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1

Windows 8 Interface

Windows 8 introduces a new desktop interface called the Windows 8 Interface. While it has been designed primarily for use with touchscreen devices, it can also be used with standard screens. In this chapter, we take a good look at the Windows 8 interface.

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What is the Windows 8 Interface?

Hot tip



Windows 8 is basically one operating system with two interfaces – Windows Classic and Windows 8. Windows 8 is intended for use with touch screen devices and Windows Classic for use with standard monitors.

The Windows 8 interface is a new and much-simplified (compared to the classic Windows interface) touch screen interface of the type used in smartphones and tablets. Each installed program, or ‘app’ as they are known, is displayed on the Windows 8 desktop as a tile. While the ubiquitous icon does the same thing on the classic Windows desktop, the main difference is that tiles can display live and constantly-updating content.

The apps themselves are also more streamlined than traditional programs and, accordingly, offer much less in the way of configuration options. The whole setup is designed to be clean, straightforward and quick, and thus much less demanding of system resources. Much of the eye-candy seen in Windows 7, such as Aero and transparent window borders has been removed.

This leads us to the rationale behind the new interface. As two of the primary requirements for mobile devices are power efficiency and touch screen control, its introduction clearly indicates that Microsoft considers mobile devices to be where the future lies. While an updated version of Windows 7 is available in Windows 8, it can only be accessed via the Windows 8 interface. So, while many will want to, either because they don’t like it or simply don’t need it, it will be impossible to completely ignore it.

Compatibility is another factor. Windows 8 will run on multiple platforms including smartphones, tablets, PCs and even the Xbox. This move toward cross-compatibility is one which is intended to establish Microsoft in the mobile market.

Hot tip



In order to serve its primary function of a mobile device interface, Windows 8 has been stripped of all unnecessary visual enhancements and menus.

A key element in this is the SkyDrive App, which we’ll look at later. SkyDrive enables users to store all their data and apps online and synchronize that data across all their devices. As a result, they will be able to log into SkyDrive on any Windows 8 device and immediately access their data, apps and preference settings. Whatever or whoever’s device they are using, it will be as though they are using their own.

There is a lot more to Windows 8 than just the new interface though. As already mentioned, an improved version of Windows 7 is also available. However, we’ll start by taking a look at the Windows 8 interface, how it works and what can be done with it.

Key Elements

The Lock Screen

The first thing you'll see when you start up is the Lock Screen, which shows the time and date, network connectivity, battery power, number of unread emails, etc.



This screen is necessary because Windows 8 is a touch-supportive operating system and so requires a protective barrier that prevents accidental inputs. Microsoft have evolved this basic function by enabling users to customise the screen by changing its background and also by specifying various notifications to be displayed as mentioned above.

Tap or click anywhere on the screen and the logon password box appears.

Start Screen

Having logged on, the user is then taken to the Windows 8 Desktop (also known as the Start Screen). This is populated with a number of tiles, each of which represents an app. Some of these apps, such as Desktop and Video are static, whereas others are dynamic and are able to display updated content in real-time. Examples include the Email, Calendar and Weather apps.

To run an app, simply tap or click its tile. Tiles can be repositioned by dragging to a new location. When dragging a tile to the left or right, a gray bar will appear; if the tile is released on the far side of the bar, it will start a new group. This feature enables groups of tiles to be created.

Hot tip



Many Windows 8 apps can be configured to display updated data in real-time on the Lock screen.

Don't forget



A lock screen is not essential when Windows 8 is used with a standard monitor. Many users will find it useful, though, purely as a means of displaying important information.

Hot tip

By default, the Windows 8 Start Screen is obligatory in that the user has to go through it to access the rest of the system. However, it can be bypassed as shown on page 81.

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Tiles on the Windows 8 Start Screen

Clicking the user name at the top-right corner reveals options for changing the user picture, locking the PC, and logging out.

Menus

At first glance, the Windows 8 Start Screen appears to be completely bereft of user options. There's no Start button, no Taskbar and no Notification Area. Right-click on the Start Screen and there is not even a right-click menu. However, most things are still available – you just need to know where to look. Microsoft in its new “keep it lean and mean” spirit, has stripped out many of the old options and changed the way what's left is accessed.

Options Bar – Right-click an empty part of the Start Screen and you'll see an Options bar appear at the bottom of the screen. This provides just one option – All apps. Click this to reveal miniature tiles for all the apps installed on the PC, and also for traditional Windows applications such as Notepad, Paint, etc.

Right-click on the tiles themselves and you'll see more options appear on the bar. These are contextual and so vary according to the app.

Hot tip

Menus in Windows 8 are much more contextual than in previous versions of Windows, i.e they provide related options.

...cont'd

Right-click on the background of an open app and different options appear on the Options bar.

Charms Bar – The Charms Bar is located down the right-hand side of the screen and, by default, is hidden from view. Hover the mouse over the top or bottom right-hand corners of the screen and the bar will appear as shown below.



Here you will find options to search your PC, share data, access other devices, and change settings on the PC. No matter where you are in the system, these universal options can always be accessed.

The Search function can be used to search for anything on your computer from applications to settings. Just open the Search app and start typing to search for any required item. The Share button allows you to view share options for the running application. Start takes you to the Start Screen, Device allows you to access and change the settings of devices connected to your computer, while Settings provides access to six system options with an option to access further PC settings.

The Charms Bar is context-sensitive, which means that it shows current application-related settings and options. It is also universal in that it can be accessed from anywhere, no matter which application is in use.

Don't forget



To access the Charms Bar, hover the mouse over the top or bottom right-hand corners of the screen. Another way is to press Win + C.

Hot tip



It's not actually necessary to open the Search app to do a search. Simply start typing while on the Windows 8 Start Screen and the app will open automatically.

...cont'd

Application Switch List – The top and bottom left-hand corners also activate menus. Hover the mouse in either corner while in Windows 8 and the Switch List will appear as shown below:



Hot tip



When the user is on the classic Desktop, the bottom left-hand corner opens a Power User menu rather than the Application Switch list.

This shows all apps currently running on the PC down the left-hand side of the screen. To switch to a different app, simply click on it in the list.

Power User Menu – Hovering the mouse in the bottom-left hand corner when on the classic Windows Desktop reveals a small representation, or icon, of the Windows 8 Start Screen.

Hot tip



If you wish to access the Power User menu while on the Windows 8 Start Screen, press Win + X.



Clicking this takes you back to the Start Screen. Right-click on the icon and you will get a menu of options likely to be of use to power users. Don't forget – you need to be on the classic Windows Desktop to see this menu.

Navigation

In its drive for Windows 8 to be all-encompassing, Microsoft has made it possible to manipulate the interface in three different ways: by touch, mouse and keyboard.

Touch

Touch gestures include swiping, sliding, tapping and pinching. The best way to get to grips with these is to experiment. The following, however, will get you off to a good start:

Swipe from the right – moving a finger from the right-hand side of the screen to the left opens the Charms Bar.

Swipe from the left – moving a finger from the left-hand side of the screen to the right opens the Application Switch list, which shows all the open apps and enables the user to switch between them.

Swipe slowly from the left – by performing the above left-to-right action more slowly, it is possible to drag an app out of the Switch List and “snap it” to run side-by-side with the current app.

Swipe down from the top – moving a finger from the top of the screen to about halfway down will close the current app.

Swipe down – swiping down from the top of the screen brings up an option to view all the apps and programs installed on your PC, not just the Windows 8 apps. When performed in an open app, the same movement reveals related options. For example, in the Internet Explorer app, it opens a tab menu that shows a list of all open tabs, plus a new tab button.

Swipe down on a tile – this selects an app and at the same time opens the Options bar at the bottom of the screen.

Pinching and stretching – pinching enables the user to zoom out on the Start Screen or an open app. Stretching zooms in.

Slide left/right – sliding a finger to the right of the screen scrolls across the Start Screen. Sliding it left, scrolls back. The same movements in the Internet Explorer app open the next and previous pages.

Tapping – this action is used to select an option or to open an app.

Hot tip



The old Windows Task Switcher (Alt + Tab) can also be used to show open apps.

Hot tip



In many cases, the touch commands available are dependent on the application in use. For example, various rotational commands can be used to manipulate objects in drawing and layout applications such as Microsoft PowerPoint.

Hot tip

Spinning the mouse wheel while on the Lock screen will open the password box. When on the Start Screen, it scrolls the screen.

Hot tip

The Windows key is usually located at the bottom of the keyboard near to the space bar and often has an image of a flying window on it.

...cont'd**Mouse**

Using the mouse to get around in Windows 8 is no different to any other operating system. The trick is knowing where to position the mouse to reveal the menus and features provided by the new interface. We have covered this in pages 9-12 so there is no need to repeat them here.

Keyboard

Those of you who use the Windows 8 interface without the benefit of a touch screen are well advised to get acquainted with the various keyboard commands relevant to it. In many cases, just as with keyboard commands and shortcuts in general, they are often quicker than using the mouse.

There are actually a whole bunch of these commands and a full list is shown on page 144. The following are some of the more useful ones:

The key that will be used most is the Windows key – see page 146. Pressing this key instantly returns the user to the Windows 8 Start Screen regardless of where they are. It can also be used in conjunction with other keys to perform other actions. For example, Win + X opens the Power User menu as mentioned on page 12, while Win + C opens the Charms Bar.

The Home and End keys jump from one end of the Start Screen to the other, while the arrow keys can be used to select a tile. The Enter key opens an app.

Tapping the space bar opens the Options bar at the bottom of the screen. Win + Tab opens the Application Switch list that allows the user to switch to a different app. While the list is open, pressing the Delete key closes the apps in turn. Alt + Tab opens a horizontal version of the Application Switch list. Note that you must have at least two apps running for Win + Tab and Alt + Tab to work.

Press Ctrl + Tab to open a list of all apps and programs installed on the computer and cycle through the list with the arrow keys.

A rarely-used key known as the Context Menu key (usually located close to the space bar) brings up a menu of related options when pressed in an open app. This appears at the top of the app window.

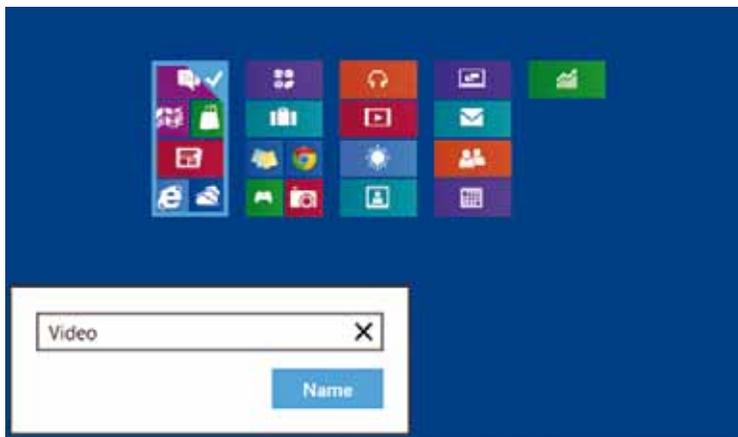
Organization

Windows 8's tiles are quite bulky and take up a lot of screen real estate. Therefore users with a large number of apps will find themselves having to scroll across the Start Screen constantly unless they get their apps organized.

The way to do this is to arrange your apps in order of frequency of use so that the most frequently-accessed are located on the visible part of the Start Screen. This can be done by individually selecting tiles and dragging them to the left side of the screen.

Another obvious user requirement is to have apps organized into related groups. Again, this can be done by dragging and dropping tiles. However, this is a laborious way of moving groups of apps.

A much quicker way is to select an app group and drag and drop the entire group. The way to do this is by making use of Windows 8's Semantic Zoom feature. Touch screen users can “pinch out” and, if you're using a mouse, press the Ctrl button while rotating the mouse wheel. Both actions reduce the size of the Windows 8 Start Screen and the installed apps as shown below:



Touching, or hovering the mouse over, an app group automatically selects the whole group, which can then be dragged to a new location on the Start Screen.

Right-clicking or tapping on an app group activates the options bar, which appears with a “Name Group” option. This enables app groups to be given suitable names.

Hot tip



A new app group can be created by dragging an app to the right until a gray divider bar appears. Release the app at this point and the new group is created.

Hot tip

Unless specifically closed by the user, Windows 8's apps are always open, even if the user has switched to a different one. However, unlike with previous Windows versions, this has a negligible effect on a PC's performance. This is due to the fact that system resources allocated to the app are automatically reduced to a level just enough to keep it running.

Hot tip

It is possible to install third-party apps on Windows 8 – see page 66.

Apps

In keeping with Microsoft's intention of making inroads into the mobile market, the apps created for Windows 8 are very similar to the apps found in tablets.

The first similarity regards the way the apps display content in real-time. For example, there is a weather app that shows a constantly-updated five-day forecast and a news app that displays current stories and images.

The second is simplicity. As with the Windows 8 interface itself, Microsoft has designed the apps to be clean and straightforward with the minimum of extraneous clutter – the app's content is intended to dominate. A consequence of this is that the traditional navigational aids such as toolbars, menus, preview panes, etc, are in evidence to a much lesser degree.

To use Microsoft terminology, Windows 8 apps are “immersive applications” – which basically means they run in full-screen mode. For users with a large, wide screen this is definitely a restriction. However, it is possible to have two apps running side-by-side, with one of them forming a sidebar to one side of the screen – we explain how to do this on page 68.

Traditional Windows programs will still work in Windows 8. However, because they have not been optimized for it, they can only be used in classic Windows, which is where the user will be automatically switched to when they are run. If the Windows 8 interface lasts the course, expect to see the appearance of Windows 8 versions of many current applications.

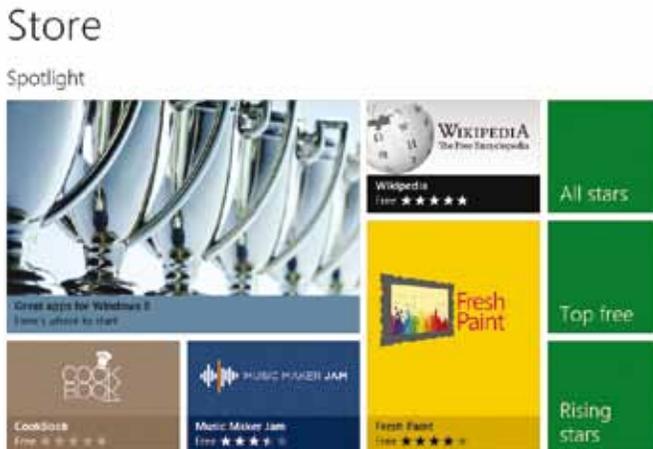
It's important to be aware that Windows 8 apps are different to their classic Windows equivalents. For example, two versions of Internet Explorer are provided in Windows 8 – a Windows 8 app and the classic Internet Explorer. While the latter supports plugins and add-ons, the Windows 8 version doesn't.

Sourcing and Installing Apps

In order to provide as secure a computing environment as possible, official Windows 8 apps are only available from the Microsoft Windows Store. This effectively “sandboxes” them and, as a result, users are much less likely to introduce viruses and malware to their computers via downloaded software.

...cont'd

To access the Windows Store, click the Store tile on the Windows 8 Start Screen. You will then be asked to sign in with your Microsoft account.



Hot tip



Currently, the Windows Store is somewhat sparse in comparison to other app stores. However, this is likely to change quickly if Windows 8 proves to be popular, so check back periodically.

Once logged in, you will find that apps are organized into groups such as Social, Entertainment, Books, Music & Videos, etc. There's also a Spotlight section, along with tiles for Top Paid, Top Free, New releases, and All Stars. In the app category view, you will find filters that enable you to search by various criteria. For example: free apps, paid apps, trial versions, newest apps, highest-rated apps, and cheapest and most expensive apps.

Most sections also have smaller Top Paid and Top Free tiles that show the most popular titles in the section. The Got Apps tile shows all of the pre-installed apps like Weather, Maps, Music, and Photos.

On each app's page there are details regarding its user rating and price plus Buy and, optionally, Try buttons. On the right are three tabs – Overview, Details, and Reviews. Overview shows screenshots, a text description, and Features list. The Details tab indicates the hardware requirements and privacy permissions required by the app.

Once you've chosen and paid for an app, just click the Install button. It will then be downloaded and installed automatically. Once this has been done, the app's tile will be placed at the end of the Start Screen, from where it can be dragged to the desired position.

Hot tip



By using the same account, all official apps installed on your PC will also be available on any other Windows 8 devices you may have.

Don't forget



Most of the time, it is not necessary to shut down an app. Due to the way that Windows 8 minimizes the system resources required by apps that aren't being used, you can, in fact, have a whole bunch of apps running at the same time without any noticeable degradation of system performance.

Hot tip



A quick way of opening the Task Manager is to press **Ctrl + Shift + Esc**.

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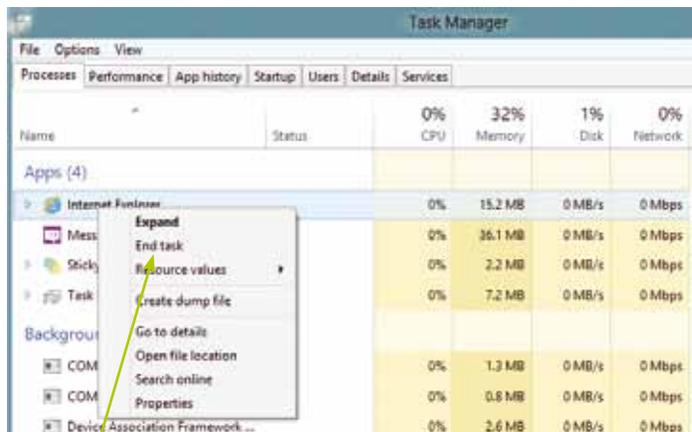
Closing Apps

Closing an app is very simple to do once you know how, but, as many users have discovered, the method of doing so is far from obvious.

Before we go any further with this, it must be pointed out that usually it is not actually necessary to close apps. This is because when a new app is opened, other running apps are switched to a state of suspension in which they use very little in the way of system resources.

However, there may be situations in which it is desirable or even necessary to close down an app. The following are three ways to do this:

- Simply press **ALT + F4** – this kills the app instantly
- Hover the mouse at the top edge of the screen and you will see the cursor turn into a hand. Drag downwards and the app window will be reduced to a thumbnail. Simply drag the thumbnail off the bottom edge of the screen
- Type **Task Manager** and you'll see the Task Manager icon appear. Click this to open the utility and select the **Processes** tab where you'll see a list of all running apps and programs as shown below:



Right-click the app you wish to close and select “End Task”.