Setting up a virtual home lab

I Built a Free Virtual IT Lab at Home. Here's How

Back in the early 2000s, setting up an IT lab meant buying expensive physical servers or digging up old computers to repurpose. It was a hands-on and valuable experience, but not the easiest or fastest route.

Today, with the power of open-source tools and virtualisation, anyone can build a fully functional IT lab right from their own computer and that is exactly what I did.

I built a completely free virtual IT lab from scratch on my home machine using open-source software. It's fast, flexible, and a great way to gain hands-on IT and cybersecurity skills without needing a stack of hardware.

Let me walk you through how I did it and how you can, too.

Index

Virtualization Overview

So, what exactly is virtualization?
In simple terms, virtualization is the process of emulating a computer system. Instead of needing multiple physical machines, you can create several virtual machines (VMs) that run as software on your main computer.

Imagine your main computer is the host, the one doing all the work. On this host, you can run one or more guest virtual machines, each acting like its own separate computer with its own operating system and settings.

Think of it as running a full computer *inside* your existing one, like opening up a new world on your desktop!

Virtual Machines — Your Own Computers Within a Computer

Virtual machines (VMs) behave just like real computers, but they run as software inside your main system. That means you can start, restart, shut down, and even install operating systems and applications, just like you would on a physical machine.

Because of this flexibility, virtual machines are ideal for creating your own IT lab, giving you a safe space to test, learn, and build without needing extra hardware.

Free Virtualisation Software

There's a wide range of virtualisation software out there, and it can get a bit overwhelming trying to choose the "best" one.

Here's the truth: there is no single "best" virtualisation software, it really depends on your operating system and your specific needs.

For this project, I’m using Oracle VM VirtualBox, mainly because it works seamlessly on both Windows and Linux systems. However, feel free to use any other virtualisation tool you prefer most of the setup steps will be very similar across platforms.

Downloading Your Operating System ISO(s)

While it's technically possible to install from a physical disc, the most common and convenient method is to use an **ISO file** a digital copy of the OS installation media.

To find an ISO file, the easiest approach is to search online. For example, if you’re looking to install **Window Server**, simply search:

"Window Server ISO Download"

Make sure to download ISOs from official or trusted sources to avoid corrupted or unsafe files. Some operating systems like Ubuntu, Fedora, or Windows Evaluation Editions provide free, official ISOs on their websites.

You should ONLY download ISOs from official websites. This means you shouldn't download Windows Server from a website like "sneakyfreecdkeys.com"...

I will still provide links to the most common operating systems that people want to install below. Keep in mind if the link is dead you can just run a quick google search and easily find the download.

Windows Server

Windows 10 (requires a valid Windows 10 license to download)

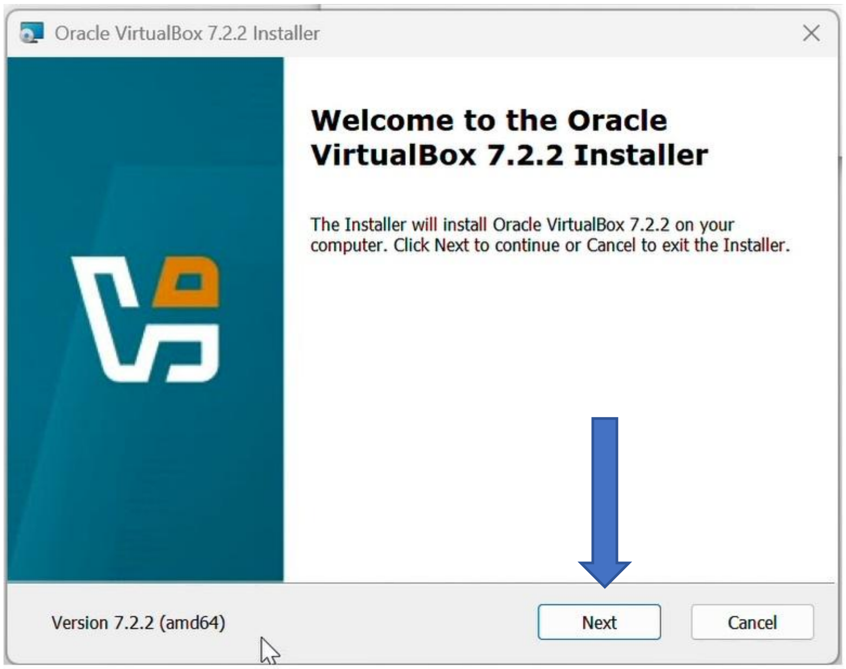
Windows XP

Ubuntu

Kali Linux

Downloading and Installing VirtualBox

Download Oracle VM VirtualBox by clicking here. Once the download is completed, I launched the



Oracle VirtualBox 7.2.2 Installer

Welcome to the Oracle VirtualBox 7.2.2 Installer

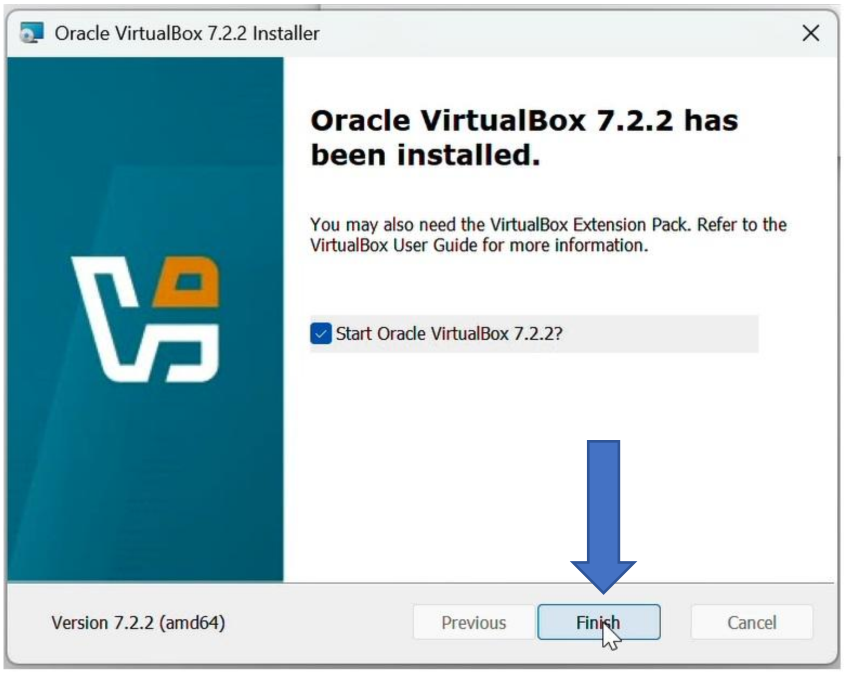
The Installer will install Oracle VirtualBox 7.2.2 on your computer. Click Next to continue or Cancel to exit the Installer.

Version 7.2.2 (amd64)

installation

I went through the installation using all the default options.

Whenever you're prompted with a yes/no question, simply choose "Yes" to continue.



Oracle VirtualBox 7.2.2 Installer

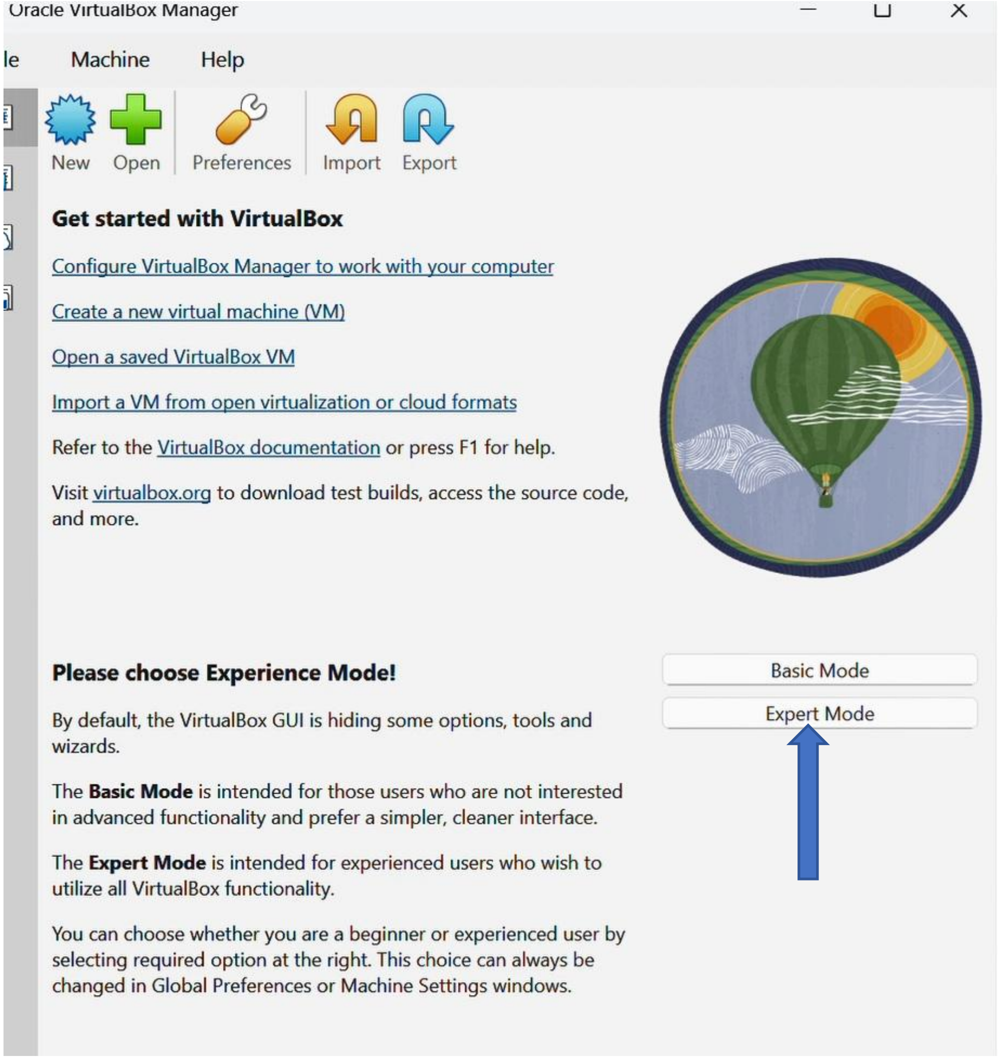
Oracle VirtualBox 7.2.2 has been installed.

You may also need the VirtualBox Extension Pack. Refer to the VirtualBox User Guide for more information.

☑ Start Oracle VirtualBox 7.2.2?

Version 7.2.2 (amd64)

Click Finish and launch VirtualBox.



Get started with VirtualBox

Configure VirtualBox Manager to work with your computer

Create a new virtual machine (VM)

Open a saved VirtualBox VM

Import a VM from open virtualization or cloud formats

Refer to the VirtualBox documentation or press F1 for help.

Visit virtualbox.org to download test builds, access the source code, and more.

Please choose Experience Mode!

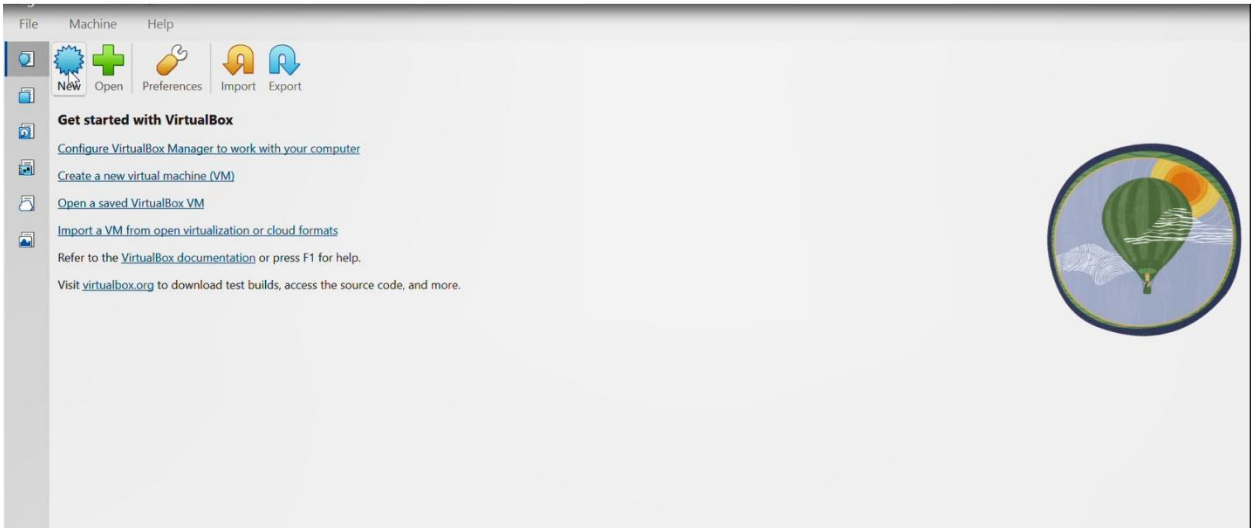
By default, the VirtualBox GUI is hiding some options, tools and wizards.

The **Basic Mode** is intended for those users who are not interested in advanced functionality and prefer a simpler, cleaner interface.

The **Expert Mode** is intended for experienced users who wish to utilize all VirtualBox functionality.

You can choose whether you are a beginner or experienced user by selecting required option at the right. This choice can always be changed in Global Preferences or Machine Settings windows.

This will launch the new VM window. Click the *Expert Mode* button to proceed. Don’t worry, it doesn’t make the process harder. It simply streamlines the setup by reducing the number of steps.



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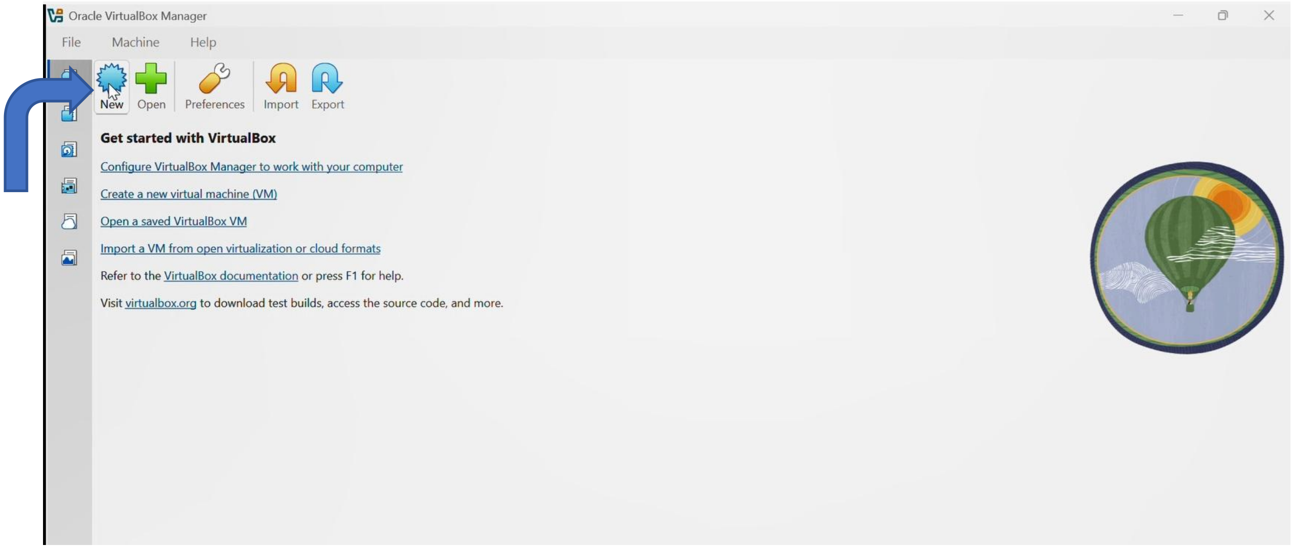
Creating a Virtual Machine

Now that we've decided on the type of virtual network to use, it's time to create a Virtual Machine (VM). You can do this by clicking the "New" button in the VirtualBox Manager.



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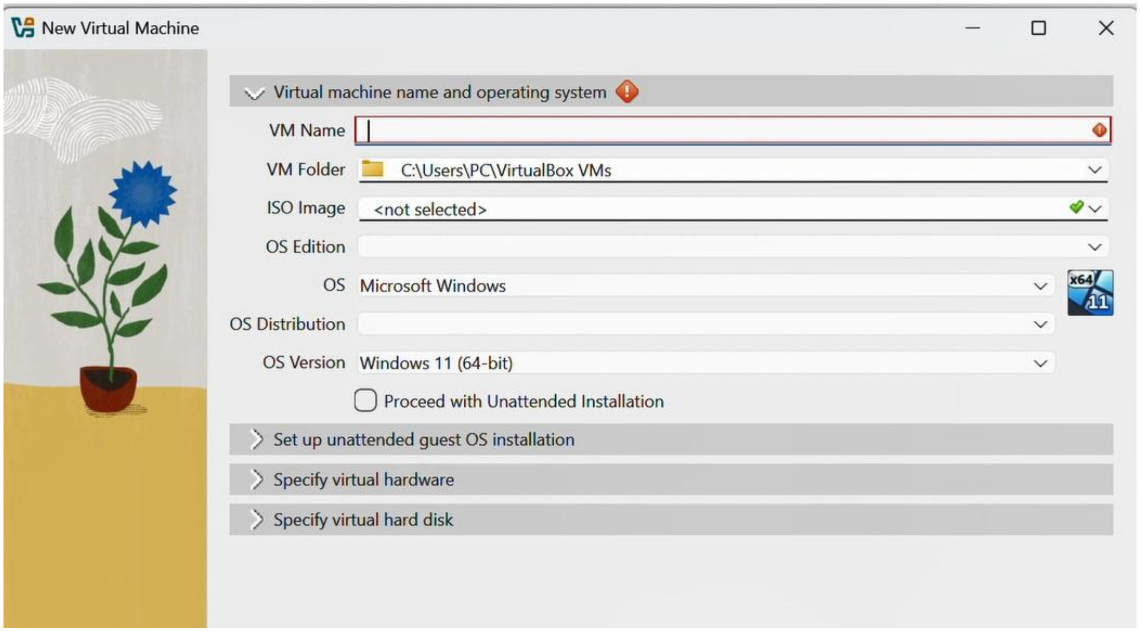


Virtual machine name and operating system

VM Name

VM Folder C:\Users\PC\VirtualBox VMs

ISO Image <not selected>

OS Edition

OS Microsoft Windows

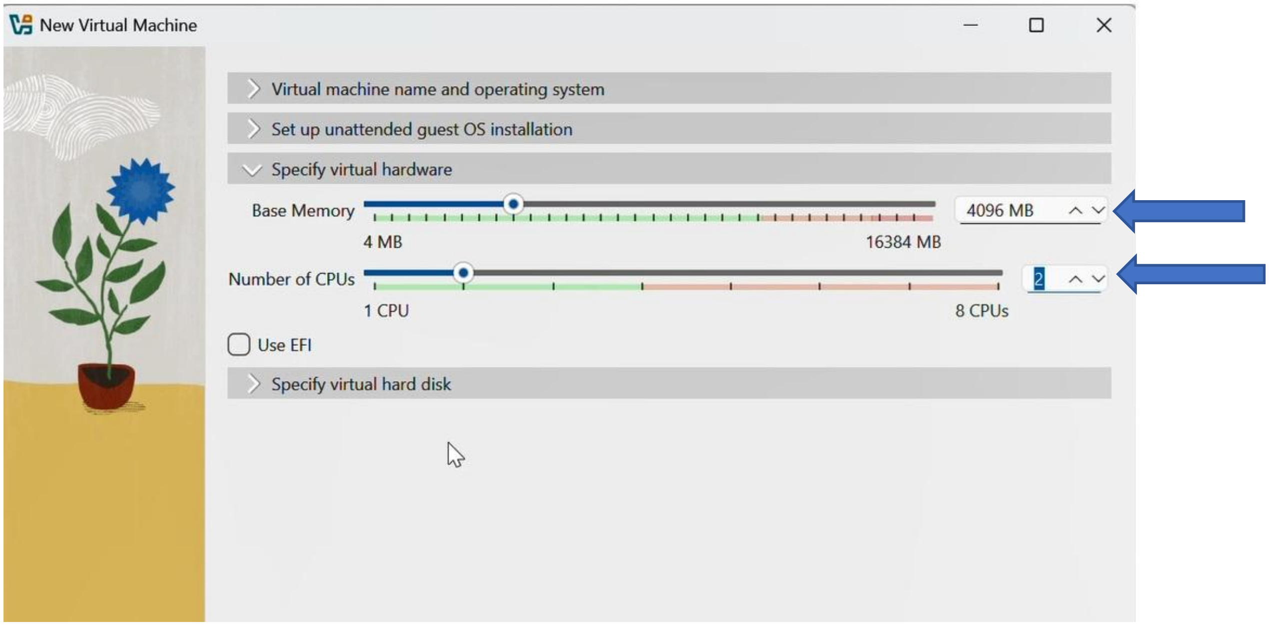
OS Distribution

OS Version Windows 11 (64-bit)

□ Proceed with Unattended Installation

Set up unattended guest OS installation
Specify virtual hardware
Specify virtual hard disk

I am going to specify a name of "Windows-Server-2022" and 4096 MB (4gb) of RAM then I will click Finish.



New Virtual Machine

> Virtual machine name and operating system

> Set up unattended guest OS installation

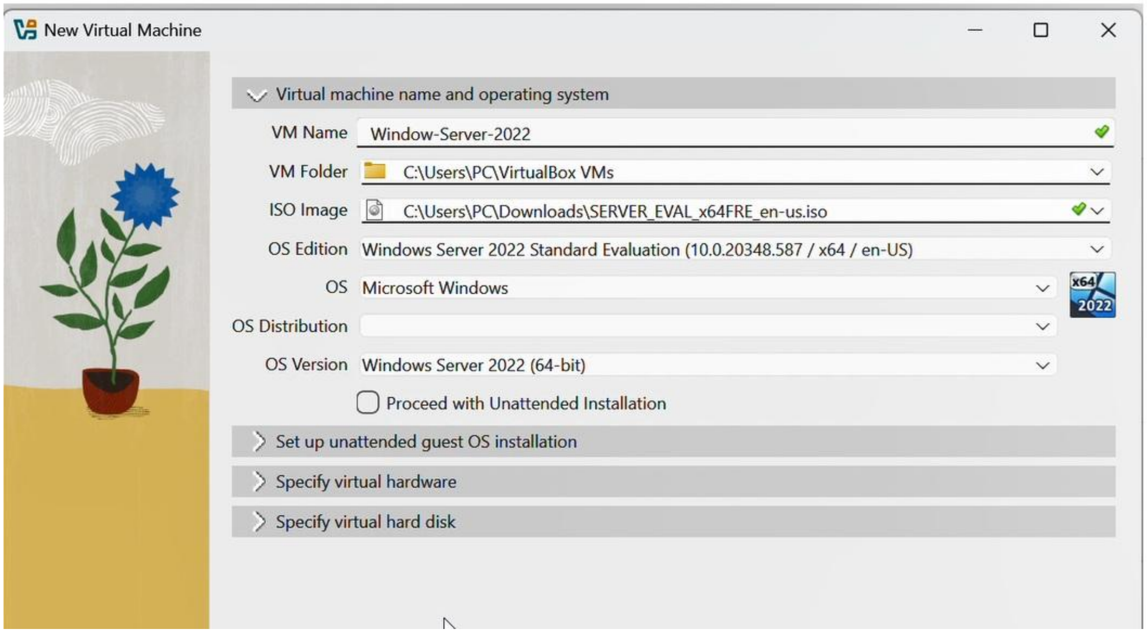
∨ Specify virtual hardware

Base Memory: 4096 MB (4 MB – 16384 MB)

Number of CPUs: 2 (1 CPU – 8 CPUs)

□ Use EFI

> Specify virtual hard disk



New Virtual Machine

∨ Virtual machine name and operating system

VM Name: Window-Server-2022

VM Folder: C:\Users\PC\VirtualBox VMs

ISO Image: C:\Users\PC\Downloads\SERVER_EVAL_x64FRE_en-us.iso

OS Edition: Windows Server 2022 Standard Evaluation (10.0.20348.587 / x64 / en-US)

OS: Microsoft Windows

OS Distribution:

OS Version: Windows Server 2022 (64-bit)

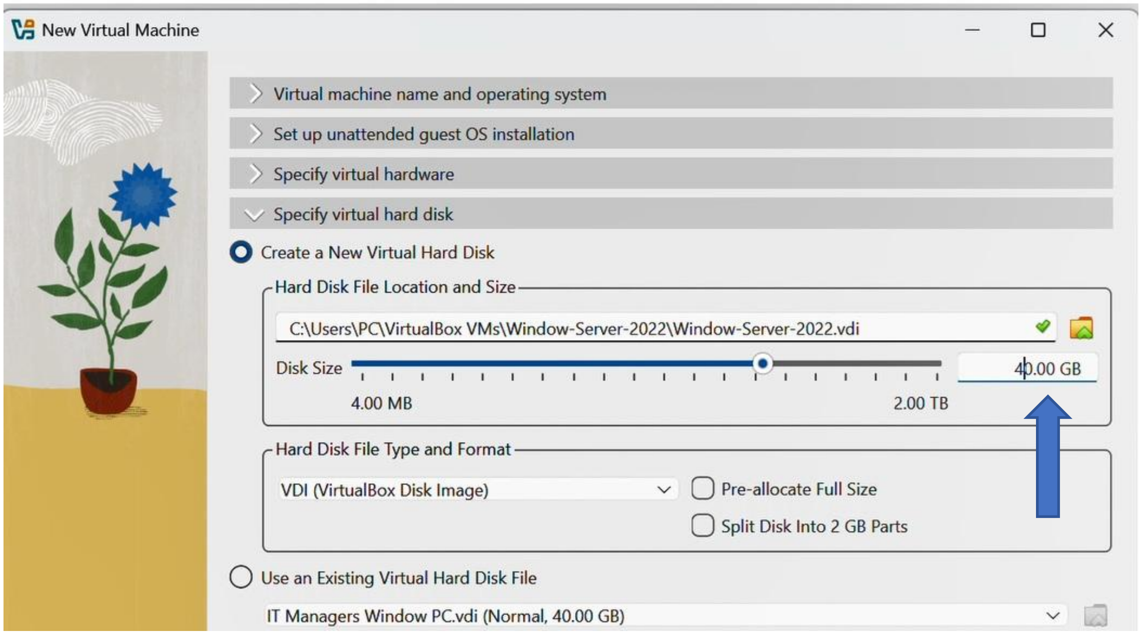
□ Proceed with Unattended Installation

> Set up unattended guest OS installation

> Specify virtual hardware

> Specify virtual hard disk

This will open another window for creating the Virtual Hard Disk. The default options here are all fine except for the File Size. I am going to set my new HDD to 40GB and then choose Finish.



New Virtual Machine
Virtual machine name and operating system
Set up unattended guest OS installation
Specify virtual hardware
Specify virtual hard disk

● Create a New Virtual Hard Disk

Hard Disk File Location and Size

C:\Users\PC\VirtualBox VMs\Window-Server-2022\Window-Server-2022.vdi

Disk Size: 40.00 GB

Hard Disk File Type and Format

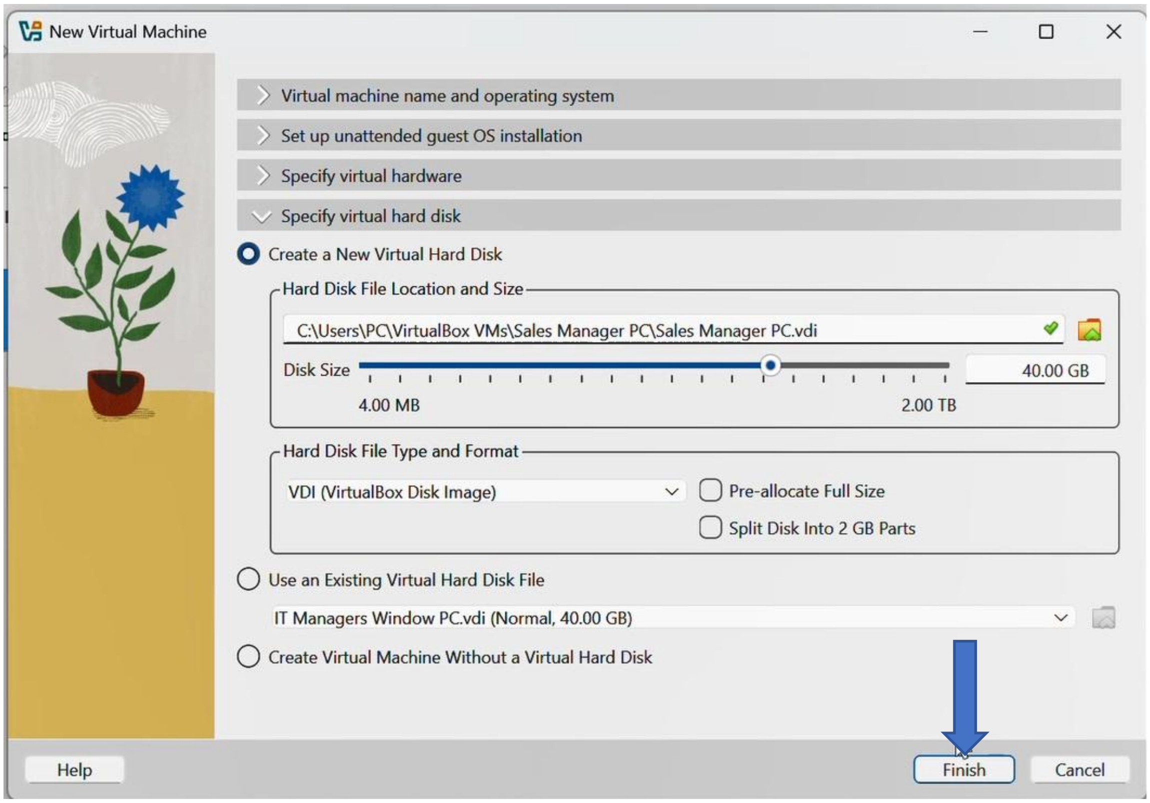
VDI (VirtualBox Disk Image)

□ Pre-allocate Full Size

□ Split Disk Into 2 GB Parts

○ Use an Existing Virtual Hard Disk File

IT Managers Window PC.vdi (Normal, 40.00 GB)



New Virtual Machine

- Virtual machine name and operating system
- Set up unattended guest OS installation
- Specify virtual hardware
- Specify virtual hard disk

● Create a New Virtual Hard Disk

Hard Disk File Location and Size

C:\Users\PC\VirtualBox VMs\Sales Manager PC\Sales Manager PC.vdi

Disk Size: 40.00 GB (4.00 MB – 2.00 TB)

Hard Disk File Type and Format

VDI (VirtualBox Disk Image)

□ Pre-allocate Full Size

□ Split Disk Into 2 GB Parts

○ Use an Existing Virtual Hard Disk File

IT Managers Window PC.vdi (Normal, 40.00 GB)

○ Create Virtual Machine Without a Virtual Hard Disk

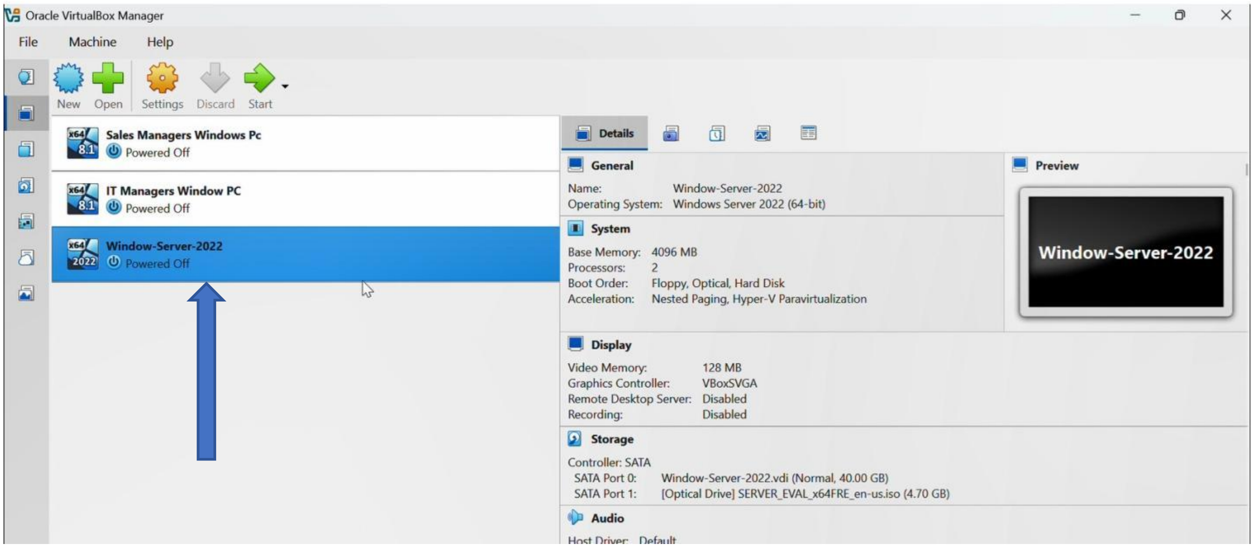
Since this hard disk drive (HDD) is set to be *dynamically allocated* (see the option on the middle-right of the screenshot above), the HDD file will only take up as much space as the data stored on it—up to a maximum of 40GB.

Now, you'll see Windows Server 2022 listed on the VirtualBox dashboard. Before starting the virtual machine (VM), you can modify its settings if needed. Typically, you might want to:

- Assign more processors
- Change the networking adapter
- Mount an ISO image

Increasing the number of CPU cores can significantly enhance your virtual machine's (VM) performance. If possible, set the number of CPUs to 2.

Pro tip: Storing the VM's virtual hard disk on a solid-state drive (SSD) can further improve performance, especially when running disk-intensive tasks.



Sales Managers Windows Pc
Powered Off

IT Managers Window PC
Powered Off

Window-Server-2022
Powered Off

General

Name: Window-Server-2022
Operating System: Windows Server 2022 (64-bit)

System

Base Memory: 4096 MB
Processors: 2
Boot Order: Floppy, Optical, Hard Disk
Acceleration: Nested Paging, Hyper-V Paravirtualization

Display

Video Memory: 128 MB
Graphics Controller: VBoxSVGA
Remote Desktop Server: Disabled
Recording: Disabled

Storage

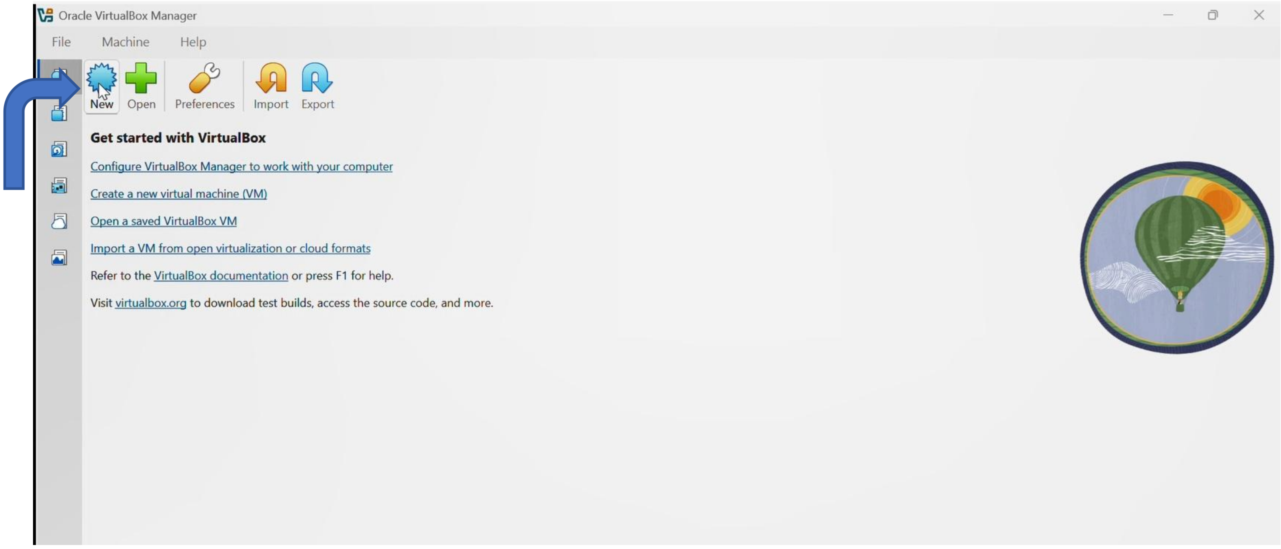
Controller: SATA
SATA Port 0: Window-Server-2022.vdi (Normal, 40.00 GB)
SATA Port 1: [Optical Drive] SERVER_EVAL_x64FRE_en-us.iso (4.70 GB)

Audio

Host Driver: Default

Now that the window server is mounted, its now time to mount the windows 8.1 a client machine

Click "New" or "Create a new virtual machine."



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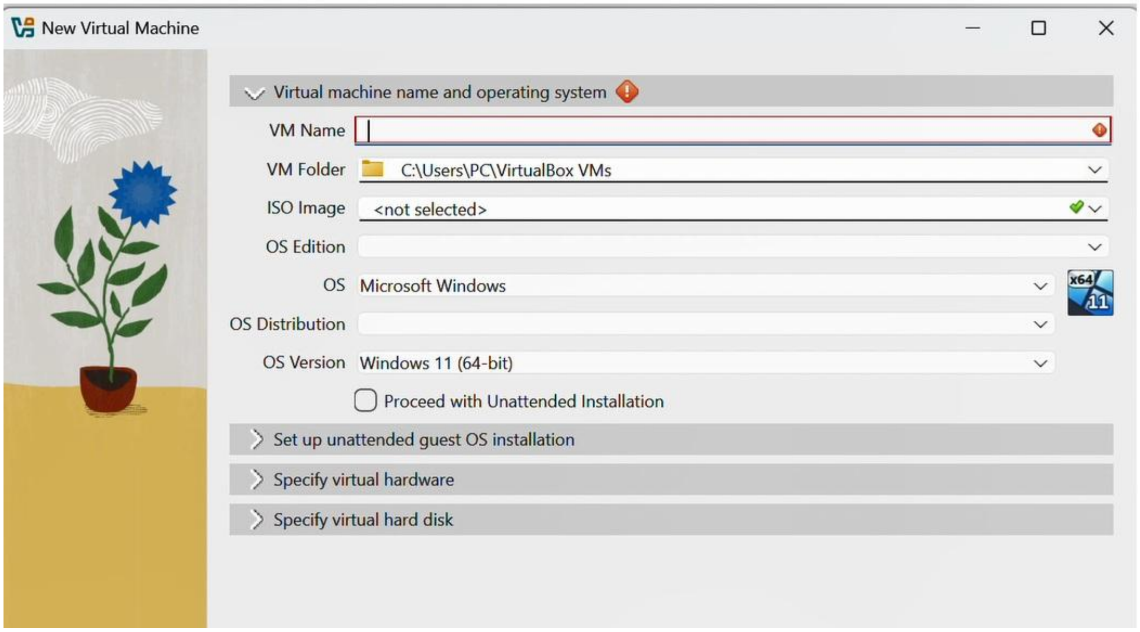


New Virtual Machine

Virtual machine name and operating system

VM Name

VM Folder C:\Users\PC\VirtualBox VMs

ISO Image <not selected>

OS Edition

OS Microsoft Windows

OS Distribution

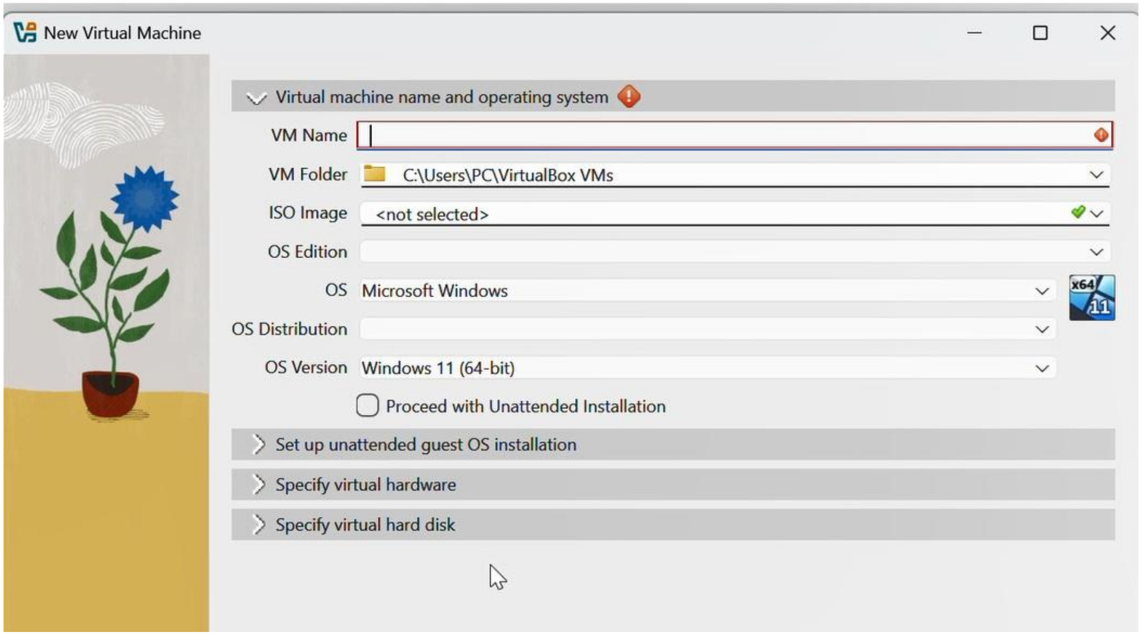
OS Version Windows 11 (64-bit)

□ Proceed with Unattended Installation

Set up unattended guest OS installation
Specify virtual hardware
Specify virtual hard disk
x64
11

-

Enter a name, e.g Sale Manager PC. As illustrated below. Then choose the window 8.1 ISO file for the location where it was save (For the ISO Image). Ensure the proceed with unattended Installation is UNCHECKED



Virtual machine name and operating system

VM Name

VM Folder: C:\Users\PC\VirtualBox VMs

ISO Image: <not selected>

OS Edition

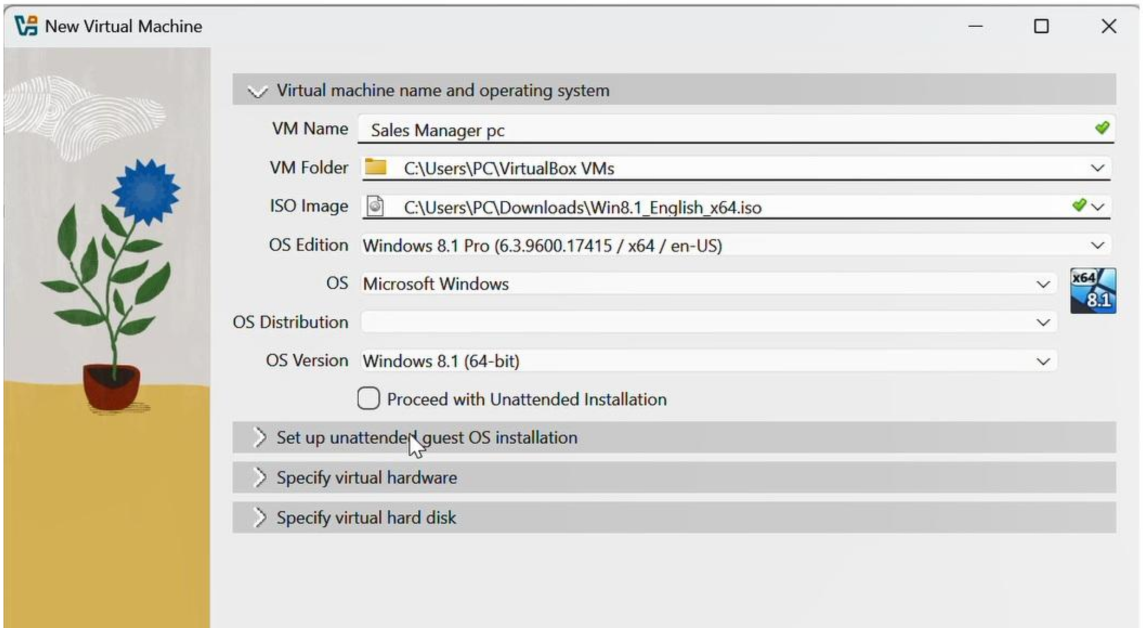
OS: Microsoft Windows

OS Distribution

OS Version: Windows 11 (64-bit)

□ Proceed with Unattended Installation

x64
11
Set up unattended guest OS installation
Specify virtual hardware
Specify virtual hard disk



Virtual machine name and operating system

VM Name: Sales Manager pc

VM Folder: C:\Users\PC\VirtualBox VMs

ISO Image: C:\Users\PC\Downloads\Win8.1_English_x64.iso

OS Edition: Windows 8.1 Pro (6.3.9600.17415 / x64 / en-US)

OS: Microsoft Windows

OS Distribution

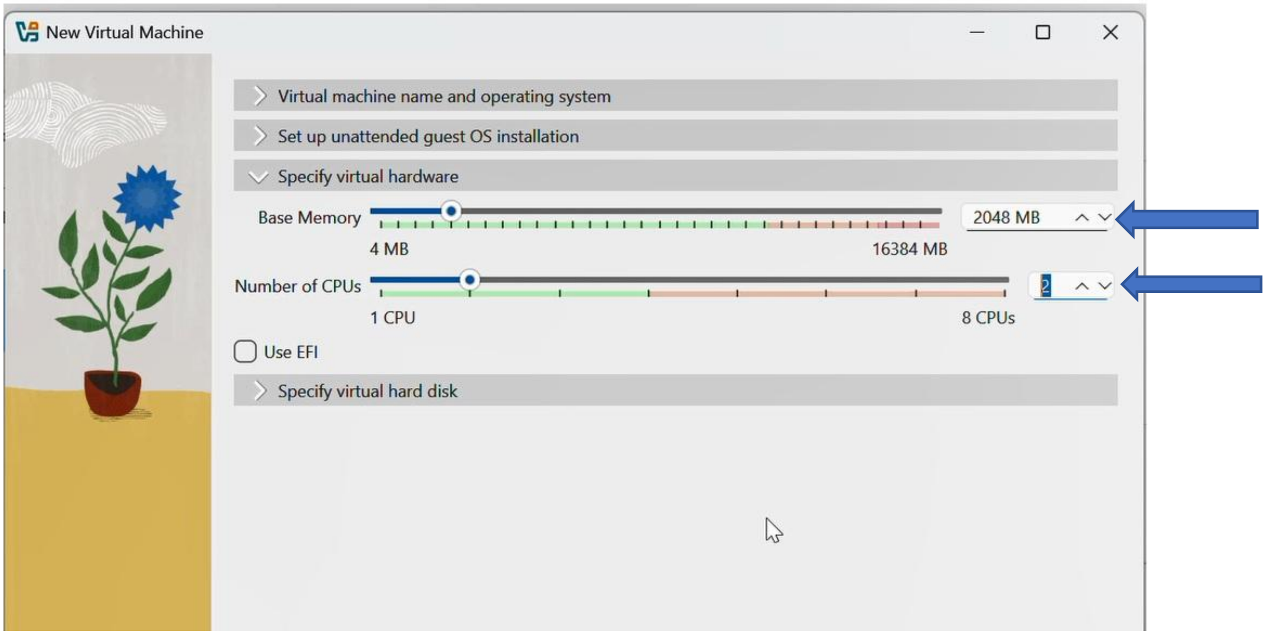
OS Version: Windows 8.1 (64-bit)

□ Proceed with Unattended Installation

x64
8.1
Set up unattended guest OS installation
Specify virtual hardware
Specify virtual hard disk

Assign System Resources

- Click on Specify Virtual Hardware and allocate at least 2 GB, preferably 4 GB for better performance. Assign atleast 2 CPU IF available. As seen Below



New Virtual Machine

Virtual machine name and operating system
Set up unattended guest OS installation
Specify virtual hardware

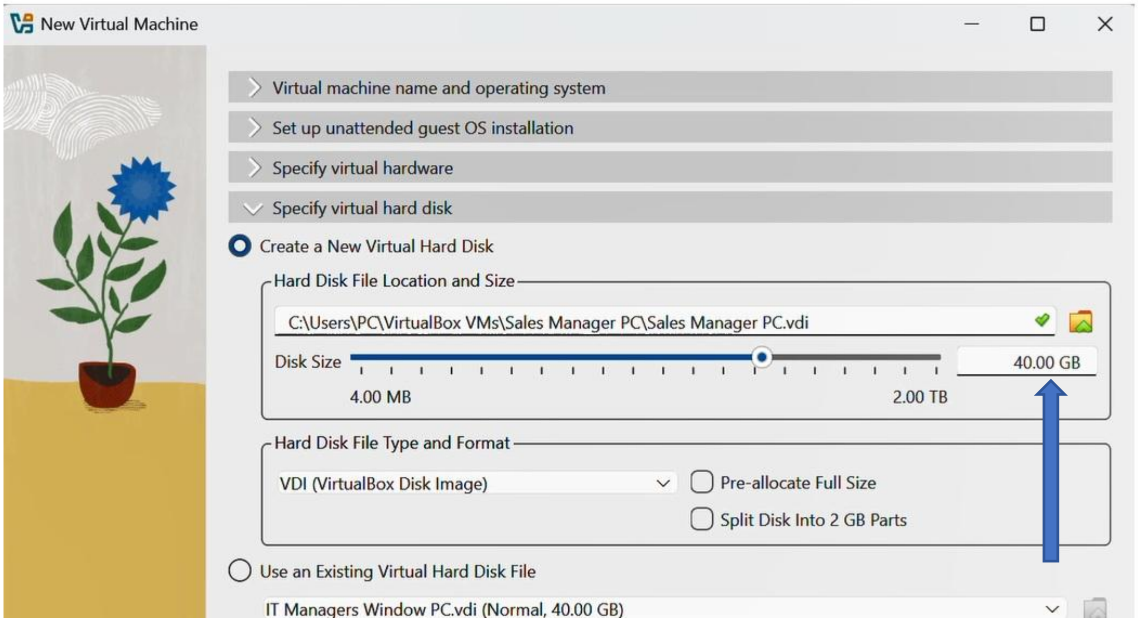
Base Memory 2048 MB

Number of CPUs 2

☐ Use EFI

Specify virtual hard disk

Create a Virtual Hard Disk by clicking on Specify virtual hard disk. Assign atleast 25 GB (recommended). As illustrated below, Then click Finish



New Virtual Machine

Virtual machine name and operating system

Set up unattended guest OS installation

Specify virtual hardware

Specify virtual hard disk

● Create a New Virtual Hard Disk

Hard Disk File Location and Size

C:\Users\PC\VirtualBox VMs\Sales Manager PC\Sales Manager PC.vdi

Disk Size 40.00 GB

4.00 MB 2.00 TB

Hard Disk File Type and Format

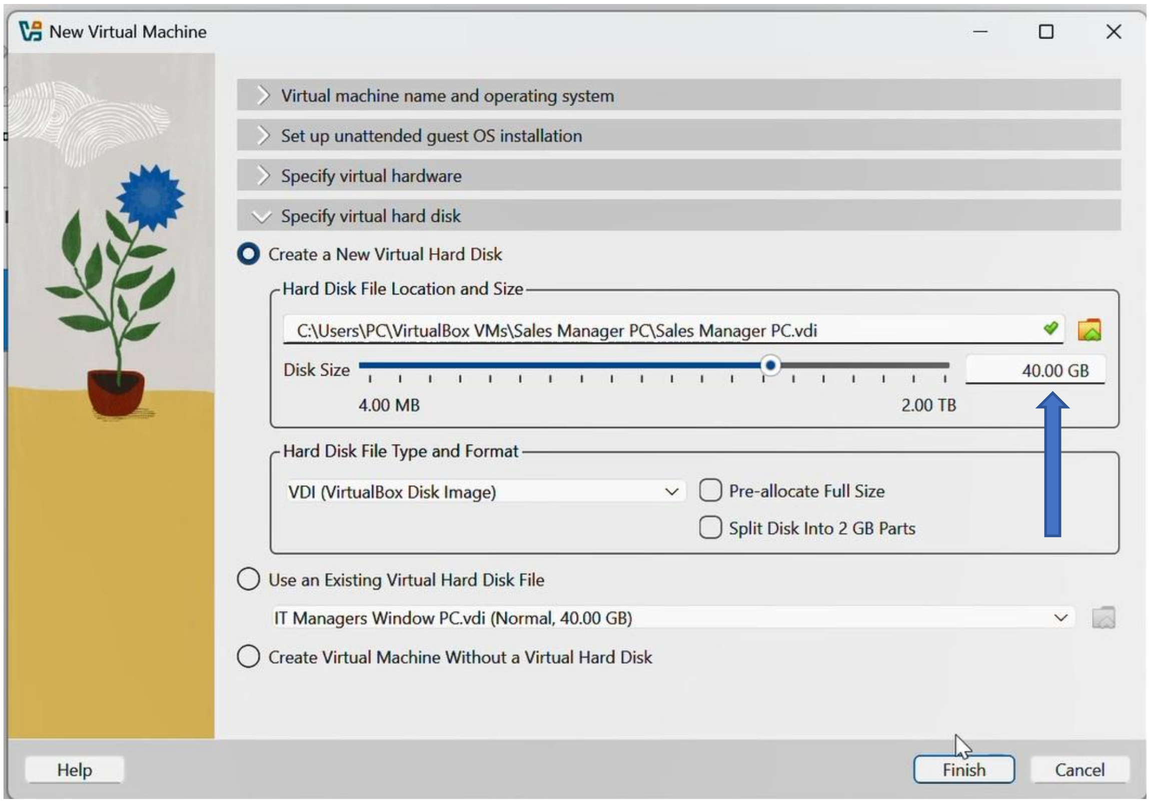
VDI (VirtualBox Disk Image)

□ Pre-allocate Full Size

□ Split Disk Into 2 GB Parts

○ Use an Existing Virtual Hard Disk File

IT Managers Window PC.vdi (Normal, 40.00 GB)



New Virtual Machine

Virtual machine name and operating system

Set up unattended guest OS installation

Specify virtual hardware

Specify virtual hard disk

● Create a New Virtual Hard Disk

Hard Disk File Location and Size

C:\Users\PC\VirtualBox VMs\Sales Manager PC\Sales Manager PC.vdi

Disk Size 40.00 GB

4.00 MB 2.00 TB

Hard Disk File Type and Format

VDI (VirtualBox Disk Image)

□ Pre-allocate Full Size

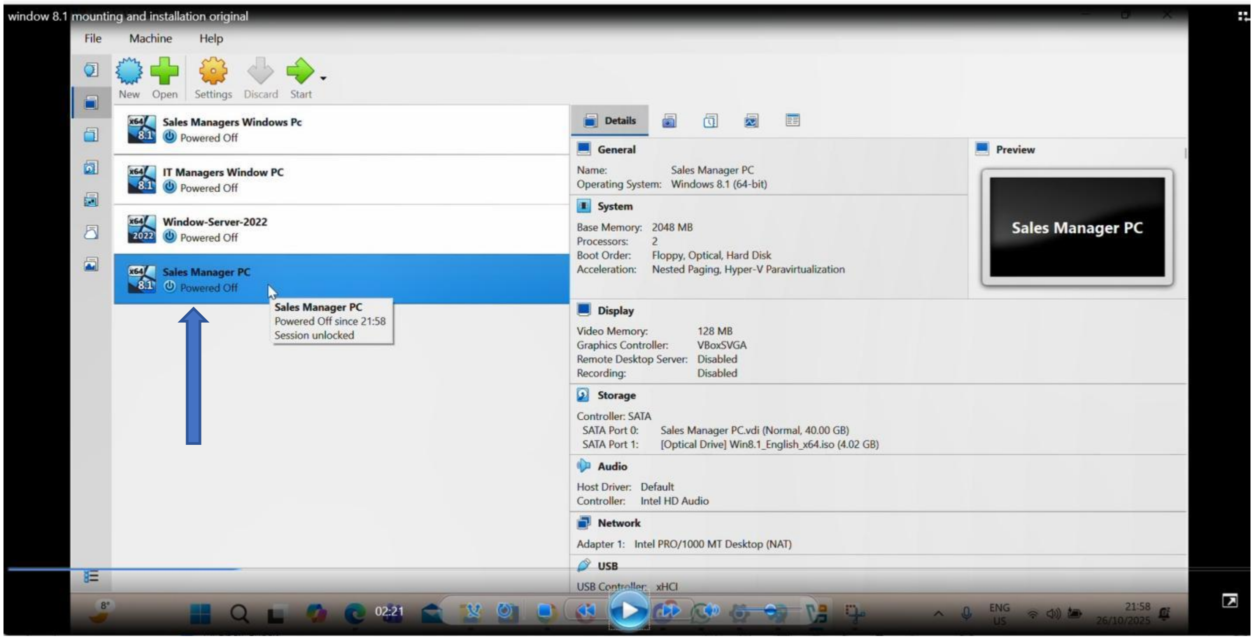
□ Split Disk Into 2 GB Parts

○ Use an Existing Virtual Hard Disk File

IT Managers Window PC.vdi (Normal, 40.00 GB)

○ Create Virtual Machine Without a Virtual Hard Disk

Now the window 8.1 for the Sales Manager Pc would be listed in the virtualbox Dashboard.



Sales Managers Windows Pc
Powered Off

IT Managers Window PC
Powered Off

Window-Server-2022
Powered Off

Sales Manager PC
Powered Off

Sales Manager PC
Powered Off since 21:58
Session unlocked

General

Name: Sales Manager PC
Operating System: Windows 8.1 (64-bit)

System

Base Memory: 2048 MB
Processors: 2
Boot Order: Floppy, Optical, Hard Disk
Acceleration: Nested Paging, Hyper-V Paravirtualization

Display

Video Memory: 128 MB
Graphics Controller: VBoxSVGA
Remote Desktop Server: Disabled
Recording: Disabled

Storage

Controller: SATA
SATA Port 0: Sales Manager PC.vdi (Normal, 40.00 GB)
SATA Port 1: [Optical Drive] Win8.1_English_x64.iso (4.02 GB)

Audio

Host Driver: Default
Controller: Intel HD Audio

Network

Adapter 1: Intel PRO/1000 MT Desktop (NAT)

USB

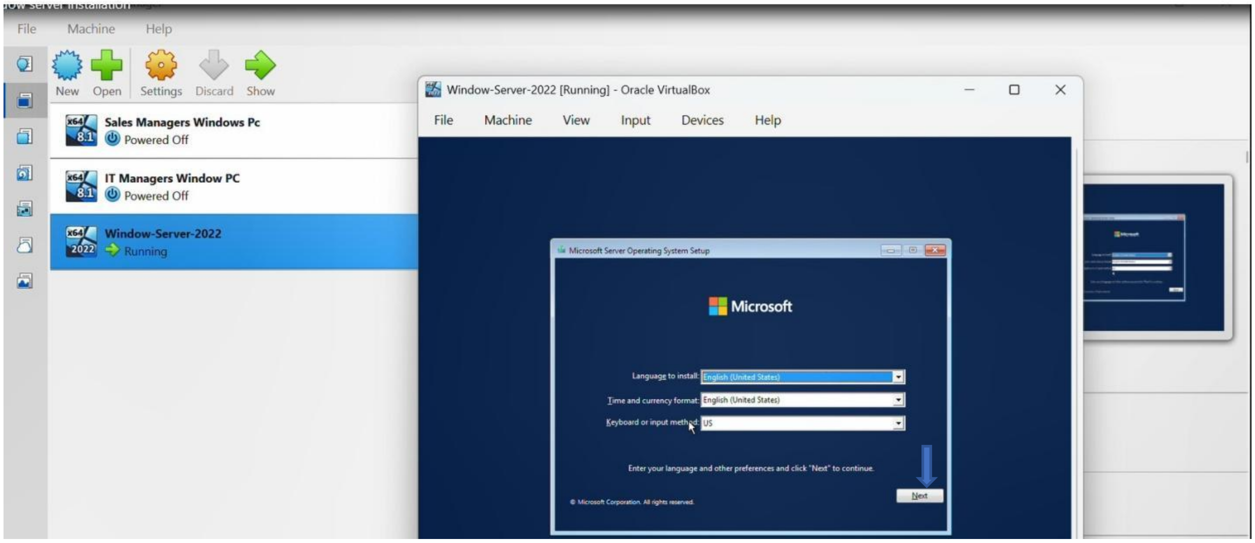
USB Controller: xHCI

We can follow the same procedures to mount the window machine of the Sales Mnager window PC, IT Manager Window PC as seen in the virtualbox dashboard above

Installing an OS on Your Lab VMs

Now that we have mounted our window server 2022 and our windows 8.1 PCs and the are listed in the dashboard of our VM, then can start installing them one after the other by launching them by clicking on the machine to highlight it and then clicking the Start button. You will be able to begin your OS installation.

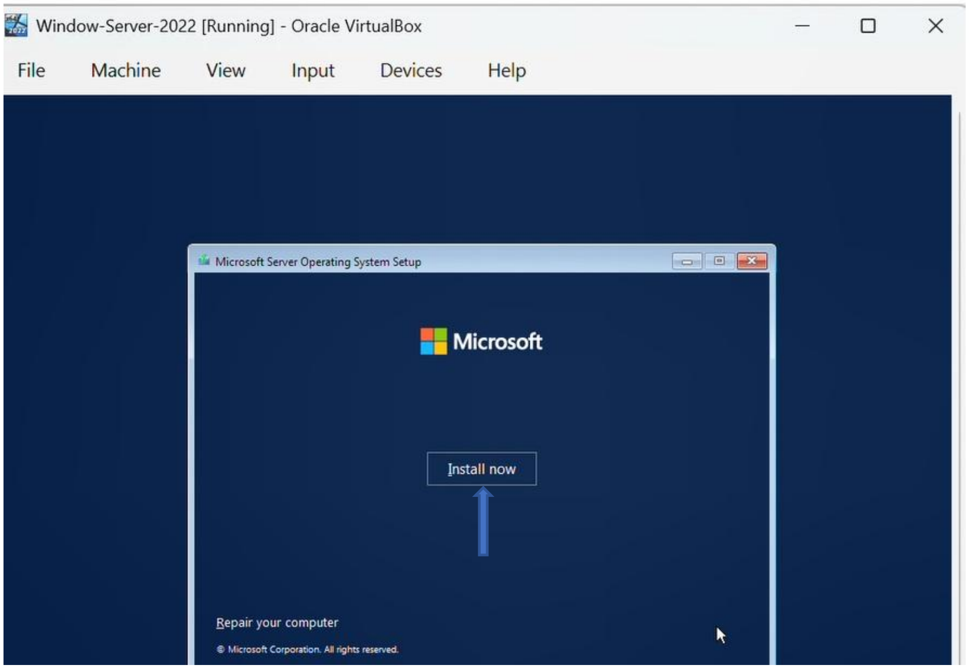
I mounted a Window Server ISO Already. So when I launch the VM I will see the installation screen for this OS. The Windows Server setup should begin.


File
Machine
Help
New
Open
Settings
Discard
Show
Sales Managers Windows Pc
Powered Off
IT Managers Window PC
Powered Off
Window-Server-2022
Running
Window-Server-2022 [Running] - Oracle VirtualBox
File
Machine
View
Input
Devices
Help
Microsoft Server Operating System Setup
Microsoft
Next
© Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

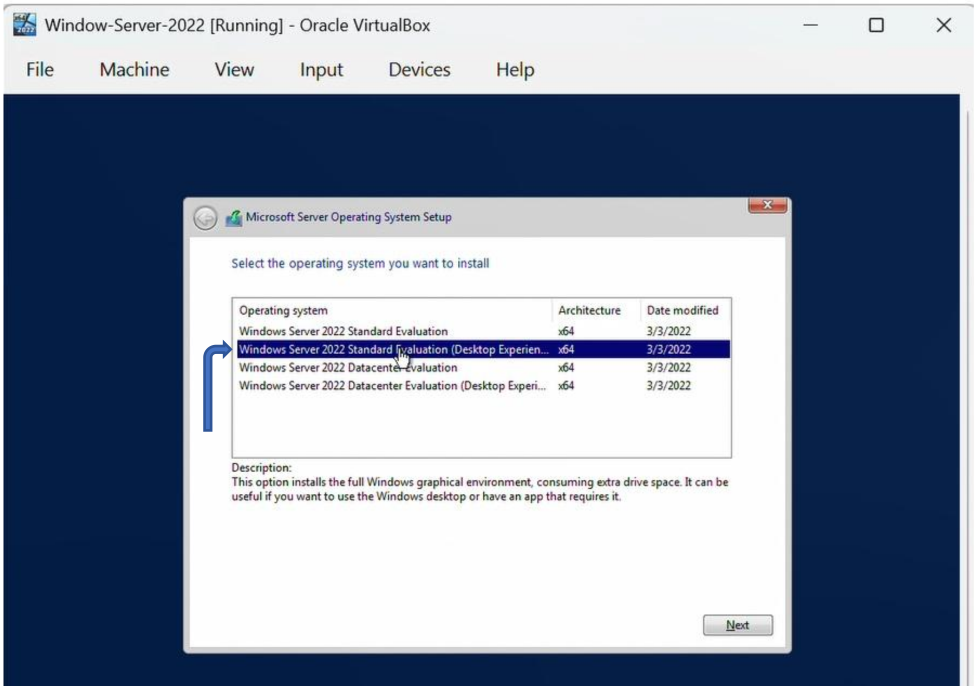
Language to install: English (United States)
Time and currency format: English (United States)
Keyboard or input method: US

Enter your language and other preferences and click "Next" to continue.

Follow the on-screen instructions. Choose your preffered language and click Next. Then a window pops up with an Install Now Button. Click install Now as shown below to start up the installation


Window-Server-2022 [Running] - Oracle VirtualBox
File
Machine
View
Input
Devices
Help
Microsoft Server Operating System Setup
Microsoft
Install now
Repair your computer
© Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

On Clicking the Install Now, You will be prompted to choose the edition you preffer working with. This totally depends on you but for a beginner is it recommended to choose WINDOW SERVER 2002 STANDARD EVALUATION(Desktop Experience) which is a GUI Experience as shown below

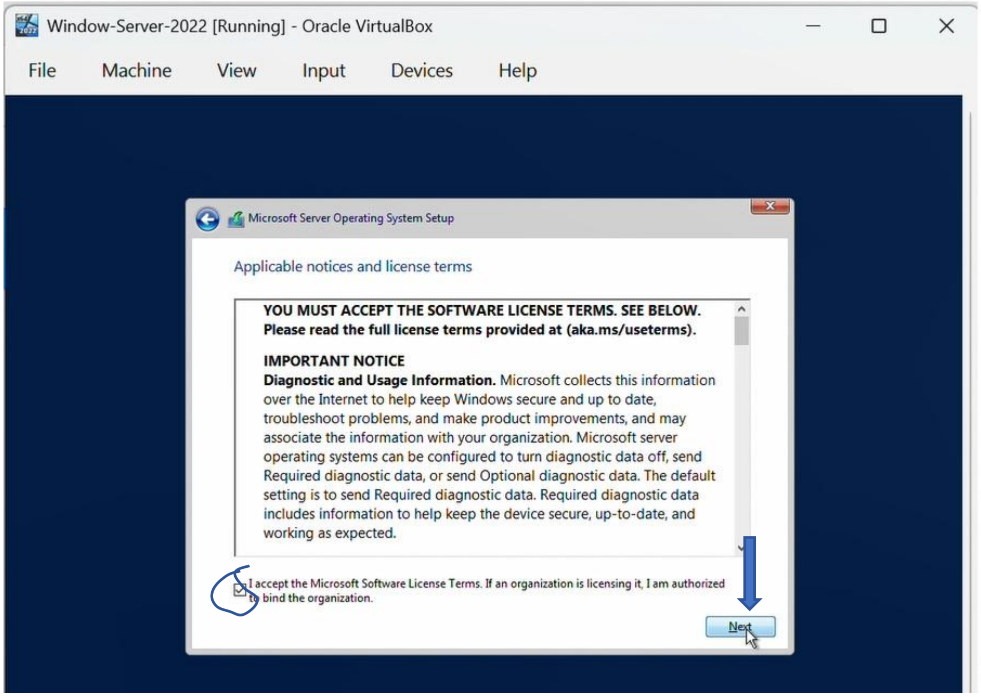

Window-Server-2022 [Running] - Oracle VirtualBox
File
Machine
View
Input
Devices
Help
Microsoft Server Operating System Setup
Next

Select the operating system you want to install

Operating system	Architecture	Date modified
Windows Server 2022 Standard Evaluation	x64	3/3/2022
Windows Server 2022 Standard Evaluation (Desktop Experien...	x64	3/3/2022
Windows Server 2022 Datacenter Evaluation	x64	3/3/2022
Windows Server 2022 Datacenter Evaluation (Desktop Experi...	x64	3/3/2022

Description:
This option installs the full Windows graphical environment, consuming extra drive space. It can be useful if you want to use the Windows desktop or have an app that requires it.

Click Next then accepet the Microsoft Licensing term and proceed by clicking Next again



Window-Server-2022 [Running] - Oracle VirtualBox
File
Machine
View
Input
Devices
Help
Microsoft Server Operating System Setup
Next

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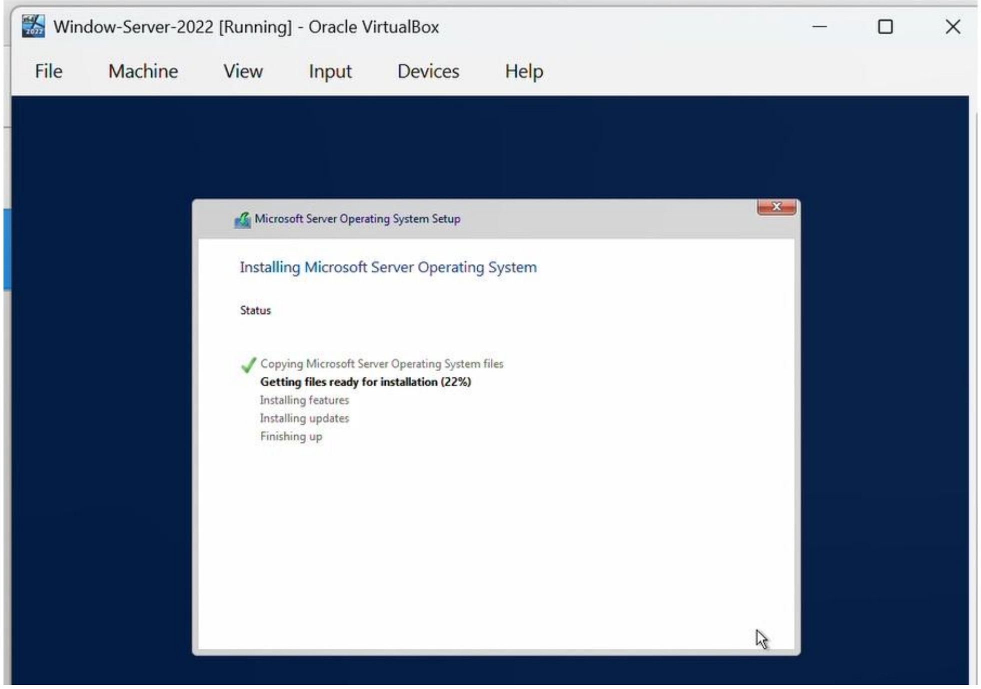
☑ I accept the Microsoft Software License Terms. If an organization is licensing it, I am authorized to bind the organization.

Then you install windows server operating system only by clicking on Custom. Then select the virtual Hard disk and click next to start installing files, features and updates as it is in the screenshot below. It takes a few minutes

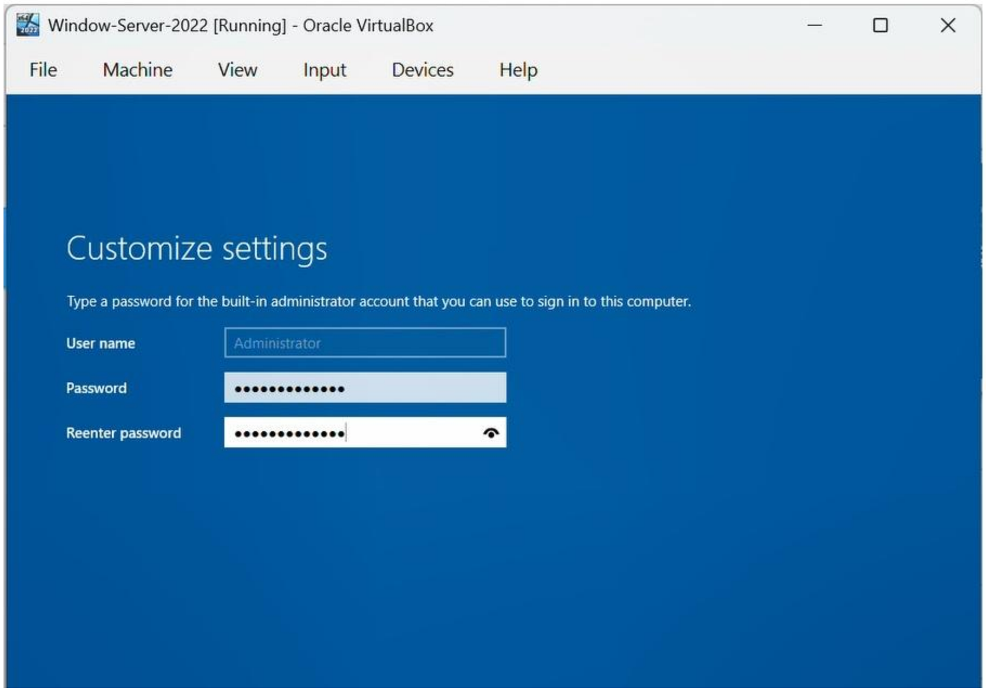

Window-Server-2022 [Running] - Oracle VirtualBox
File
Machine
View
Input
Devices
Help
Microsoft Server Operating System Setup

Installing Microsoft Server Operating System

Status

✓ Copying Microsoft Server Operating System files
Getting files ready for installation (22%)
Installing features
Installing updates
Finishing up

After finishing up, Microsoft Server Operating System needs to restart to continue. After reboot, Set up Administrator password, confirm it and click finish. To see the locked GUI of the Window Server 2022. To unlock it, press down the right control key with delete key



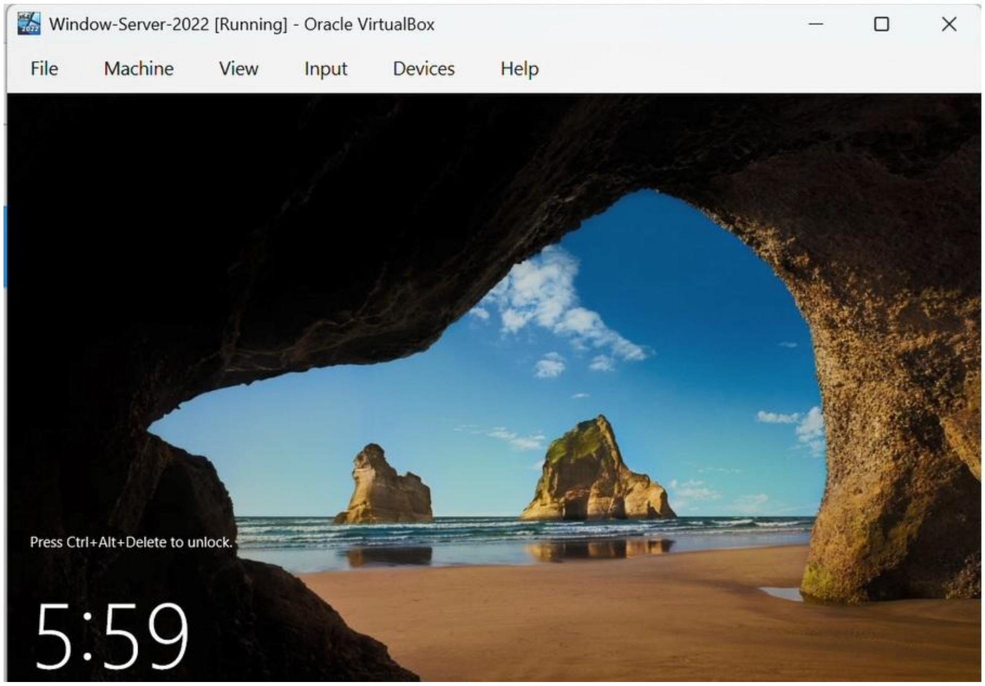
Customize settings

Type a password for the built-in administrator account that you can use to sign in to this computer.

User name: Administrator

Password: ••••••••••••••

Reenter password: ••••••••••••••


Window-Server-2022 [Running] - Oracle VirtualBox
File
Machine
View
Input
Devices
Help
Press Ctrl+Alt+Delete to unlock.
5:59

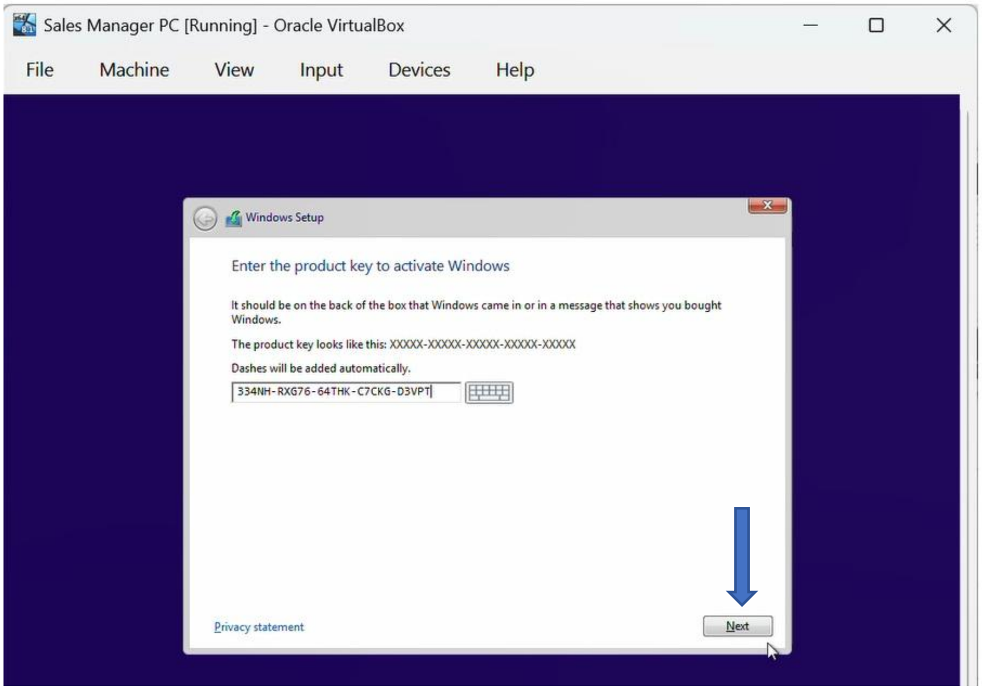
Similarly we can install our windows 8.1 machines too following the procedures below

Follow these setup steps:

Choose **Language**, **Time**, and **Keyboard** layout → **Next**

Click **Install now**

Enter product key (or skip if using evaluation)



Enter the product key to activate Windows

It should be on the back of the box that Windows came in or in a message that shows you bought Windows.

The product key looks like this: XXXXX-XXXXX-XXXXX-XXXXX-XXXXX

Dashes will be added automatically.

334NH-RXG76-64THK-C7CKG-D3VPT

Choose edition (Pro / Core)

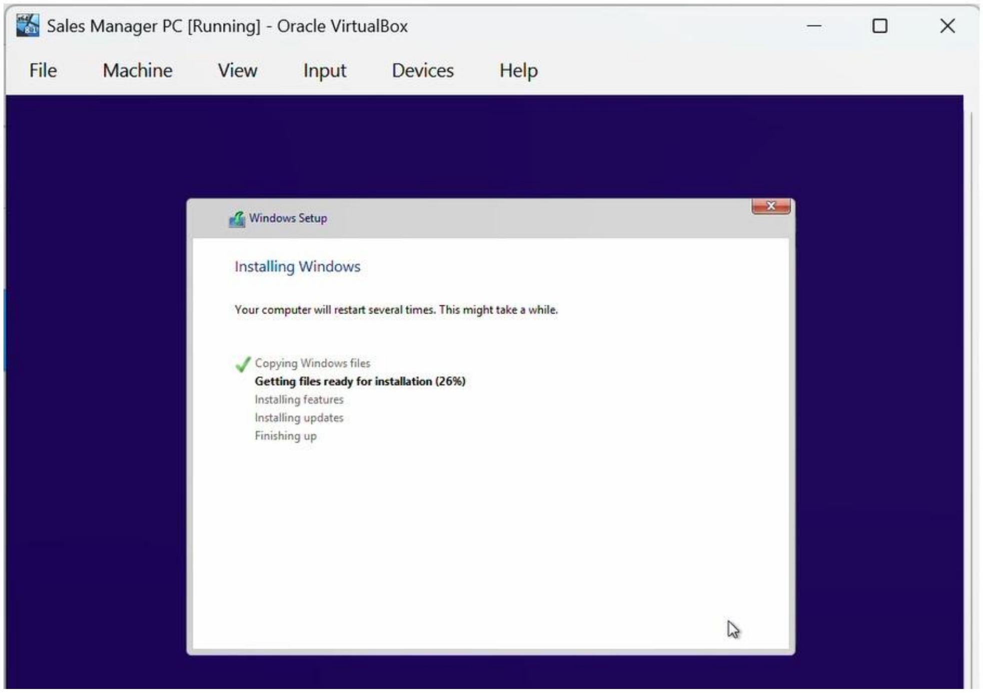
Accept license terms

Choose **Custom: Install Windows only**

Select your virtual hard disk → **Next**

Windows will copy files and restart several times.
After setup:

Choose **Settings** (Express or Custom). click next then windows will start installing files, features and updates. Note that window needs to restart several times to continue



Installing Windows

Your computer will restart several times. This might take a while.

✓ Copying Windows files

Getting files ready for installation (26%)

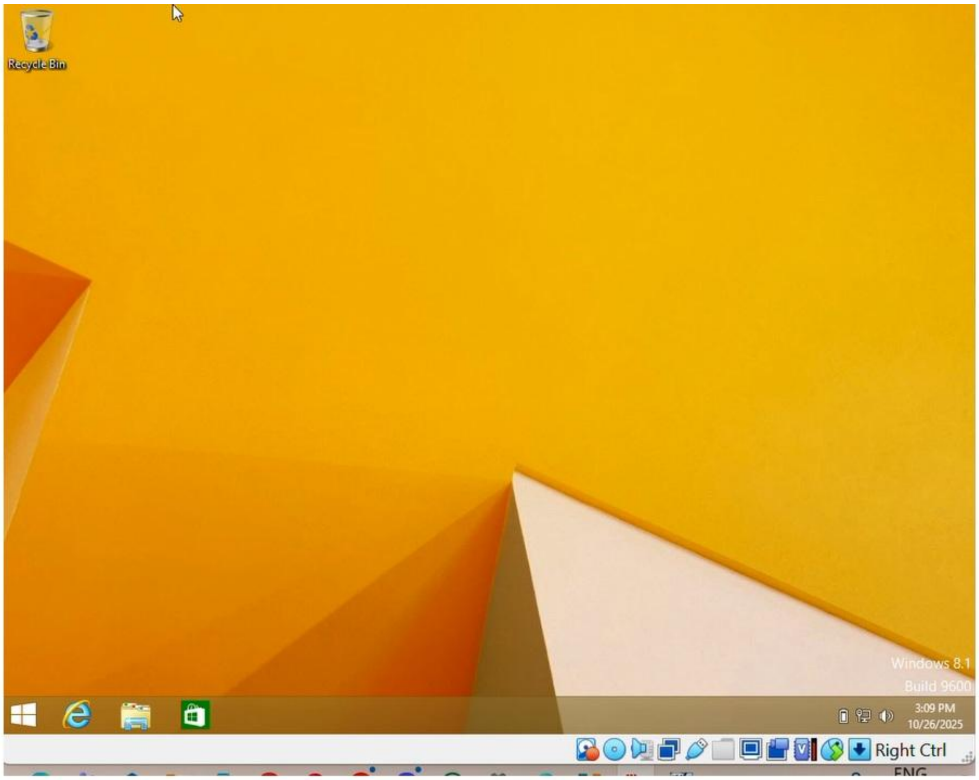
Installing features

Installing updates

Finishing up

Then create a local Account

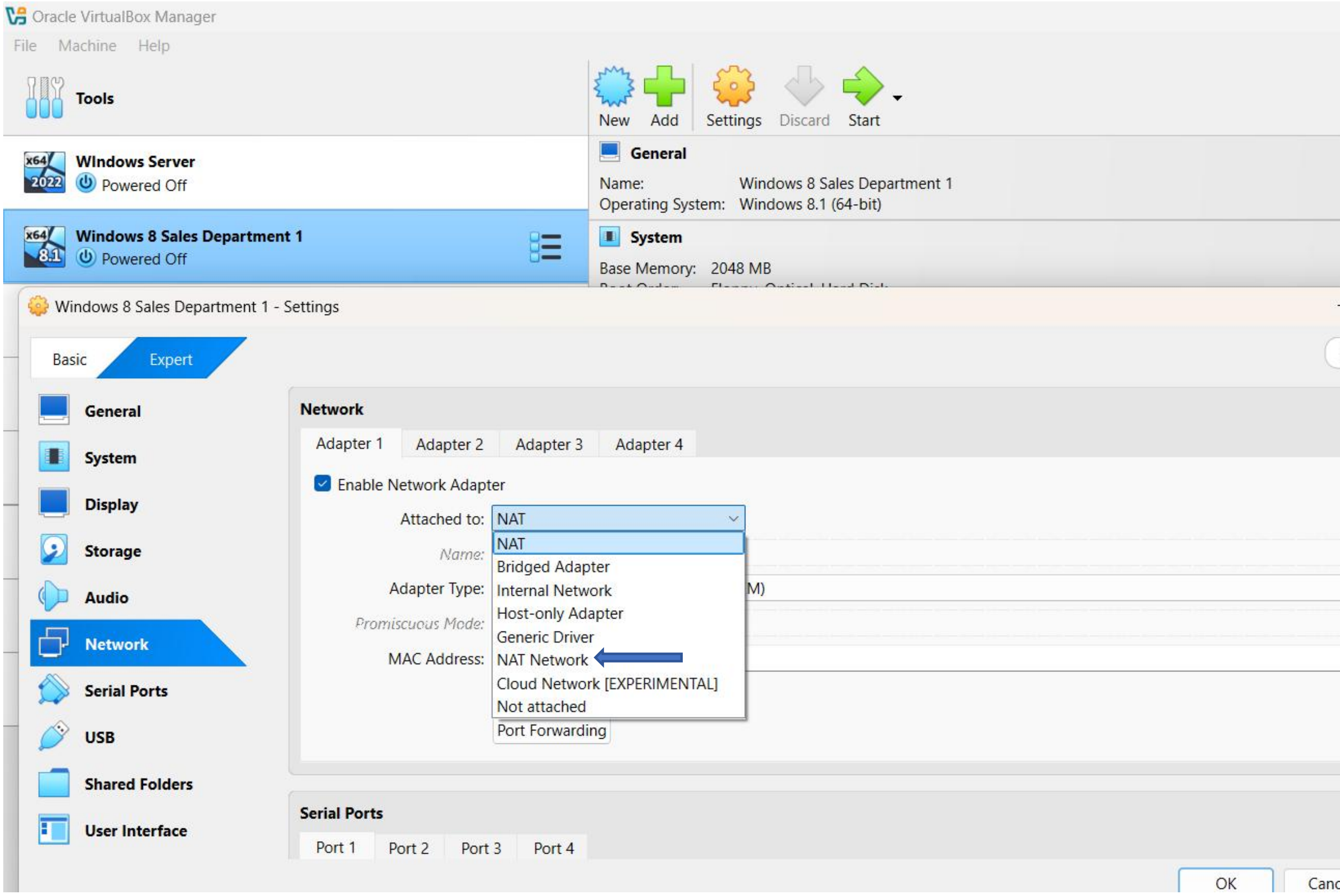
Wait for the desktop to load



Creating a Virtual Network with VirtualBox

Virtual networks allow your VMs to connect to each other, your host machine, or the internet depending on how you configure them. VirtualBox supports several types of virtual network configurations, and the one you choose will depend on your specific use case.

Note: Some network types can only be configured *after* a VM has been created, as they're managed within the VM’s settings.



Name: Windows 8 Sales Department 1
Operating System: Windows 8.1 (64-bit)

Base Memory: 2048 MB

☑ Enable Network Adapter

Attached to: NAT

Network Types in VirtualBox

1. NAT (Network Address Translation)

This network type allows your VM to access the internet using the host computer's connection. However, it does not allow communication between the VM and the host or between multiple VMs.

Use this if: Your lab setup only includes one VM and it just needs internet access.

To enable NAT:

Right-click your VM

Select Settings

Go to the Network tab

Choose Attached to: NAT (see image above)

2. NAT Network

This option is similar to NAT but also allows VMs connected to the same NAT Network to communicate with each other, while still maintaining internet access.

Use this if: Your lab setup includes multiple VMs that need to talk to each other and access the internet.

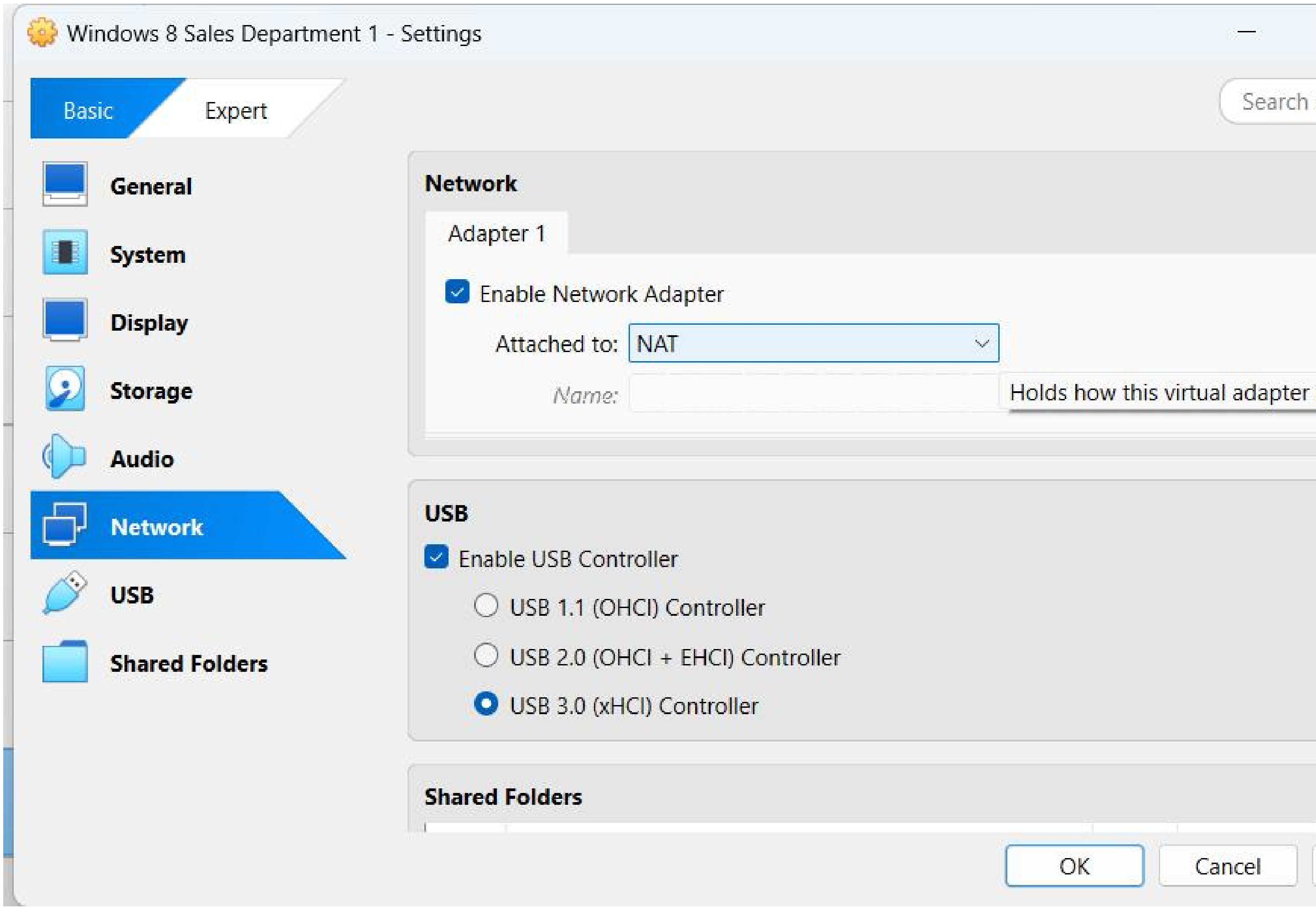
To create a NAT Network:

Go to File > Preferences

Select the Network tab

Click the plus (+) button to create a new NAT Network

Then, in your VM's settings, attach it to the NAT Network you just created



Windows 8 Sales Department 1 - Settings

Network

Adapter 1

☑ Enable Network Adapter

Attached to: NAT

Name:

Holds how this virtual adapter

USB

☑ Enable USB Controller

○ USB 1.1 (OHCI) Controller

○ USB 2.0 (OHCI + EHCI) Controller

● USB 3.0 (xHCI) Controller

Shared Folders

More Network Types in VirtualBox

3. Bridged Adapter

This network type makes your VM appear as a separate physical device on your local network. Your router will assign it an IP address, just like it would with any other device.

Use this if: You need your VM to be accessible from **other devices** on your local network (e.g., your host, other VMs, or even other physical computers).

To enable a Bridged Adapter:

Right-click your VM

Select **Settings**

Go to the **Network** tab

Choose **Attached to: Bridged Adapter**

4. Internal Network

This creates a completely **isolated** network shared only between VMs attached to the same internal network. There's **no internet access**, and your host computer cannot communicate with these VMs.

Use this if: You want a fully isolated lab environment for testing, malware analysis, or network simulation.

To use an Internal Network:

Right-click your VM

Select **Settings**

Go to the **Network** tab

Choose **Attached to: Internal Network**

5. Host-only Adapter

This setup is similar to an internal network but also gives the **host computer** a direct IP connection to the VM. The VM still doesn't have internet access unless combined with another adapter (e.g., NAT).

Use this if: You need to access the VM **directly from your host** (e.g., using RDP, SSH, ping, or file transfer). This is ideal for web development labs or local server testing.

To set up a Host-only Adapter:

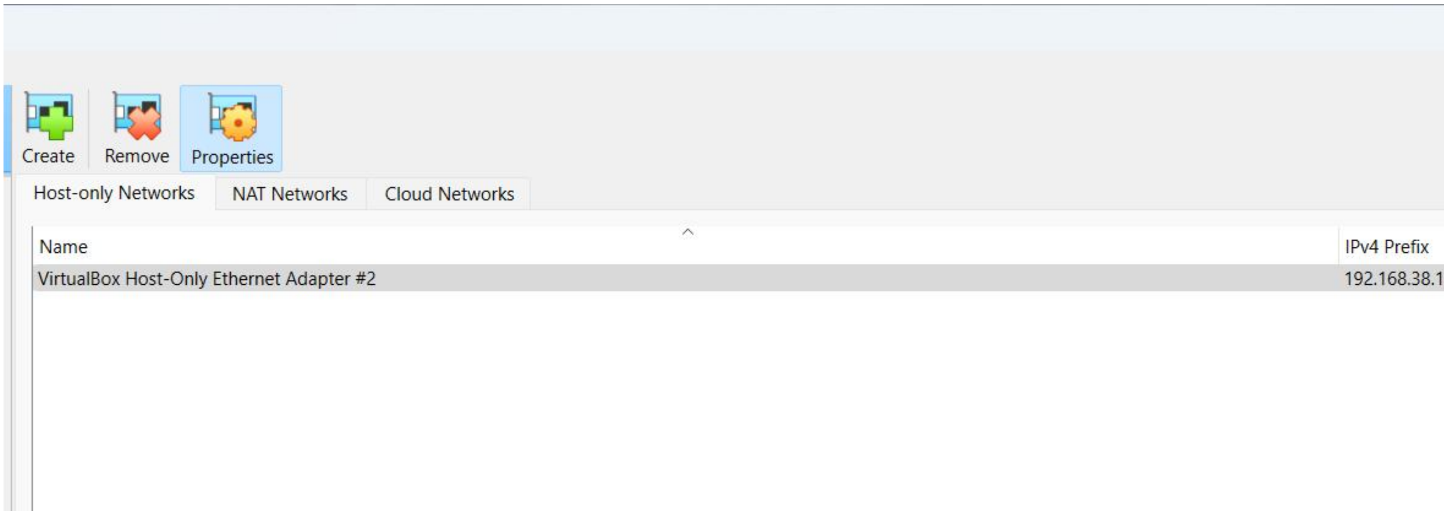
Right-click your VM

Select **Settings**

Go to the **Network** tab

Choose **Attached to: Host-only Adapter**

You can create a host-only network by select File > Host Network Manager



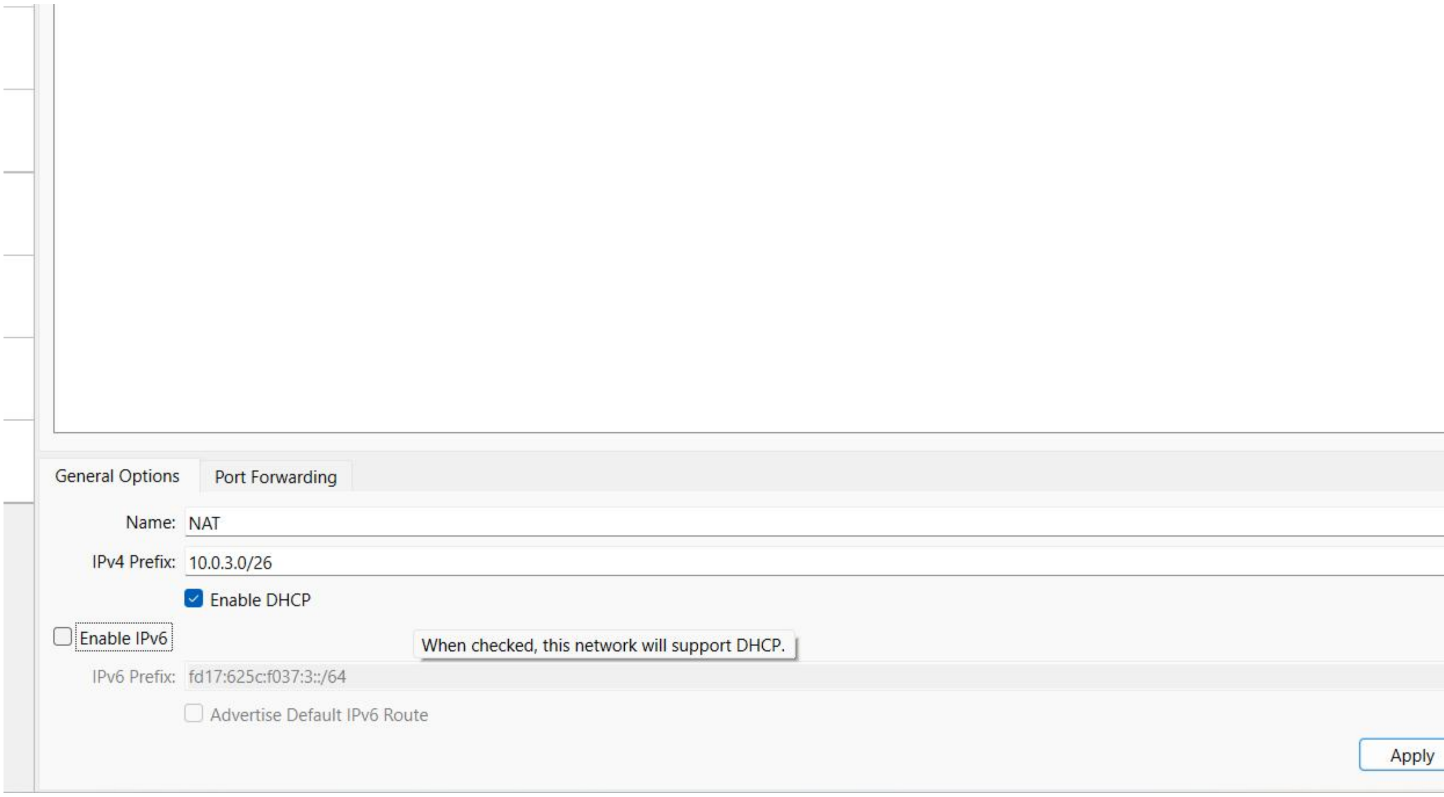
Name	IPv4 Prefix
VirtualBox Host-Only Ethernet Adapter #2	192.168.38.1

Generic Driver

According to Oracle’s documentation:

“*The generic driver attachment is special and cannot be considered as an alternative to other attachment types.*”

In most use cases, the **Generic Driver** is not commonly used and is intended for advanced or specialized networking scenarios. You typically won’t need this unless you're working with custom or experimental networking configurations.



Name: NAT

IPv4 Prefix: 10.0.3.0/26

☑ Enable DHCP

□ Enable IPv6

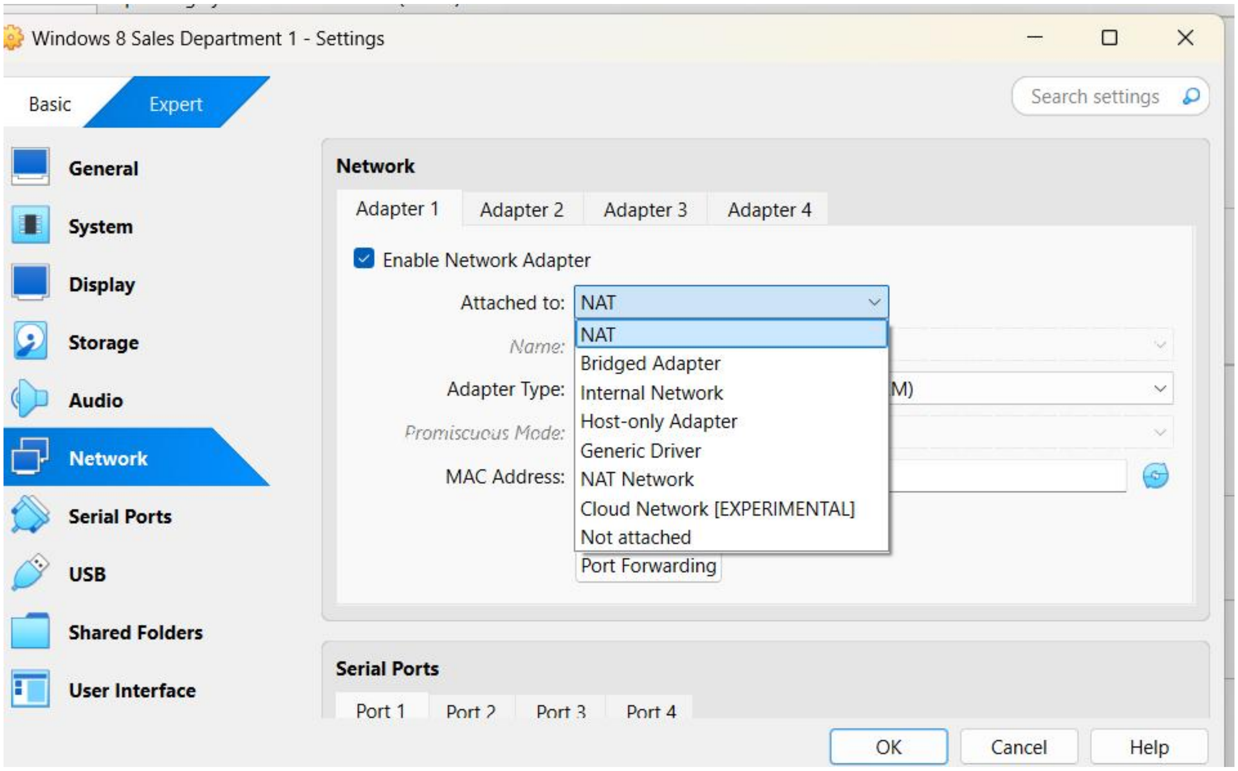
When checked, this network will support DHCP.

IPv6 Prefix: fd17:625c:f037:3::/64

□ Advertise Default IPv6 Route

I'm going to leave all the NAT Network settings at their defaults so that is it! The **Virtual Network** is now set up and ready to use.

Now, go ahead and configure the **Networking** tab of your VM to match your chosen network type. As mentioned earlier, the **easiest and most flexible option** is to create and use a **NAT Network**, especially for multi-VM labs that require internet access.



☑ Enable Network Adapter

Attached to: NAT

Wrapping It Up...

That’s it! You’re now ready to run through your OS installation and complete your lab setup.

With your virtual machine, virtual network, and operating system in place, you have everything you need to start building hands-on **IT labs** and gaining **real-world experience** — right from your own machine.

What You’ve Accomplished:

Now go ahead and **create something awesome**. Whether you're studying for certifications, testing software, or building your own virtual network lab, you're well on your way to sharpening your IT skills.