Windows 10 S Vs Windows 10: What's The Difference?

Gordon Kelly , Forbes Contributor, MAY 2, 2017

There's a new Windows in town. 'Windows 10 S' is Microsoft's attempt to strip back Windows 10 and compete with Google's increasingly popular ChromeOS in budget, business and education sectors. The result? Windows 10 S sounds a lot like Windows 10, but in reality they are two very different operating systems...
Microsoft

The Good News

Performance - The Big Selling Point
Microsoft has yet to reveal what Windows 10 S stands for, but 'Speed' would be as good a choice as any. Windows 10 S will boot in just 15 seconds. It is built on the same core as Windows 10 but is more lightweight, running on lesser hardware configurations which allows for both the purchase of very cheap PCs (more later) but also installation on older hardware to bring it back to life.
If you're setting up multiple computers, Windows 10 S can also be installed via USB with preconfigured options. That's a big time saver.

Battery Life
Microsoft also promises Windows 10 S will deliver significantly better battery life than Windows 10. In fact Microsoft claims its first Windows 10 S computer, the 'Surface Laptop', will last up to 14.5 hours on a single charge, and that machine packs a 13.5-inch 1080p touchscreen display.

The key factor is whether this stacks up in real world use. Numerous Windows 10 laptops make lofty claims of 10-20 hour battery life and never get close. MacOS and, in particular, ChromeOS deliver very long lasting, real world battery life and Windows 10 S will need to prove it can do significantly better than its bigger brother.

Wide Compatibility
This is short and sweet: if your computer can run Windows 10, it can run Windows 10S.
Microsoft also claims Windows 10 S will work with most third party peripherals as it has access to the Windows 10 driver database. Then again that is all the drivers you will have access to (more later) so if you need to manually install drivers on your current setup then expect to run into trouble with Windows 10S.

Many Windows 10 Pro Features
Interestingly Microsoft has built Windows 10 S from the core of Windows 10 Pro, not Windows 10 Home.
Microsoft has yet to provide a full list of bundled Pro functionality in Windows 10 S, but you will get Pro features like Azure Active Directory (AD), Mobile Device Management (MDM), business editions of Windows Update and Windows Store, plus BitLocker and enterprise roaming. Exclusions include Hyper-V and Windows Subsystem for Linux.

Low Cost
Unsurprisingly Microsoft really wants users to try Windows 10 S so as a lure the company is offering anyone dissatisfied with it a free upgrade to Windows 10 Pro before the end of 2017. After that time upgrades will cost a very reasonable $50.
On top of this all schools currently running Windows 10 Pro PCs can get Windows 10 S for free and it will include Office 365 Education with Microsoft Teams. Given its lower hardware demands, Windows 10 S PCs can be built with prices starting from just $189, but you will run into other costs...

The Bad News
At this stage it might sound like Windows 10 S is too good to be true, but unfortunately it also contains key limitations which will be deal breakers for a significant proportion of users...

Goodbye Desktop Programs
Yes, just like Microsoft's failed Windows RT platform, Windows 10 S will not run software you have to install from the desktop. Currently that means no Chrome, no Firefox, no iTunes, numerous games and much much more.

Instead all Windows 10 S software comes from the Windows Store. Microsoft rightly points out this should mean software is safer, a big deal for schools and businesses, but currently the Windows Store is a wasteland. Will the likes of Google and Apple repackage their software so it can be installed on Windows 10 S via the Windows Store? That seems a big ask.

Until then you'll be browsing the web using Microsoft Edge and even if Chrome or Firefox does become available, there's currently no way to switch Edge from being the default browser.

Bing Everywhere

Perhaps just as controversially, Microsoft has also announced that users will not be able to use any other search engine than Bing within Windows 10 S (aside from browsing to Google.com). Microsoft says where Bing isn't available, regional variants will be offered, but that won't include Google or any other major Bing search rivals.

Hamstrung Software

While manufacturers can make their software available to Windows 10 S by offering it via the Windows Store, many programs also rely on counterpart desktop software to improve their functionality. For example Google Photos and the Google Photos desktop uploader or the endless number of third party apps from customising and enhancing everything from Adobe Photoshop to Windows Explorer.

As such manufacturers will not only have to offer their software through the Windows Store, they will have to hope makers of popular third party add-ons do so as well.

Bottom Line: Windows RT 2.0 - For Better Or Worse

A crude way to describe Windows 10 S is Windows 10 restricted to the Windows Store. It's also important to note Windows RT failed not because it was bad, but because it was ahead of its time. Five years later Microsoft will be desperately hoping the success of Cloud-based ChromeOS means the time for Windows 10 S has finally come.

But it's a difficult sell. ChromeOS has a singular vision: a Chrome browser-based platform with support for Android apps. It's a clean, simple alternative to Windows which is very fast, long lasting, secure and cheap. By contrast Windows 10 S is more confusing. It's called 'Windows 10 S' for starters which sounds a lot like 'Windows 10' and it does both more and less than Windows 10 Home.

As it stands Windows 10 S is going to have to deliver outstanding real world performance and battery life over Windows 10 to make users pick it. And even then Microsoft needs to popular the Windows Store to try and somehow compete with Google Play.

Get it right and Microsoft will have have a foothold on what will ultimately be the future of operating systems and the tool to combat a fast growing rival. Get it wrong and users will find their own adjectives for the 'S'...