

**ARROGANCE OR EFFICIENCY?**  
**A DISCUSSION OF THE MICROSOFT OFFICE FLUENT USER INTERFACE**

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## 1 Introduction

I was writing an e-mail message the other day using Microsoft Office Outlook 2007 and clicked on the button for adding one of my signature blocks.

Presto! Most of my message disappeared! Investigation and testing showed that the behavior was unpredictable; sometimes, only the existing default signature was replaced by the new signature but occasionally the program became confused and wiped out portions of the text as well.

I tried in vain to find a problem report on the Microsoft site about this peculiar behavior. Using my status as a Network World columnist, I was able to get through to a press relations officer representing Microsoft Office products, and had a pleasant conversation about what turned out to be a usability issue. During that conversation, I pointed out that the observed normal behavior -- replacing the previous signature block -- was new to Outlook 2007 and represented what I felt to be a presumption about both the limitations of users (obviously incompetent to delete a redundant signature block) and mental rigidity by the designers, who were tricked by the name of the feature into believing that signature blocks should be used only for signatures. On the contrary, I said, I had long used the signature block feature as a macro facility, storing dozens of predefined texts in the signature list and selecting them at will. In addition, why would it seem reasonable to designers to assume that a signature block would necessarily be replaced instead of added to? Why would they make the choice for the user never to have components of signature blocks stored separately, to be combined at will?

I admitted that macro facilities in Office 2007 were far better than in previous versions of the software suite. We can now easily create and manage blocks of text, favorite headers and footers, and even text boxes and other objects for storage and retrieval.

Our conversation then turned to another irritating aspect of Office 2007: the absence of a backward-compatible user interface. As most readers know, the Office 2007 suite has a radically different user interface, called the Microsoft Office Fluent user interface (UI), in which

- Familiar functions are grouped in new ways;
- Some functions have disappeared entirely;
- The limited user-definable toolbar is restricted to a single roll of symbols;
- Icons in the user definable toolbar cannot be customized; and
- There is no way to revert to the more familiar Office 2003 (or older) interface.

I said that it seemed to me that these limitations of user control were the result of arrogance: the unspoken assumption that users cannot be trusted to make rational choices about new versions of software. In contrast, I ranted, in my systems engineering and programming courses I teach students to listen carefully to user needs and to remember that all of our production should serve as aids to users, not as unwanted controls.

The PR representative was admirably diplomatic and helpfully relayed my questions and comments to the product managers of Office 2007. Mark Alexieff, Senior Product Manager for Microsoft Office responded in detail and with his permission, I am quoting him verbatim in the following section.

## 2 Correspondence with Microsoft

### 2.1 Question: Why did Microsoft's engineers decide to preclude having the old UI as an option for customers running the 2007 release?

The new Microsoft Office Fluent user interface (UI) is focused on making it easier for people to get the results they want when using the Office applications. While the Office applications have increased tremendously in power and added functionality, the core UI has remained substantially unchanged for nearly 20 years. From talking to our customers, it became clear that the menus and toolbars approach to UI no longer did a good job of making application capabilities easily accessible to users. A key principle of the new design as to deliver a “results” oriented interface that maps to what people want to accomplish. An example is that we put 80% of the most frequently used commands within one click of the ribbon. We also wanted to surface some of capabilities that contained within the applications in a more intuitive way. Our customer research showed that much of what customer's expressed interest in seeing in future versions of the product was in fact already available, but was not intuitive or easy to find based on the menu and tools bar construction.

Customer feedback also indicated that rather than including a classic mode that people could revert to, they wanted us to help them move forward, so that is one reason that it was not included. In addition to redesigning the UI, we've added a lot more functionality in the 2007 Microsoft Office system. Faced with the same challenge of making all this new functionality available in the old UI, it made more sense, and would be better for our customers, to focus our resources on doing a great job with the new interface, rather than dilute that effort by implementing new features in two different user interfaces.

In taking such a bold step as redesigning the user interface, we appreciated that it would require some adjustment and a learning curve. Our research showed that for an average user of Office it took 2-3 weeks to return to previous levels of productivity. So far, the response from our customers reinforces that decision as a majority of our customers have provided positive feedback and do not see the new UI as a deployment barrier. That said, as always, Microsoft welcomes feedback on its products from customers to enable it to better meet their needs.

Also see below for some analyst research on the new Office Fluent UI that may provide you with further insight.

### 2.2 Forrester Study on Information Worker Perceptions

*The Microsoft Office Fluent User Interface: Information Worker Perception Of Productivity, Training, And Support Requirements*

URL: <http://www.microsoft.com/presspass/presskits/2007office/docs/UIStudyInformationWorkers.pdf>

#### Snapshot of Results

- 1004 users of Office 2007 programs surveyed in North America
- Users cite access to new features and functions, the improved look and feel, and the ability to create high-quality documents as the primary benefits (more than 88 percent agree or strongly agree with statements related to these benefits). Advanced users and younger users were more likely to “strongly agree” than to simply “agree” with the statements.
- End-users react very positively to the benefits of the new UI:
- 95.5 percent are more or equally satisfied
- 81.4 percent say the new user interface is as easy or easier to use
- 60.4 percent say their productivity has increased and another 33.2 percent say it has stayed the same

- Majority of respondents indicate that within a 2-3 week time period they are able to become more productive on the new version of Office as compared to previous versions
- Majority of respondents are not using any training in their transition – those that are rely primarily on online, interactive training
- More than one-third of respondents think that no training is necessary
- Respondents were asked, “For work that normally takes 30 minutes to complete, how long did it take you to complete in the first 2-3 days as an Office 2007 user?” The average response was 33.8 minutes. When asked: “How long does that same task take you today?” 24.7 minutes was the average response - a 17.4 percent reduction.
- 60.4 percent state that productivity levels have increased
- 61.1 percent of respondents did not call the helpdesk at all while coming up to speed on the Fluent UI, and 60.1 percent indicated they did not use any training.

### 2.3 Forrester Study on IT-Decision-Maker Perceptions

*The Microsoft Office Fluent User Interface: IT Decision-Maker Perception Of Productivity, Training, And Support Requirements*

URL: <http://www.microsoft.com/presspass/presskits/2007office/docs/UIStudyITManagers.pdf>

#### Snapshot of Results

- 749 IT decision-makers polled in North America – all play a role in defining IT strategy, choosing IT vendors and authorizing IT purchases
- More than 86 percent agree with benefits associated with access to a greater number of features and functions, an improved look and feel, and ability to create high-quality documents
- 84.4 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that benefits of new UI outweigh any challenges
- 84.1 percent say the new UI does not represent any significant obstacle
- 80 percent of respondents say end-users return to full productivity within 0-4 weeks
- More than half of all organizations experienced an increase in help desk call volume, but the majority of these characterized the volume increase as “minimal” or “moderate” (81.5 percent)
- More than two-thirds had not added IT staff to support end-user transitions to the new user interface
- 59.3 percent of respondents expect that there will be no substantial change to IT support staff costs during the first six months of deployment
- When asked how long it took the average worker to become as productive as with previous versions, 52.8 percent indicated it took two weeks or less.

### 3 Conclusion

It seems to me that perhaps the arrogance lay in my assumptions rather than in Microsoft's. Contrary to my assumptions, there is evidence that the new user interface is working and users are mostly happy with

it. I do think it might be interesting for Microsoft to do a correlation analysis between the degree of satisfaction in various dimensions and the initial level of competence of the user. In my case, with my obsessive-compulsive personality, I had created highly personalized, ultra-efficient toolbars reflecting my most-frequently used functions and with icons adapted to allow rapid differentiation among similar functions. I still don't understand why the personalized "Quick Access Toolbar" should be restricted to a single row and prevented from relocation. For example, I use a 19 inch vertically oriented screen with more room for the Quick Access Toolbar along one vertical side than across the top of the screen. Perhaps this account of a productive and polite correspondence will stimulate ideas for increased flexibility in the user interface without compromising the benefits described in the research summarized above.

In any case, I was delighted with the depth and promptness of response to my concerns and I congratulate Mr. Alexieff and the Microsoft Office PR representative for their customer orientation and courtesy.

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