 7, largely because the new operating system shares much of the underlying code as Vista. In particular, Windows 7 borrows Vista's security system, and since the work to support that product was already done, it has allowed vendors to concentrate on supporting some of the new user interface enhancements that Microsoft has rolled out with Windows 7.

This is the approach taken by Open Text, which is aligned quite closely with Microsoft and was featured prominently in the software behemoth's Windows 7 launch October 23. Microsoft tapped Open Text for the honor in large part because of the work the Waterloo, Ontario, company has done to prepare its product line for the new Windows operating system. In this regard, Open Text is a leader among terminal emulation vendors.

Windows 7 offers richer rewards to Open Text than Vista did, explains Xavier Chaillot, director of products and marketing for Open Text's Connectivity Solutions Group. "Certification is easier in Windows 7 than Vista," he says. "In Vista, the user interface was new, but it was what was happening behind the scenes that was the most important. In Windows 7, Microsoft offers some good [user interface] features that we can leverage in our products."

Specifically, Open Text expects support for the new Windows 7 jump lists feature will boost the efficiency of HostExplorer 14 users. Jump lists are like little application-specific Start menus that pop out when users left-click on a program in the main Start menu, or right-click a program in the Taskbar area of the desktop. These jump lists are populated with frequently accessed files or programs, such as recently viewed documents.

In Open Text's case, when a user clicks on the icon for HostExplorer, a jump list will pop out showing that user's recently opened connection profiles, and allow him or her to easily select one, as opposed to navigating through the program, as users normally would. This feature will also be available in Exceed, the X Windows emulation software that will also gain new Windows 7 features.

Multiple document preview is also expected to boost productivity for HostExplorer and Exceed users. With this feature, a user will be able to view thumbnails of every open session when he or she hovers the mouse over the HostExplorer or Exceed icon. Open Text says this feature will "eliminate the guesswork and reduce the time spent switching between applications and open sessions."

HostExplorer will also support Touch, the new touch screen interactivity feature that Microsoft is pushing as the next evolutionary step in PC productivity. Originally Open Text planned to support this feature in HostExplorer with a patch delivered after the launch, but that timetable was moved up and Touch will, in fact, be supported with the launch of HostExplorer 14.

Open Text's Host Access Strategy

Open Text has kept a relatively low profile in the host access world since the enterprise content management (ECM) software giant acquired Hummingbird, a fellow Canadian software vendor, for nearly \$500 million 2006. Now, the former Hummingbird division, which has continued to develop the various terminal emulators, X Windows clients, network file systems, ETL tools, and secure data transfer clients, is looking to elevate its profile in the midrange world.

Except for renaming Hummingbird, Open Text has taken a mostly hands-off approach to managing the division, says Chaillot, who has been with the Hummingbird organization for more than 10 years. For example, Open Text did not rename the Hummingbird products, which Chaillot applauds as a wise decision. "Obviously when you have a product such as Exceed or HostExplorer, which has mindshare in the market, you don't want to just scrap that," he says. (Obviously, Chaillot has never worked for IBM server marketing.)

Occasionally, Open Text has AS/400 customers that want to expose data from an AS/400 into the vendor's flagship ECM repository. But these projects are typically aimed at retiring the legacy asset, and moving content to a permanent home on Windows or Unix machines, Chaillot says.

With that being the case, Chaillot answers the seemingly obvious question, "Why would an ECM company like Open Text keep a host access product around?" One reason, he says, is "We are doing the grunt work in terms of transporting the data and getting people to access data on heterogeneous platforms," he says. "We're not so much document management or anything like that. But from the standpoint of allowing users to manage application content, we're the closest thing they have to that world."

While the Information Integration Center can provide ETL-like capabilities that link DB2/400 data with Open Text's ECM, the bulk of product sales to mainframe and AS/400 shops these days are the HostExplorer product, and involve competitive displacements against Attachmate EXTRA, IBM's Personal Communications, and Micro Focus' RUMBA terminal emulators, Chaillot says. He maintains that the componentization of HostExplorer, and its capability to deliver traditional Windows-based emulation and browser-based Web-to-host connectivity gives it an advantage over older competitive products.

And with the launch of HostExplorer 14, one could say that Open Text has a lead in supporting the new Windows operating system and its features.