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Ericuse165 asked the Windows forum which is better: 32- or 64-bit version of Windows 7.You can run today's versions of Windows on 32-bit processors --a standard that's been around for about 25 years - and on newer, back-compatible 64-bit processors. Of course, everything must have an acronym in this industry, so the Compatible Windows 64-bit standard is also known as x64. That's a good thing, but the 32-bit standard is shortened as x86. If you don't understand history, it's just confusing. Because x64 processors are backward compatible, you can install and run 32-bit processors, as well as 64-bit versions of Windows. Of course, if you bought an x64 pc from the main manufacturer, it almost certainly came with 64-bit Windows preinstalled. You cannot install or run 64-bit Windows on a 32-bit computer. The 64-bit version of Windows has some advantages. While the 32-bit version is limited to 4GB of RAM - and can't really use it all - the 64-bit version can take up to 8TB. While you won't be able to actually install enough RAM (or afford it) for a long time, you can buy a 64-bit PC today with 12GB installed. Speaking of things that don't exist yet, 64-bit applications should run faster than their 32-bit counterparts. But as I write, there are very few native 64-bit applications and these are not necessarily improvements (most 32-bit applications work well on Windows x64). In fact, although Microsoft Office 2010 comes with 32-bit and 64-bit versions on the same DVD, Microsoft recommends installing only the 32-bit version. And, of course, 64-bit Windows has its drawbacks: While most 32-bit applications don't have a problem in a 64-bit environment, tools – which tend to work near the core of the operating system – are rarely as versatile. For example, a program that inserts into the Windows Explorer context menu must be rewritten to work with the x64 version of Explorer. More and more tools today are getting rewritten to work properly in Windows x64. Another problem: Early 16-bit Windows (and DOS) programs, written as compatible with Microsoft's Pre-Windows 95 operating systems, will not work at all in a 64-bit environment. (They will run on a 32-bit version of Windows running on 64-bit hardware.) It's important from a historical point of view – the first time we have Windows operating systems that won't work in the original, IBM-PC version of VisiCalc.But for most people, it shouldn't be a problem. Read the original discussion in the forum. Add your comments to this article below. If you have other technical questions, please send them to me on answer@pcworld.com or post them to the help community on the PCW Answer Line forum. Note: When you buy something by clicking on the links in our we can earn a small commission. Read our affiliate link policy for more information. Microsoft still offers both 32-bit and 64-bit versions of Windows 10. However, whether you're installing Windows 10 or Windows 7, 7, almost certainly skip the 32-bit version and get the 64-bit version instead. The 64-bit version of Windows is also known as the x64 version of Windows, while the 32-bit version is also known as the x86 version. Your computer is almost certainly 64-bit 64-bit computers have been mainstream for a long time. Intel's first large 64-bit processor was the Core 2 Duo, which was released in 2006. AMD released the Athlon 64 in 2003. If you have a computer that you have bought or built in the last decade, it is almost certainly a 64-bit computer. Of course, there are some exceptions. Early versions of intel atom's very weak line of processors were only 32-bit processors. But these were so slow when they were released that it is highly unlikely many people are still using these netbooks and discount pills today. Computers with 64-bit processors can run 32-bit operating systems, but there's really no reason to do it anymore. Even on a 64-bit operating system, you can still run 32-bit applications well. Why install 64-bit versions of Windows 32-bit are limited to 4 GB of RAM, which is a small amount nowadays when even budget computers these days usually have 8 GB or more. If you want to use more than 4 GB of RAM — and you'll probably do — you'll need a 64-bit version of Windows. RELATED: How to upgrade or replace your COMPUTER's RAM In addition, 32-bit programs (even if they run on a 64-bit Windows operating system) can only access 2 GB of RAM. Modern demanding games and professional tools can easily use more than 2 GB of RAM. Given this limitation, it's no surprise that many applications now require a 64-bit operating system. For example, if you want to play grand theft auto v on PC and many other computer games released in the last few years, you must have a 64-bit version of Windows. ZBrush, a 3D modeling tool, discontinued its 32-bit version. Even NVIDIA has stopped working on its 32-bit graphics drivers, so you'll need a 64-bit operating system to get new graphics drivers for NVIDIA hardware. 64-bit versions also have a number of useful security features that 32-bit versions of Windows simply don't. For example, the expanded address space allows you to randomize the address space layout (ASLR) to better protect against attacks on programs. Drivers must be signed unless they are installed in a special boot mode, kernel shield prevents applications from patching the Windows kernel in memory on 64-bit versions of Windows, and Data Execution Prevention (DEP) has more restrictive settings in the 64-bit version. Why do you want 32-bit Windows? There are several important reasons why run a 32-bit version of Windows. If you're using a very old computer with a 32-bit processor, you have no choice. Some manufacturers may only offer 32-bit drivers for especially ancient hardware devices, and you need a 32-bit version of Windows to run them. The 32-bit version of Windows also allows you to run 16-bit software written for Windows 3.1, 3.1, is a feature not found in 64-bit Windows. However, you can always run 16-bit software in DOSBox. Some older programs may also only run on 32-bit versions of Windows if they have used unsafe techniques, such as kernel patching, that have been blocked in 64-bit versions of Windows for security reasons. 32-bit versions of Windows should only be used for legacy compatibility purposes. It's all a 32-bit operating system is really essential for: old processors, ancient hardware devices, windows 3.1 apps, and other apps that need to be updated to run on a modern version of Windows. How to check if you're using 64-bit or 32-bit Windows If you're not sure if your PC has a 64-bit version of Windows or even a 64-bit processor, you can check from Windows. In Windows 10, go to Settings > System > Info. To the right of the System Type entry. If you see a 64-bit x64-based processor message, your computer is running a 64-bit operating system. If you see a 32-bit operating system, an x64-based processor, your computer is running a 32-bit operating system, but is able to run a 64-bit operating system. RELATED: How do I know if I'm using 32-bit or 64-bit Windows? In Windows 7, go to control panel > system and system > security. Look at system type to see if you're using a 32-bit or 64-bit operating system. The Windows 7 control panel doesn't show if your processor is 64-bit efficient, so it's a good idea to perform an online search for the processor name that appears on your system screen to find out if it's a 64-bit processor if you're currently using 32-bit Windows. How to upgrade to 64-bit Windows If you're using a 32-bit version of Windows on a 64-bit processor, there's good news and bad news. The good news is that you can upgrade to a 64-bit operating system for free. You can use the current Windows license to install a 64-bit or 32-bit version of Windows. The bad news is that you need to reinstall the Windows operating system to make changes. RELATED: As you switch from 32-bit Windows 10 to 64-bit Windows 10 on Windows 10, you can upgrade to 64-bit by obtaining 64-bit Windows installation media and performing a clean installation. In Windows 7, the process is similar— just download the 64-bit Windows installation media from Microsoft. Microsoft should make 32-bit Windows harder to find We think Microsoft should make it harder to access the 32-bit version of Windows. Some people may need it, but Windows users should not be able to accidentally install a version of Windows 10 (or even Windows 7) that has so many limitations in modern hardware and software. Backblaze, for example, noted that many of its customers who use the 32-bit version of Windows seem to have installed it accidentally without realizing the flaws. So, when you install Windows in the future, you should switch to the 64-bit version. Image credit: Nor Gal/Shutterstock.com. Whether you're buying a new PC or upgrading an old, old, probably came across a 64-bit designation and wondered what it meant. Read on as we explain what Windows 64-bit is and why you want a piece of this 64-bit cake. RELATED: How do I know if I'm using 32-bit or 64-bit Windows? Starting with Windows 7, Microsoft has made a huge amount to increase the popularity of 64-bit PCs among home users, but many people are not clear what exactly that means (and may not even realize that they've run it). Today, we'll take a look at the history of 32-bit and 64-bit pCs, whether your PC can handle it or not, and the benefits and shortcomings of using a 64-bit Windows environment. A very short history of 64-bit processing, before we start dazzling you with an interesting story, let's get to the basics. What is 64-bit? In the context of a discussion about 32-bit and 64-bit personal computers, xx-bit format refers to the width of the processor registry. A registry is a small amount of storage in which the processor stores the data needed for quick access for optimal computer performance. The bit designation refers to the width of the register. A 64-bit registry can contain more data than a 32-bit register, which in turn contains more than 16-bit and 8-bit registers. The more space in the cpu's registry system, the more it can handle, especially in terms of efficient use of system memory. A processor with a 32-bit registry, for example, has a ceiling of 232 addresses in the registry and thus is limited to access to 4GB of RAM. This may seem like a huge amount of RAM when they were mixing up registry sizes 40 years ago, but this is a pretty awkward limitation for modern computers. While it may seem that 64-bit computers are the new child in the techno-wizarding block, it has actually been around for decades. The first computer to use the 64-bit architecture was Cray UNICOS in 1985, which sets a precedent for 64-bit supercomputers (Cray 1 is visible in the center of the photo above). 64-bit processing will remain the only province of supercommand and large servers for the next 15 years. At the time, consumers were exposed to 64-bit systems, but most were completely unaware of this. The Nintendo 64 and Playstation 2, both seen in the photo above, had 64-bit processors full 5 years before consumer-level 64-bit processors and accompanying operating systems even appeared on the public radar. Consumer confusion about what 64-bit and poor driver support from manufacturers mean to them has seriously hampered the pursuit of 64-bit computers for most of 2000. In 2001, Microsoft released a 64-bit version of Windows XP. It has not been widely adopted, except for those who want to deal with very driver support and many headaches. The following year, OS X Panther and a handful of Linux distributions began supporting 64-bit processors of different capacities. macOS X did not fully support 64-bit for another five years with the release of OS X X Windows was 64-bit-based in Windows Vista, but again it was not widely accepted. All around it was a bumpy road for 64-bit adoption among home users. Two things have turned the tide in the world of PCs. The first was the release of Windows 7. Microsoft has pushed 64-bit IT firmly to manufacturers and given them better tools — and longer lead times — to deploy 64-bit drivers. The second, probably more impact comes from the way PC manufacturers sold their pCs. The amount of memory in your computer is one of those numbers. A computer with 8 GB of RAM seems better than the one with 4 GB of RAM, right? And 32-bit computers were limited to 4 GB of RAM. To offer computers with more memory, manufacturers had to adopt 64-bit computers. Can your COMPUTER support 64-bits? If your PC doesn't precede Windows 7, the chances are high that it supports a 64-bit version of Windows. You can even run a 64-bit version of Windows already, and that's a pretty easy thing to check. Even if you're running a 32-bit version of Windows 10, you can switch versions if you have 64-bit hardware. RELATED: How do I know if I'm using 32-bit or 64-bit Windows? Advantages and shortcomings of 64-bit computers You have read a little about the history of 64-bit computers, and system control indicates that you can run 64-bit Windows. What now? Let's get through the pros and cons of switching to a 64-bit operating system. What do you have to look forward to if you make the jump? Here are some of the huge benefits to go into a 64-bit system: Can you rock radically more RAM: How much more? 32-bit versions of Windows (and other wasps) are limited to 4,096 MB (or 4 GB) of RAM. 64-bit versions are theoretically able to support just over 17 billion GB of RAM thanks to this spacious registry system that we talked about earlier. Realistically, Windows 7 64-bit Home versions are limited (due to licensing issues, not physical limitations) to 16 GB of RAM, and professional and ultimate versions can sway up to 192 GB of RAM. You'll see improved performance: Not only can you install more RAM on your system (easily as much as your motherboard can support), you'll also see more efficient use of that RAM. Because of the nature of the 64-bit address system in the registry and the way 64-bit Windows allocates memory, you'll see less system memory gnawed through secondary systems (such as a graphics card). Although you can only double the physical amount of RAM in your computer it will feel like way more than because of the new system performance. Your computer will be able to allocate more virtual memory per process: In a 32-bit architecture, Windows is limited to assigning 2 memory to the application. Modern games, video and photo editing apps, and hungry apps like virtual virtual they crave large pieces of memory. On 64-bit systems, they can have up to 8 TB of virtual memory, prepare for another large theoretical number. That's more than enough, even the craziest photoshop editing and Crysis session. In addition to more efficient memory utilization and allocation, applications optimized for 64-bit operating systems, such as Photoshop and Virtualbox, are very fast and take full advantage of the cpu and memory space they have been given. You'll take advantage of advanced security features: Windows 64-bit with a modern 64-bit processor takes advantage of additional security unavailable to 32-bit users. These safeguards include the aforementioned D.E.P. hardware, as well as kernel protection, which protects against kernel exploits, and device drivers must be digitally signed, reducing driver-related infections. It all sounds wonderful, doesn't it? What about the shortcomings? Fortunately, the list of shortcomings associated with adopting a 64-bit operating system is getting smaller over time. There are still a few issues: You can't find 64-bit drivers for older but critical devices in your system: This one is a serious transaction killer, but the good news is that it's not as big a problem as it used to be. Providers almost universally support 64-bit versions of the latest operating systems and devices. If you're running Windows 8 or 10 and using hardware made in the last five years, you shouldn't have any hardware driver issues. If you're using Windows 7 or the previous one, or if you're using very old hardware, you might be less fortunate. Got an expensive scanner from 2003 that you love? Too bad. You probably won't find any 64-bit drivers for it. Hardware companies would rather spend energy to support new products (and encourage their purchase) than to support older equipment. For small things that can be easily replaced or still need to be upgraded, this is not a big deal. For critical and expensive equipment, this is more important. You will have to decide for yourself whether the cost of the update and the trade-offs are worth it. Your motherboard does not support more than 4GB of RAM: Although rare, it is not unheard of to have a motherboard that will support an early 64-bit processor but does not support more than 4GB of RAM. In this case, you'll still get some benefits from a 64-bit processor, but you won't get the benefits most people want: access to more memory. If you're not buying bleeding edge parts, however, your hardware has become so cheap lately that maybe it's time to roll back your old motherboard and upgrade at the same time that you're upgrading your operating system. You have older software or other software issues to solve: Some software doesn't make the transition 64-bit smoothly. While 32-bit applications work well on 64-bit Windows, 16-bit applications will not work. If by chance you're still using a really old older app for something, you'll need to virtualize it or Upgrade. RELATED: Why are most programs still 32-bit in a 64-bit version of Windows? At some point, everyone will be using the 64-bit version of Windows. We're almost there. Still, even in these later stages of the 32-bit to 64-bit transition, there are several speed strokes. Do you have any recent experience with 64-bit problems? We would like to hear about this in the discussions. Discussions.