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**By Mark W. Kaelin**

## Takeaway

No matter how well designed an operating system purports to be, there are always to tweak it for performance. Here are 10+ tweaks, tricks, and hacks you can apply to Microsoft Windows Vista to make it run like a champion and perform to your particular specifications.

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Every operating system could stand some tweaking. No matter how many developers you throw at an OS as complicated as Windows Vista, power users will always find something they can modify or hack to make it run faster, or better, or just differently. Here are just a few of the Windows Vista tweaks, tricks, and hacks we have discovered so far.

### 1: Add the Run command to the Start Menu

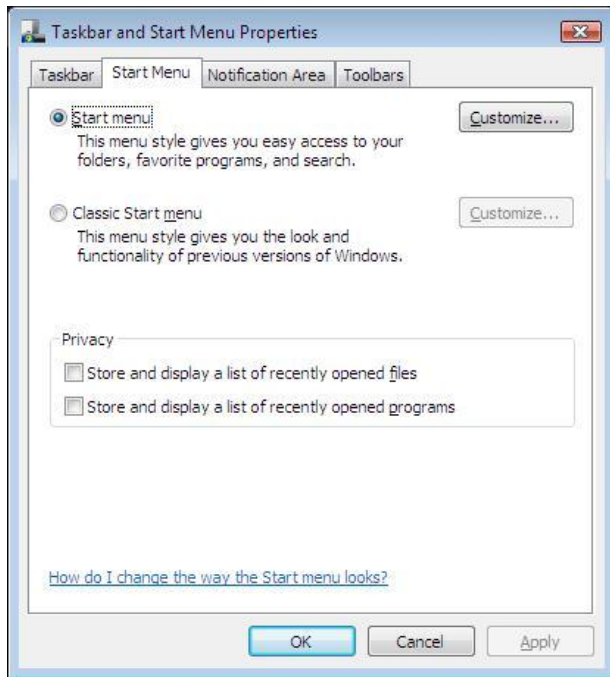
Beginning way back with the release of Windows 1.0, Microsoft has been all about the GUI interface (more or less effectively). But sometimes you just want to run a program without having to navigate the GUI maze of menus and folders. Windows Vista, by default, does not include the Run command on the Start Menu. This was a common and favorite feature of Windows XP.

To add the Run command back to the Vista Start Menu, follow these steps:

1. Right click the Taskbar in an open area
2. Click on Properties

Click on the Start Menu tab (See **Figure A**)

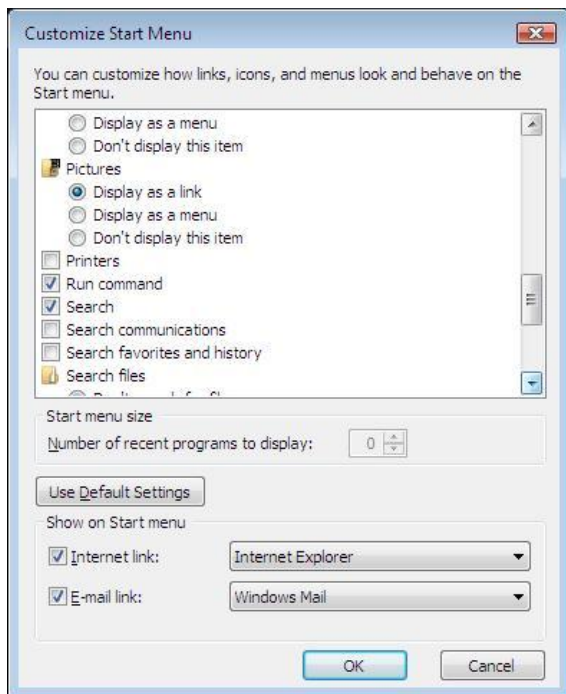
Figure A



Taskbar and Start Menu Properties

3. Click the Customize button to get to the Customize Start Menu  
Scroll down the list until you find the Run command checkbox and check it (See **Figure B**).
4. Click OK and the Run command will now appear on the Start Menu.

Figure B



Customize Start Menu

## 2. Disable the Welcome Center and Sidebar

The Windows Vista default setting is to show the Welcome Center on startup. While the Welcome Center is mildly interesting the first time you see it, you will quickly tire of it appearing every time you boot your Vista PC. This behavior is easily changed by unchecking the Run a Startup button located at the bottom of the Welcome Center as shown in **Figure C**.

**Figure C**



### Welcome Center

Similarly, the Vista Sidebar is also on by default. While some users will find the Sidebar and its widgets useful, many will desire the desktop real estate and underlying resources for other more productive uses. You can turn the Sidebar off by:

1. Right clicking the Windows Sidebar icon in the system tray
2. Click Properties
3. Uncheck the Start Sidebar when Windows starts checkbox (See **Figure D**)
4. Click OK

Figure D



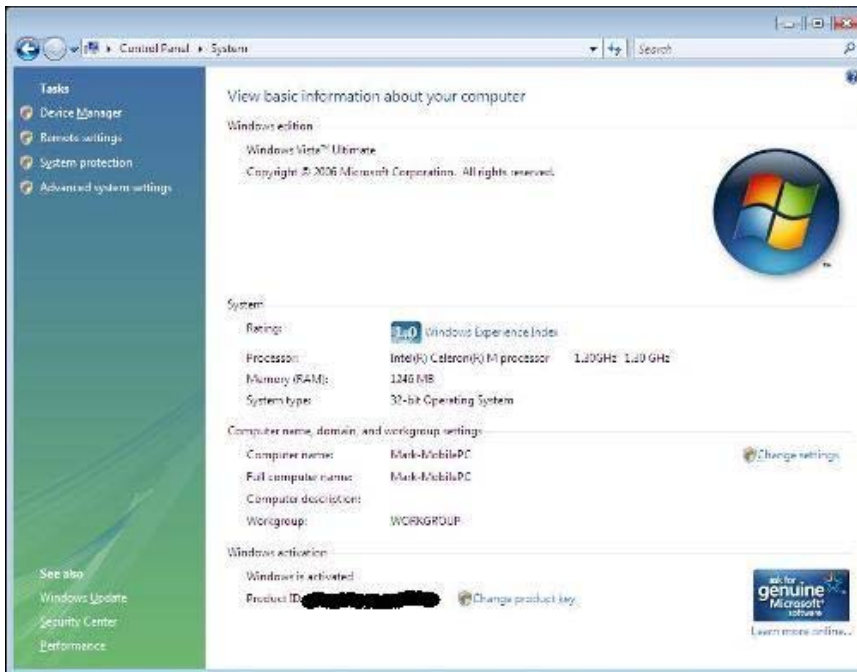
Windows Sidebar Properties

### 3: Change the Product Key

A Windows Vista installation disk essentially has all of the various editions of Vista included on that one disk. Which version gets installed is dependent on what product key you enter during the installation process. At some point you may want to upgrade your current version to a version with more bells and whistles, which would require a new Product Key.

Or you may want to Activate your Windows Vista under a different Product Key for some reason. The easiest way to change your Product Key is through the System applet in the Control Panel. (See **Figure E**)

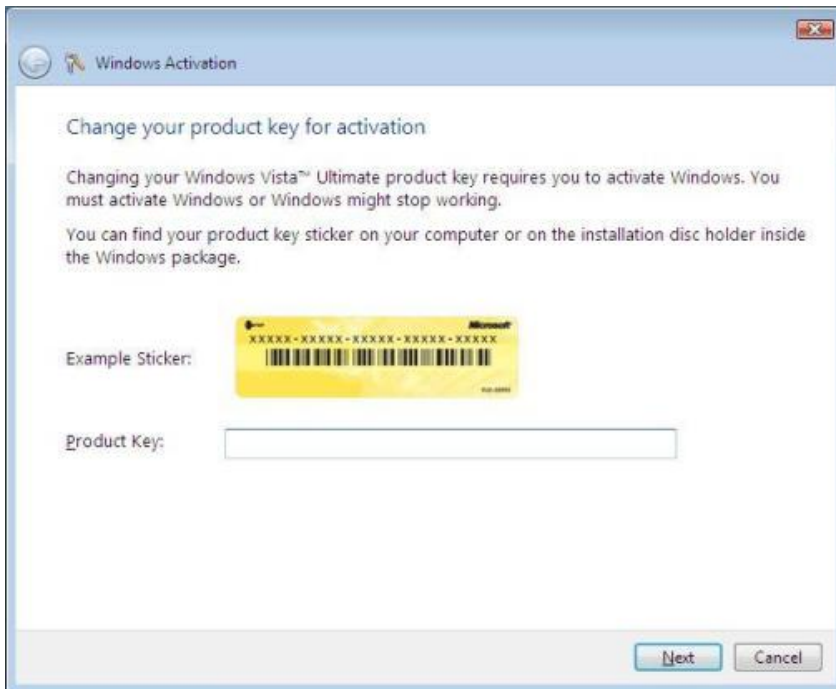
Figure E



*System applet*

Under the Windows Activation section there is a link: Change Product Key. Clicking that link brings up the screen shown in **Figure F** where you can enter in a different Product Key.

Figure F



*Windows Activation*

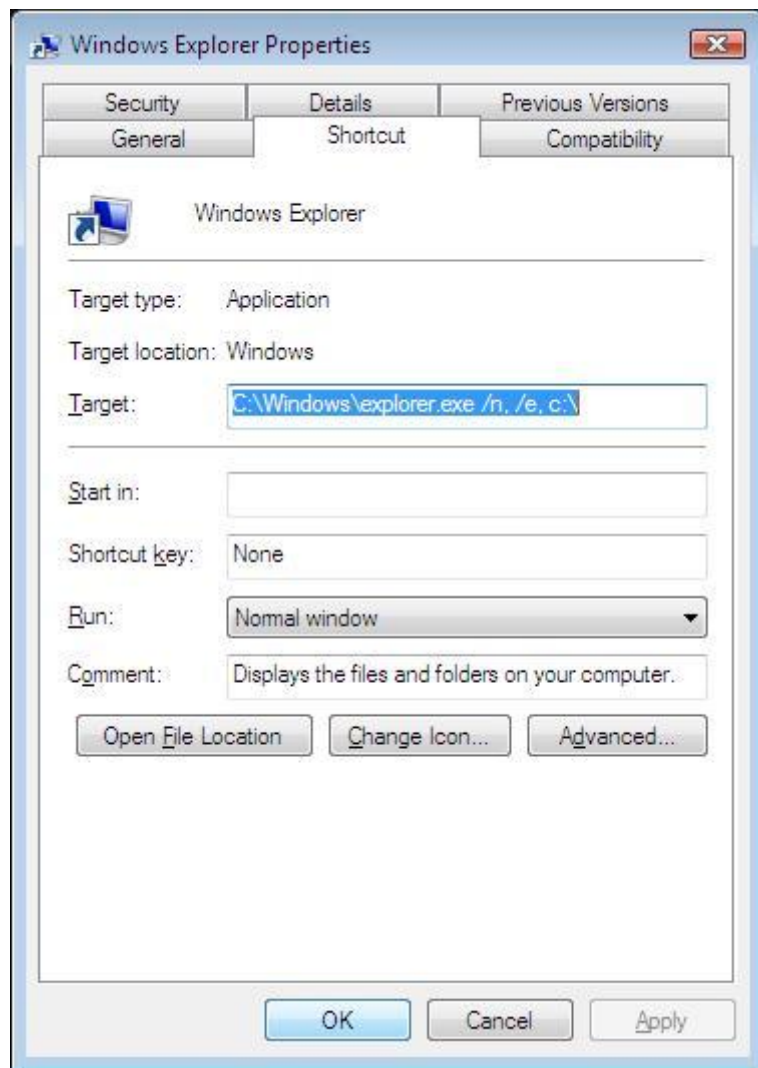
## 4: Start Windows Explorer at somewhere other than documents

While Windows Vista has desktop search that will theoretically allow you the option of merely typing in a location on your hard disk to get an Explorer view, some users will undoubtedly prefer to use Windows Explorer. By default, Windows Explorer in Vista shows you the files located in the user Documents folder. Follow these steps to have Windows Explorer start in a different folder:

1. Copy the Windows Explorer shortcut, usually found in the Start Menu under Accessories, to the Desktop.
2. Right click the shortcut and click properties.

Click on the Shortcut tab to get the window shown in **Figure G**.

**Figure G**



*Windows Explorer Properties*

3. Change the Target field to the desired location.

For example, to have Windows Explorer start at C:\ type in"  
C:\Windows\explorer.exe /n, /e, c:\

4. Click OK

## 5: Privacy tweak

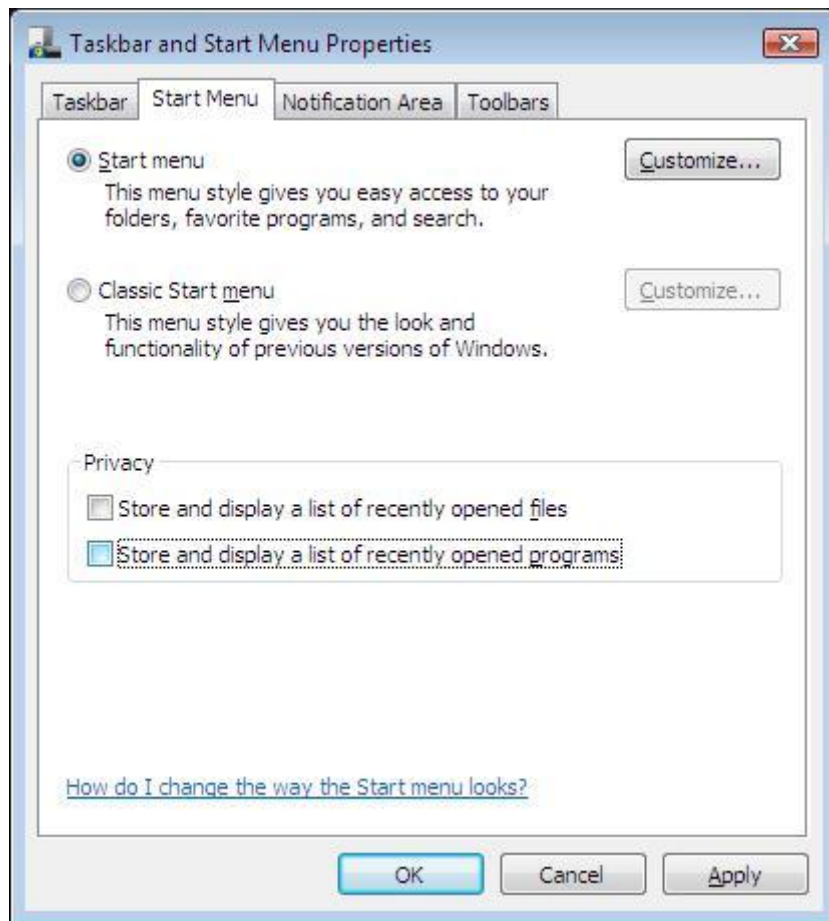
As a convenience, Windows Vista by default saves and displays a list of recently opened files and programs on the Start Menu. Ostensibly, this is supposed to make it easier to find a file or program. However, many users would prefer that information to remain hidden. Here is how to turn it off:

1. Right click the Taskbar and click Properties on the resulting menu
2. Click the Start Menu tab

Uncheck the checkboxes under Privacy (See **Figure H**)

3. Click OK

**Figure H**

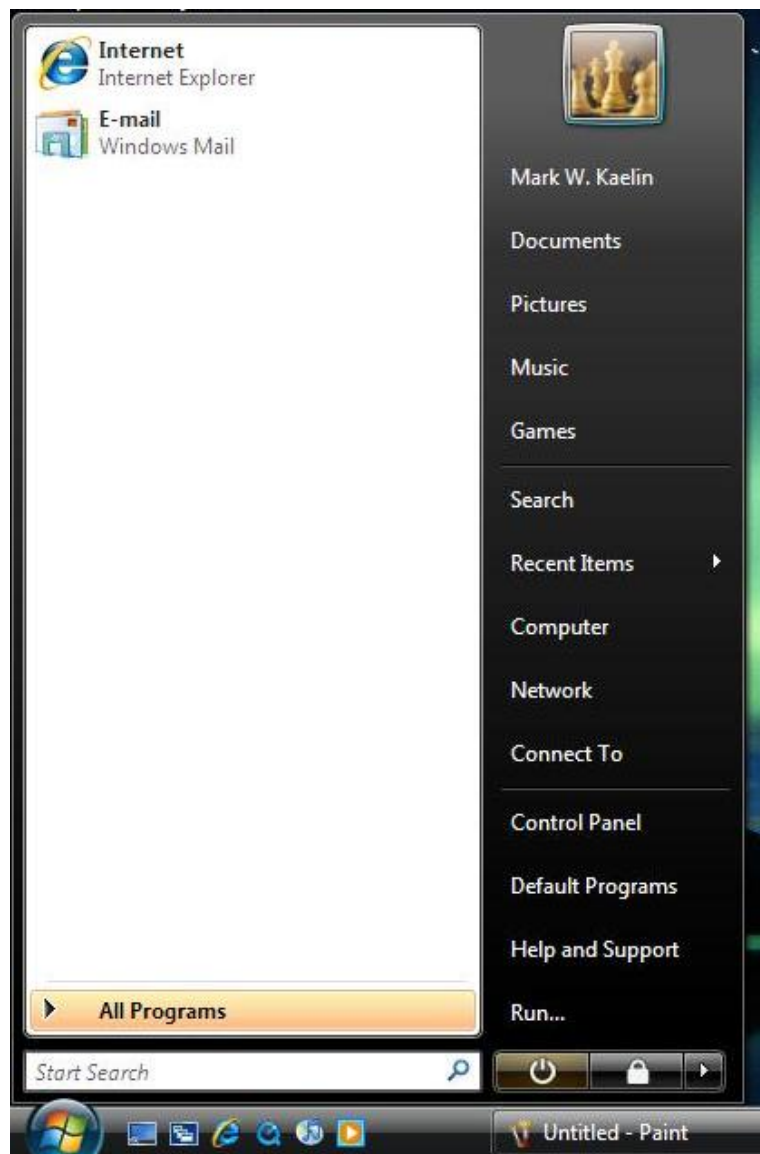


*Privacy settings*

## 6: Smaller icons on Start Menu

The icons located on the Windows Vista Start Menu default to large (**Figure I**).

**Figure I**

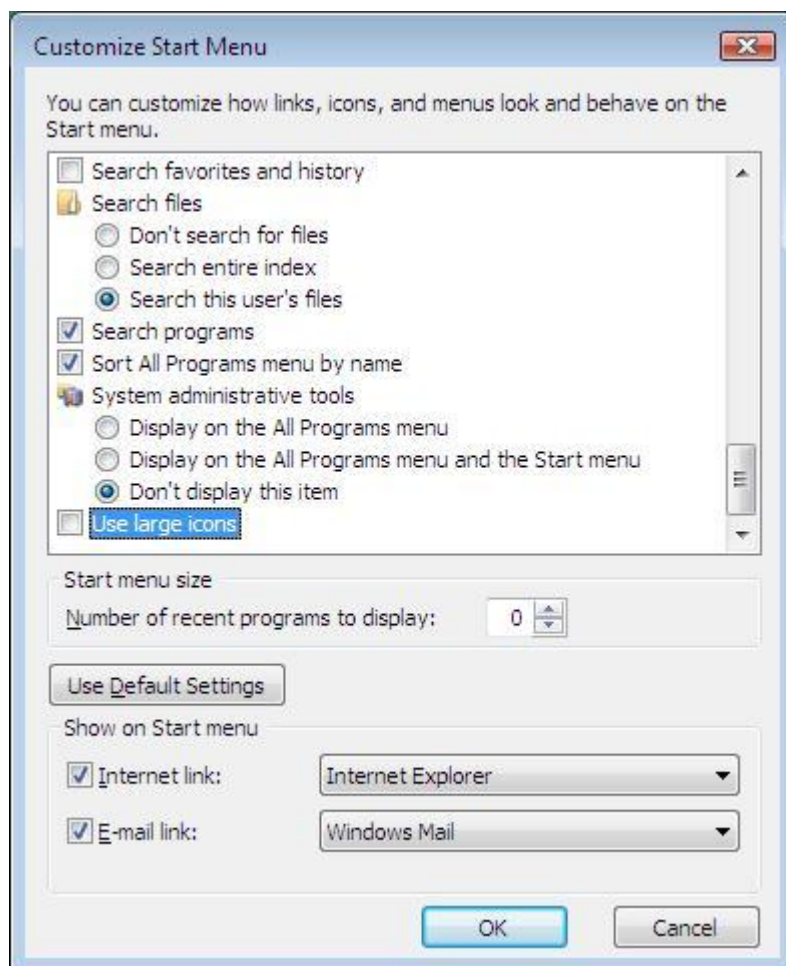


### *Large icons*

For many users, the personal preference will be for those icons to be much smaller. Here is how:

1. Right click the Taskbar and click on Properties
2. Click the Start Menu tab
3. Click the Customize button
4. Scroll down to the bottom of the list (See **Figure J**)
5. Uncheck the Use large icons checkbox
6. Click OK twice

Figure J



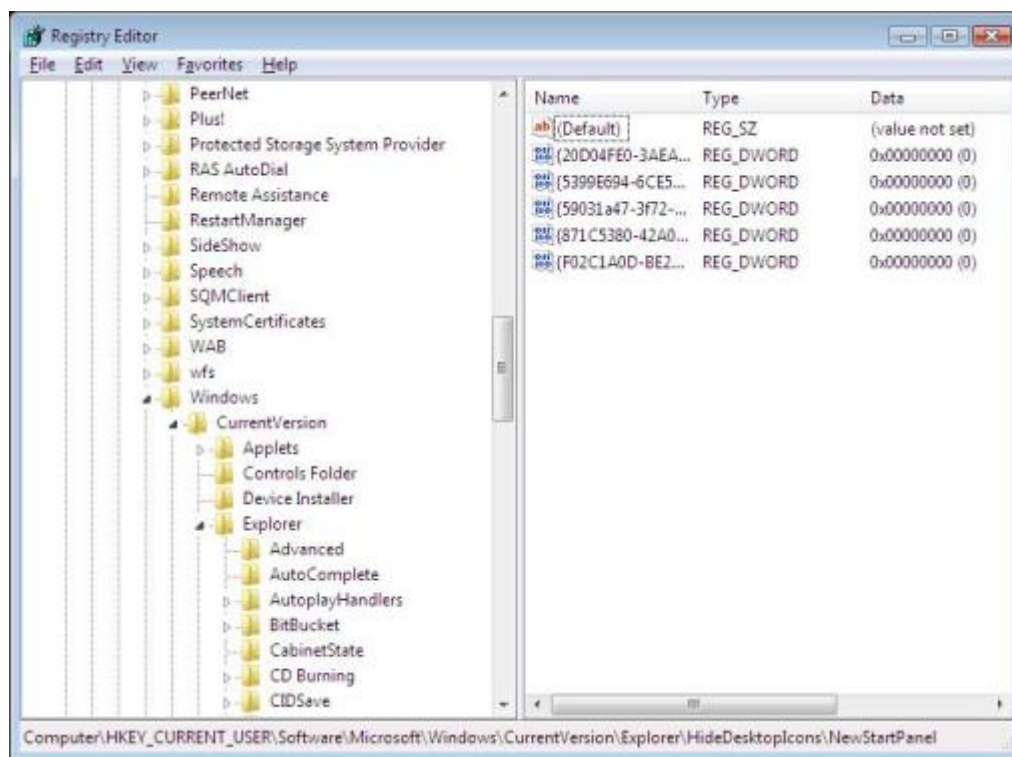
No more large icons

## 7. Add Internet Explorer to the Vista Desktop

For some reason known only to the Windows Vista development team, there is no easy option to add the Windows Explorer icon to the Vista Desktop. You can add Computer, Recycle Bin, and the Control Panel --- perhaps someone can explain that to us. In the meantime, if you want to add Internet Explorer you can do it with a Registry hack. *Before editing the Windows Registry it is always advisable to make a backup of the Registry file.*

1. Click the Start button
2. Open the Run dialog box (or type regedit in to the search box on the Start Menu)
3. Type in regedit and press Enter
4. Navigate to the following registry key:  
HKEY\_CURRENT\_USER\Software\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\Explorer\HideDesktopIcons\NewStartPanel
5. Create a new DWORD 32-bit by right clicking in the key area (See **Figure K**)
6. Copy this as the key name including the brackets:  
{871C5380-42A0-1069-A2EA-08002B30309D}
7. Close regedit
8. Right click on the Desktop and click the Refresh menu entry --- Internet Explorer should now appear.

Figure K



Regedit Internet Explorer

## 8: Change Security Center notifications

One of the most often leveled criticisms of Windows has been its lack of security. To overcome that perception Microsoft had programmed Vista to complain loudly and often if it discovers your malware, firewall or virus protection software is off or requires maintenance. For many users, the constant badgering to update your virus definitions is more annoying than effective. To calm Vista down a bit you can change the way you are notified of potential lax security.

Open the control panel and click the Windows Security Center as shown in **Figure L**.

**Figure L**



*Windows Security Center*

Click the link *Change the way Security Center alerts me* to reach the dialog box shown in **Figure M**. Choose your preference for notification

**Figure M**



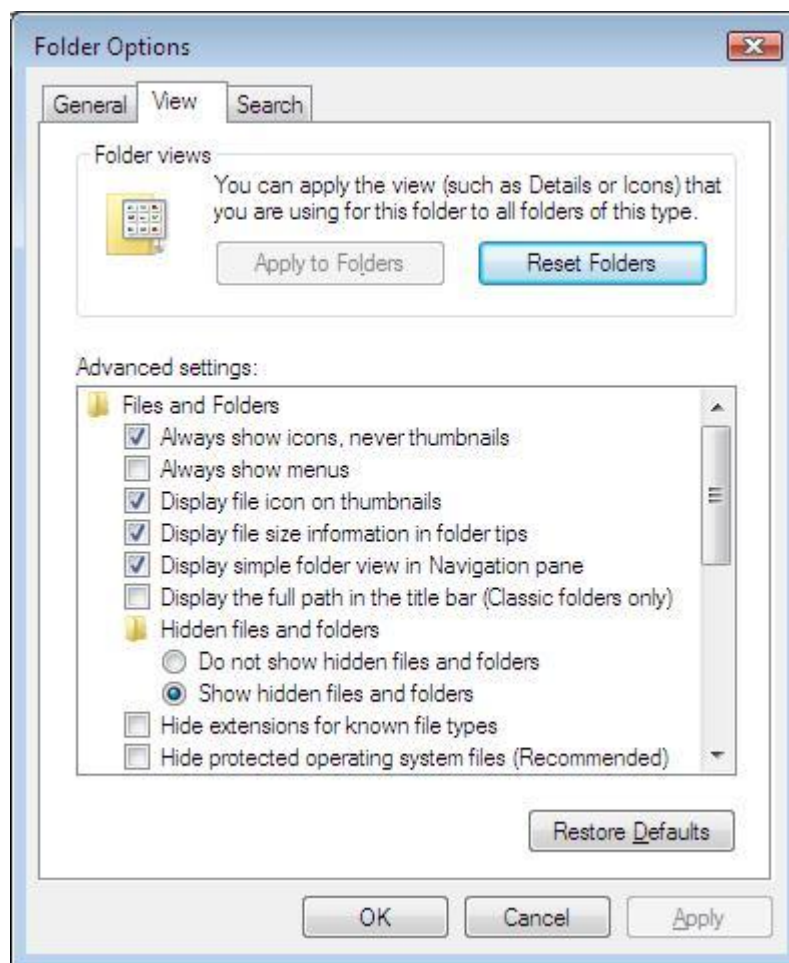
*Chose your preference*

## 9: Set Folder options

One of the first things experienced users change when they get a new Windows computer is change the Folder View options to a preferred setting. Windows Vista is no exception to this rule.

1. Open the Control Panel and click on the Folder Options icon
2. Click on the View tab (See **Figure N**)

**Figure N**



*Folder options*

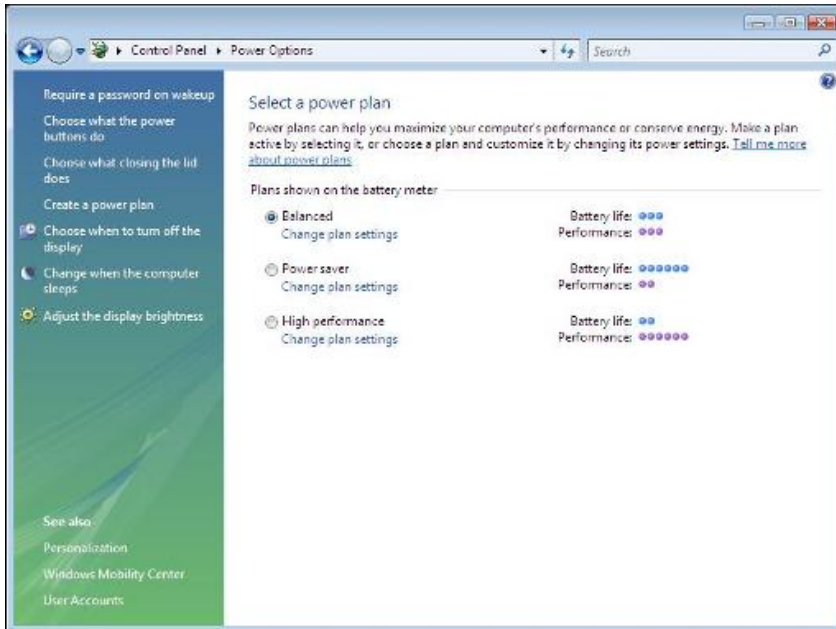
3. Check or uncheck your folder preferences --- some suggestions:
  - a. Check show hidden files and folders
  - b. Uncheck Hide extensions for known file types
  - c. Uncheck protected operating system files

## 10: Adjust power settings

By default, Windows Vista sets the power options to what it calls a "Balanced" plan. While for many users this plan will be adequate, there are many who will want to make adjustments. For laptop users specifically, settings can vary greatly when operating on battery power versus plugged into an outlet. To adjust power settings:

Open the Control Panel and then click the Power Options icon (See **Figure O**)

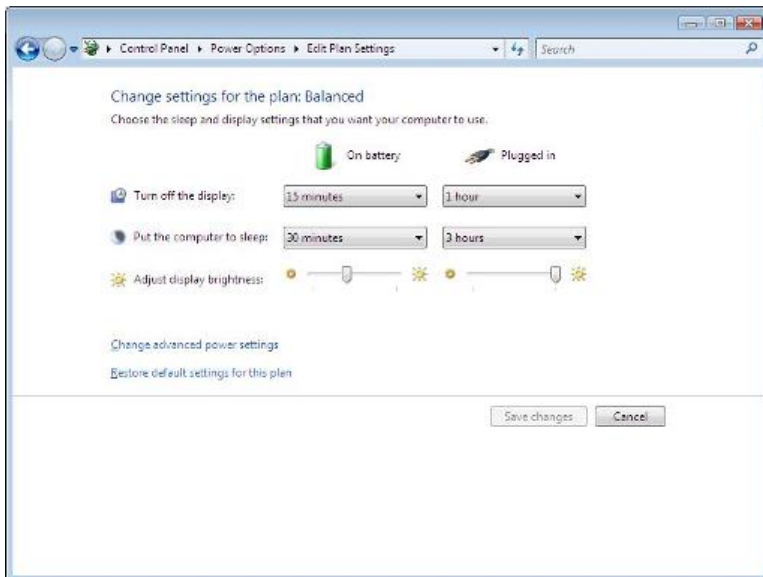
**Figure O**



### *Power Options*

Click on the Change Plan Settings under one of the default plans to make changes (See **Figure P**)

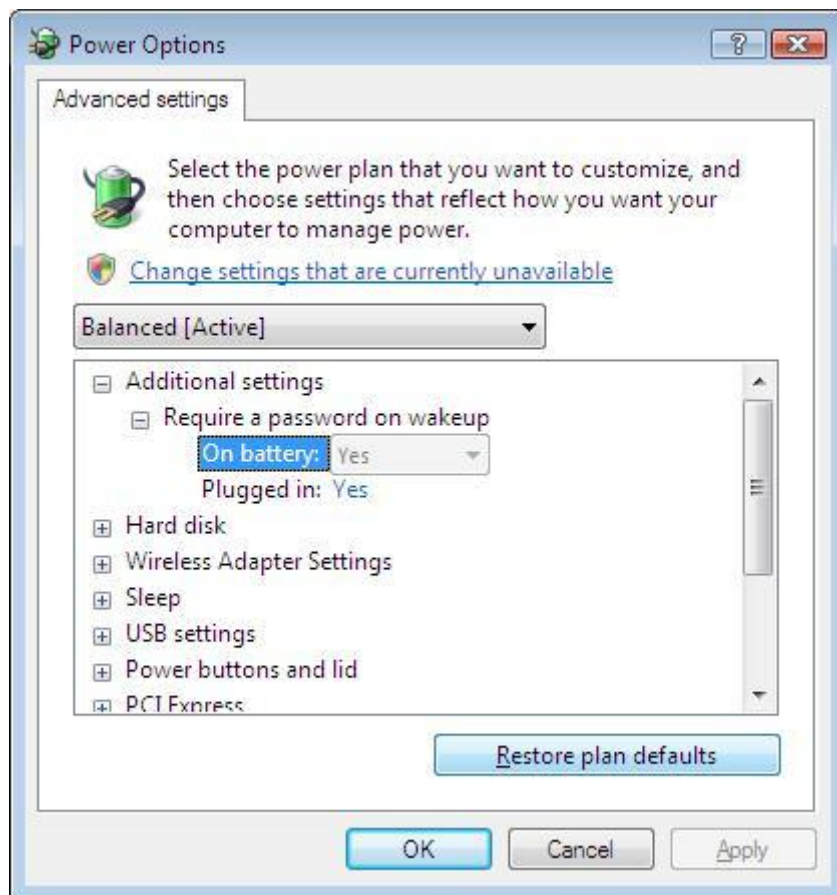
**Figure P**



### *Power settings*

For additional fine tuning click Change advanced power settings (See **Figure Q**)

**Figure Q**



*Advanced power settings*

## 11: Reduce Desktop Icons

By default, the Windows Vista Aero GUI uses what it classifies as "Medium" icons on the Desktop. Medium in this case is really quite large. (There is also a Large icon setting, but we won't go there.) To bring the icons back to a less eye-popping size:

1. Right click on the Desktop
2. Choose the View menu item
3. Change to Classic Icons (**Figure R**)

Figure R



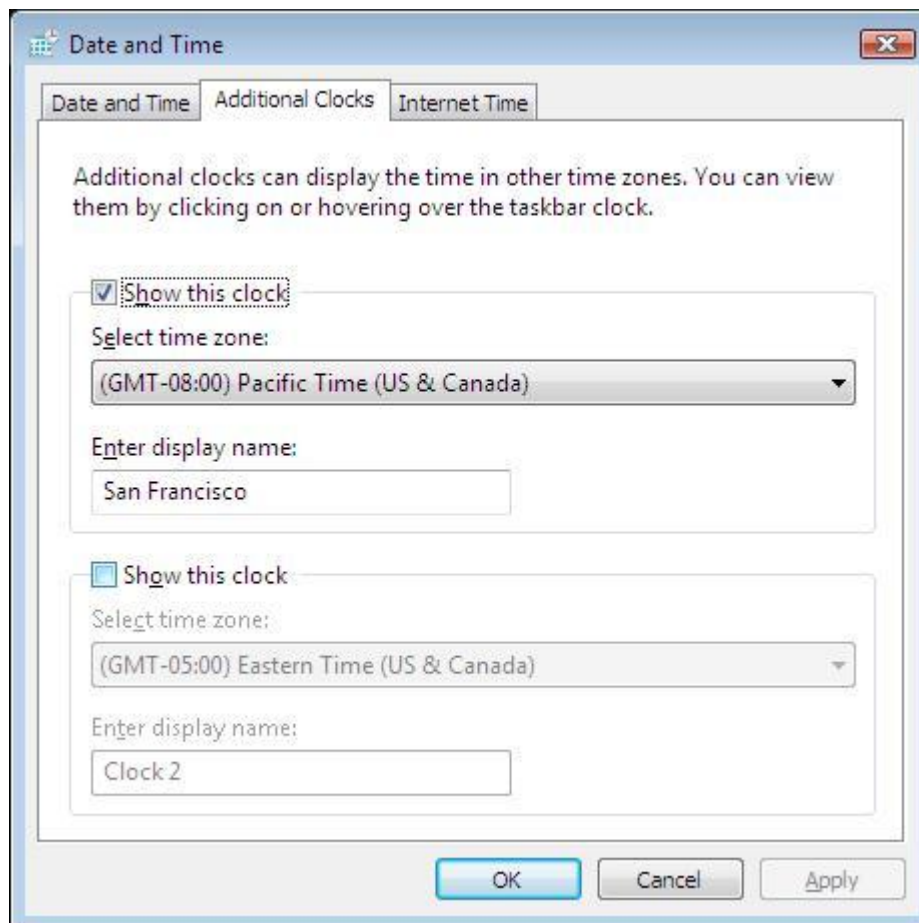
Classic

## 12 Add another time zone

For many of us working away from home offices at satellite offices, home or on the road, knowing the time across various time zones can be a necessary evil. Windows Vista will allow you to keep time in two additional time zones to the machine time.

1. Right click on the time display located in Taskbar System Tray
2. Select the Adjust Date/Time menu item
3. Click on the Additional Clocks tab (See **Figure S**)

**Figure S**



### *Add clocks*

4. Choose a time zone
5. Click the checkbox next to Show this clock
6. Click OK

Now when you mouse over the time in the Taskbar System Tray you will get the time in your chosen time zones.

## Additional resources

- TechRepublic's [Downloads RSS Feed](#) **XML**
- Sign up for TechRepublic's [Downloads Weekly Update](#) newsletter
- Sign up for TechRepublic's [Windows Vista Report](#) newsletter
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## Version history

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