

Mike Nelson – SED article, due October 22, 2010

Using Windows Live SkyDrive

I'm all about convenience. Drive-thru windows, remote controls, robot vacuum cleaners, you name it – if they make my hectic life easier and give me more time to concentrate on what I want to do, then I'm all for it. I believe that in order for me to be efficient, I see the need for me to be able to store data on the fly, without having to worry about losing a USB stick or carrying around a USB drive. I also kind of a cheapskate when it comes to not being able to completely justify a purchase if someone offers to fill that need for free. I heard the folks at Microsoft have changed some of their offerings in this area around a bit, so I decided to check it out.

I was an original beta tester for Microsoft's Office Live Workspace when it was released a few years ago and really didn't think much of it at the time. I had used the Windows Live Folders service (which was the predecessor to SkyDrive, and also existed long before the term "cloud" got over-hyped) and decided then that there were many other alternatives out there that were more robust and fit my needs at the time. Well, a few months ago I got an email from the Windows Live Team saying that they were going to upgrade my Office Live site and move me to their updated SkyDrive offering. It had been awhile since I kept up on what the 'Softies were doing in this area, so I decided to take a look once the space got converted. I am a current DropBox user and like it, so the hard sell was on for me.

The first thing I noticed when you sign up for a Live site, you get a barrage of services (although, and I have no idea why, some do require separate registration), and yet some still require the download of the newly introduced Windows Live Essentials 2011. Since I converted some time ago, and the Essentials product was not yet available, this is what I had offered to me when I first logged in:

- Live Messenger
- Live Groups – A shared storage area within SkyDrive for groups of users
- Live Photos – Photo galleries allowing for Silverlight slideshows, metadata, and tags
- Live Contacts – formerly "Live People"
- Live Office – Word, Excel, Powerpoint, and even OneNote
- Live Mesh – File and folder sync for PC's, Mac's, and Phones.
- Bing
- MSN
- Hotmail

At first look for me, it almost seemed too much to offer, and it very well could be confusing for some novice users. The features are abundant, but I would wager to guess that most of those services are not actually used by the average user for any length of time. But, my primary target was SkyDrive, so I dove right in to it.

My needs were simple – be given ample free online storage space, be able to upload and download files easily, and be able to have some mechanism for synchronizing files between my computers and the cloud service. Remember, I am a avid user of DropBox, which is lightning fast on upload, downloads, and synchronizations, so that is what I had to compare with.

The storage I was given was 25GB, which is more than adequate for my needs and much more than my free 2GB offered up by DropBox. However, I did reason that if I were to utilize all of the integration features of all the applications that were offered, I would probably use that up pretty quick. The one fallback that I soon found was that you cannot upload a file that is more than 50MB in size, which is rare, but sometimes necessary. DropBox has no file size limit when you use the desktop client (which I always do), and even a 300MB limit on anything uploaded via it's website. The larger space included with SkyDrive is very tempting, even with the limitations.

The interface for SkyDrive is fairly clean, but not too intuitive, with some inconsistent dropdown menus and some confusing options. I do like the interface for just the pure number of options you are given for files and folders though. The integration with Live Office is also a plus, with the ability to work on documents on the fly. The Sharing piece is a bit clumsy, but it does work well once you get it setup right. Even with these nuisances, the interface is still better than what I am used to with DropBox, since it caters to file synchronization and not the abundant other options offered by Live.

Synchronization is achieved via the new Windows Live Mesh, part of the Windows Live Essentials 2011 download. When I was writing this article, I got an email from Microsoft that says that as of March 31, 2011, Live Sync will stop working and only Windows Live Mesh will be supported. Essentially, the Live Sync product and Live Mesh are being combined into a single offering within Live Essentials called Windows Live Mesh, which it always should have been in my opinion. The Live Mesh piece has gotten better from its original inception, with a new MAC client (yeah!) and more options with replicating Internet Explorer and Office program settings between computers. I setup both and after a few minor issues, things worked well. Remote computer access in Mesh gives it another point for integration.

In the end, I decided to keep both services up and running. SkyDrive fills some voids left by my current free DropBox account and also affords me the luxury of having the ability to edit Office documents and Photos , and connect to remotely to my computers wherever I am with no client installed. I haven't tried the Mobile option yet, but DropBox is awesome in that area with their iPhone app, so I don't think Live will win that battle any time soon. I haven't fully utilized or tested all the other apps that Microsoft throws at you with this, and I'll get around to it, as long as it stays free, of course.