Why Upgrade?

It seems that every year or so software vendors suddenly announce a new version of their wares and then expect us to all jump to attention and upgrade (and get a discount if you hurry). Many users and business owners ask themselves "Why should I upgrade – the current system is working just fine? If it ain't broke, why fix it?" For many, it feels like being held to ransom: "Upgrade now, or else!"

This begs the question of why we should consider upgrading software that is already working well.

It is a commonly held misconception that the main reason for upgrading software is to get access to the latest and greatest new features. However most users only use a fraction of the features of the current version and don't need or even want most of the newer functionality. So why upgrade?

Security. The number one reason is security.

Every computer in your company is most likely connected to the internet, and that exposes it to the big bad electronic Wild West. There are a lot of bad hombres out there constantly pushing and poking and prodding around, looking for holes and weaknesses in software they can exploit or sell on the black market. In an ideal world software manufacturers would create perfect software that had no security flaws, but common sense tells us that is simply not a realistic expectation. The best way to protect yourself is by keeping your software up to date. If I were a hacker, it would be easy to find out if you were, for example, an accounting firm. It would also not be that hard to guess what software you might be using (MYOB? Xero? Moneyworks? Reckon One?) I may decide it is worth my while to buy some malicious software from a very shady source that exploits a known weakness of an older version of your software. Bingo! You are running an old version 4.6 when the current version is 7.4! Hmmm. What an interesting list of clients you have! As a side note, the reason software manufacturers are so cagey about explaining exactly which security weaknesses have been fixed is so the baddies can't use this knowledge to exploit older systems!

Bug Fixes

Modern software packages contain many millions of lines of code (1 millions lines roughly equates to 18,000 pages of printed text). Again it is simply not a realistic expectation that any system of this complexity could be error-free. Bugs can come from within the software itself, but also from interactions with other software. For example, several years ago I faced a support problem with a user who was unable to start Microsoft Word – it just crashed every time he tried to open it. The problem turned out to be the printer driver! Once I downloaded and installed the latest version of the printer driver, Word started working correctly. That problem didn't take that long to fix, but wasted a lot of time finding the root cause of the problem.

Vendor Support

Lots of things can give trouble with software, especially in the desktop environment where a mix of programs from different vendors are all expected to work and play nicely together on your PC. Getting good support from the vendor is just easier when working with a newer version. Note also that for very old versions the vendor may retire that version and no longer offer any support at all!

Compatibility

It is commonplace for businesses to email files to each other as attachments. If you are using older versions of software, there is an increased chance of your recipients encountering problems due to compatibility with your older file formats. This is a pain and waste of time for everyone, and a poor advertisement for your business! "Come to us! We use old software!"

Staff morale

When you provide your staff with the newest and best tools, you're sending a message to them that they are important, and what they do matters. I meet hundreds of people each year on my training courses and I notice them throwing their hands up in the air in resignation as they tell me "oh we are still on Office 2010 … our company is too cheap to upgrade". As an employer, you need to consider the comparative value of the boost to staff morale against the price of a few hundred dollars for a software upgrade.

I'm not saying that in every case software should be upgraded to the latest version no-questions-asked, just that the decision should be carefully considered and that in most cases the pros outweigh the cons.