Windows 8.1 – useful improvements into the right direction
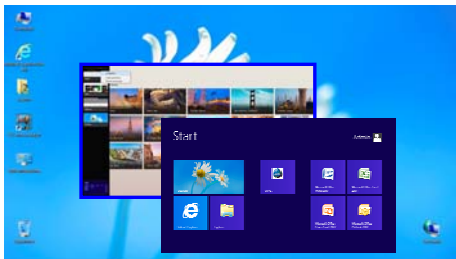
Update from 8.8.2014 and preface to the article:

Windows 8   –   Usage, tips and suggestions for improvements

With the introduction of Windows 8 there were strong reactions about the lack of compatibility of the user interface to previous versions of the Windows operating system. The key points to use Windows 8, some tips and suggested improvements (of which some had been realised in Windows 8.1), are summarised and explained on the following pages.
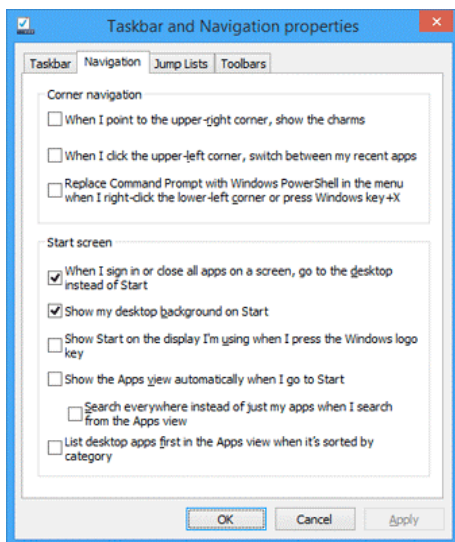
The main reason for criticism was the turning away from the fundamental principle of the Windows operating system, which enables each application to run in a separate window. Depending on the performance of the computer any number of windows (i.e. applications) can be operated in parallel and be displayed besides each other. All these windows are freely variable in size and arrangement.

In contrast, running on Windows 8, the mostly Internet-based applications (called apps) run in full screen mode. Simultaneously displayed or overlapping windows of the apps are not possible. The Windows Desktop has been downgraded to an app and must be started just like any other app from the «Start user interface».

An **important** and **necessary improvement for Windows 8** would be that the Windows Desktop once again becomes the centre of the Windows user interface, and that the new «Start user interface» would run as an application in a conventional and adjustable Windows window in the Windows Desktop. The new «Start user interface» could then be started, for example just like the Internet Explorer, simultaneously several times, thus allowing the display of multiple apps side by side. This was not implemented in Windows 8.1.

The most important improvements in Windows 8.1:

1.   Bypassing the «Start user interface»

On the Windows Desktop move the mouse onto an empty area in the taskbar at the bottom of the screen and click the right mouse button. The context menu of the taskbar appears.

Select the properties and then the tab **'Navigation'** in the dialog **'Taskbar and navigation properties'**.

The first option in the part «Start screen» is labelled '**When I sign in or close all apps on a screen, go to the desktop instead of Start**'.

If you set this option, the familiar Desktop appears immediately after the next login. This enables to use Windows 8 almost without using the new «Start user interface».

In addition you might wish to clear all other options. However there remains the problem of the missing Windows **«Start Menu»**.

2. Turning off the computer (shutdown)

When the mouse is moved to the lower left corner of the screen, a tile with the new «Start user interface» appears and a click with the right mouse button displays a context menu. In Windows 8.1, this context menu includes the submenu '**Shut down or log off**' and on the «Start user interface» there is now an icon «On / Off» to shut down the computer.

Windows 8 – Usage, tips and suggestions for improvements

Have you ever fallen from the clouds ... With Windows 8 numerous improvements have been realised. An example is the integrated virus protection «Windows Defender». The changes at the level of operation are very large. The subsequent introduction briefly covers the most important user-related issues.

- The **Windows Desktop**
- The Windows «**Start Menu**»
- The new «**Start user interface**»
- The new «**Apps user interface**»
- The new «**Touch screen user interface**»

- The new [Windows Logo key]
- The representation of windows in the Windows Desktop
- The playback of DVDs (e.g. with «VLC Media Player»)
- Turning off the computer («Shutdown»)

- Conclusion
- Ten suggestions for improvement (operation and technical behavior)

We want to stimulate the debate about Windows 8 so that the needs of all users are taken into account in the further development. Many new features of Windows 8 are nice and very useful, but the partial lack of compatibility with previous versions of Windows should be restored. The need for an improved Windows 8 extends from the user interface to the correction of wrongdoing arising from the bypassing of missing access rights. Until then, it could be more attractive and easier for many users to continue to work with Windows XP or with Windows 7 and the antivirus program "Microsoft Security Essentials".

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Windows 8 – Usage, tips and suggestions for improvement

- **The Windows Desktop**

With Windows 8, several new steps are necessary in order to get to the familiar Windows working surface, the Windows Desktop. After turning on the computer at first the new «Lock screen» with time and date appears. The background image can be freely selected for each user. With a click or any key the «Login screen» is displayed to enter the password.

☺ Tip: If the password begins with a capital letter, simply press the Shift key for capital letters on the «Lock screen». Thereby the «Login screen» appears and you can directly enter the password.

After logging in the new «Start user interface» appears with the tiles. One of these tiles is called «Desktop». A click on the tile «Desktop» opens the familiar Windows working surface, the Windows Desktop.

The Windows 8 «Desktop» shows the icons with shadow underlayed lettering, which complicates the readability and does not fit to the otherwise clear, light and modern design of Windows 8. Unfortunately, the new Windows 8 Desktop has no «Start Menu» and thus no possibility of navigation, which is integrated into the Desktop.

- **The Windows «Start-Menu»**

Review: The classic Windows «Start Menu» displays all installed programs (applications, now called "Apps") grouped into menu groups and automatically and intelligently shown or hidden. The programs most frequently used are displayed and the programs not used for a long time are hidden and displayed only when needed. In addition, the «Start Menu» shows the recently used document files to open those directly and provides access to all of your computer settings. This «Start Menu» was visually and functionally altered already in Windows 7 and already Windows 7 is missing an option to use the more efficient «Start Menu» of Windows XP in the classical representation.

In Windows 8, there is no «Start button» on the taskbar and the «Start Menu» no longer exists. It also can not be activated optionally. Thereby the familiar and user-friendly access to programs, documents and settings is more difficult. The manual "restore" of the «Start button» by installing additional programs as offered on the Internet is no solution. The familiar classic «Start Menu» from Windows XP should be at least optionally available in Windows 8.
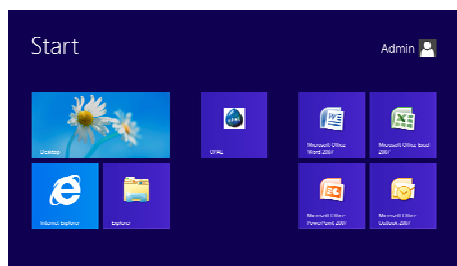
☺ Tip: When the mouse is moved to the lower left corner of the screen a tile of the new «Start user interface» appears and a click with the right mouse button displays a context menu to open the Explorer, the Task Manager, the Control Panel, etc. (see the figure). Unfortunately the top menu item "Programs and Features" does not open the menu function "Programs" from the classic «Start Menu» but the system window "Add or remove programs". With a click in the lower right corner of the screen all open windows are directly hidden and minimized or restored.

The following sections explain the functionality of Windows 8, which replaces the «Start Menu». In Windows 8, the «Start Menu» is replaced by three elements. The «Start user interface» and the «Apps user interface» cover the entire screen, thus are separate working surfaces in addition to the Windows Desktop.

- 1.) the «Start user interface»
- 2.) the «Apps user interface
- 3.) the «Charms» (function panel on the right side of the screen)

- **The new «Start user interface»**

The new «Start user interface» is intended to display the most frequently used programs (applications, now called "Apps") as tiles (large icons) to find and to start the most important programs quickly. The displayed tiles can be placed with drag & drop in the desired order (with some automatic arrangement functions). At the bottom of the screen is a scroll bar to see those tiles, which are placed further to the right. The recently used documents are not displayed.
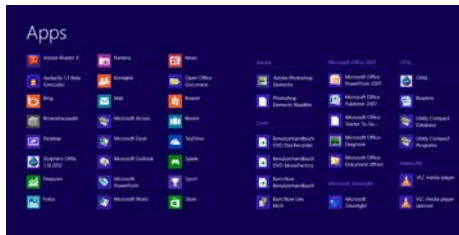

There are several ways to display the «Start user interface». When the mouse is moved in the right upper or lower corner of the screen, the «Charms» appear (a function panel on the right side of the screen with 5 buttons). Click on the middle «Charm», ie on the middle button «Start», to display the «Start user interface». Alternatively, the mouse can be moved to the bottom left corner of the screen to display the «Start user interface» as a tile and display it with a click. The easiest is the new [Windows logo key] on modern keyboards to switch from the Desktop to the «Start user interface» or back to the Desktop.

☺ Tip: The name of a desired application, even if it does not appear as a tile, can be typed directly on the «Start user interface» to locate the application, to display the icon of the application and to start it directly with a click.

When selecting a tile with the right mouse button, a situational function panel (context menu) appears on the bottom of the screen. The button «Remove from Start» allows the selected tile to be deleted from the «Start user interface». To remove an unwanted application completely from the computer, use the button «Uninstall». For a better overview it is recommended to delete any unneeded tiles from the «Start user interface» (e.g. all unnecessary Microsoft Internet services).

- **The new «Apps user interface»**

The new «Apps user interface» is intended to display all the installed programs (applications, now called "Apps") as icons and to find and to start programs. The icons are displayed fixed and can not be individually placed and grouped. The menu functions in the menu groups from applications can not be shown or hidden, as it was possible in the «Start Menu», so this new «Apps user interface» is overcrowded with icons. At the bottom of the screen is a scroll bar to see those tiles, which are placed further to the right. Again, the recently used documents are not displayed.

To view the new «Apps user interface», the mouse is moved to the right upper or to the right lower corner of the screen to display the «Charms» (a function panel on the right screen edge with 5 buttons). With a click onto the upper «Charm», and thus to the top button «Search», the panel «Search» is displayed together with the «Apps user interface». A separate Charm «Apps» for direct access to the new «Apps user interface» is missing. In modern keyboards, the new [Windows logo key] can be pressed twice to switch from the «Apps user interface» to the Desktop.
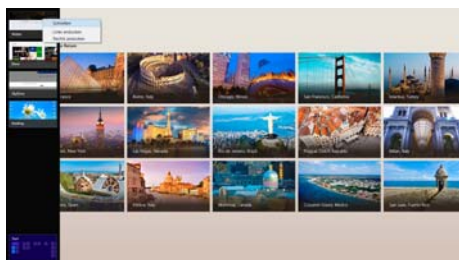
When you call the «Apps user interface», the Panel «Search» will be displayed on the right side of the screen as well, for example to search for an application by its name. With this search function, however, it is not possible to search a menu group and display it in full. This makes it difficult to locate all installed menu features of an individual application, since they are only found and displayed if they contain the search term (e.g. the name of the application). The search results displayed (as well as the display position in the «Apps user interface») will unfortunately be lost when this user interface is left.

☺ Tip: The name of a desired application, even if it does not appear as a tile, can be typed directly on the «Apps user interface» to locate the application, to display the icon of the application and to start it directly with a click. The Charm «Search» helps, inter alia, also to search for settings and files.

When you select an icon with the right mouse button, a situational panel function (context menu) appears on the bottom of the screen. The «Pin to Start» button allows the selected icon to be added to the «Start user interface». This is recommended to view all frequently used applications on the «Start user interface». A button to copy an icon to the Desktop is missing. As well, icons can not be copied using drag and drop between the «Apps user interface», the «Start user interface» and the Desktop.

- **The new «Touch screen user interface »**

Specifically designed for touch screens is a new user interface, which for example is used by default for the applications pre-installed on the «Start user interface», such as the various Microsoft Internet services («Mail», «Calendar», «Contacts», «News», «Photos», «Store», «Bing», etc.). These applications are not run in a window on the Desktop, not in the well-known Internet Explorer, but in the new Windows 8 dominating «Touch screen user interface». In this working surface most web applications are shown, each one in full screen mode (possibly a second one in a side strip). For example, the online help for the «Start user interface» is shown in a touch screen version of the Internet Explorer within this «Touch screen user interface» (e.g. with a larger context menu for links). To access the Windows help, move the mouse in the upper or lower right corner of the screen to display the panel of «Charms» and to select the Charm «Settings». There are functions and help for the specific situation. If the help is invoked in this way while the Desktop is being displayed, the help locally installed on the computer is shown instead of the online help.

The operation of the «Touch screen user interface» is done either with side movements of you finger or a pen (input pen), or with mouse movements into the screen corners and to the sides of the screen. A click with the right mouse on a blank space opens panels with application dependend situative features (e.g. for navigation) at the top and / or bottom of the screen. Another click will hide these panels again.

Also in the «Touch screen user interface», the [Windows logo key] switches between the «Start user interface» and the most recently used application (whereat the Desktop is viewed as an application). Access to the «Apps user interface» is now possible only by prior activation of the «Start user interface» or the Desktop, because the Charm «Search» displays the panel «Search» situatively for the current application and because a Charm "Apps" is missing. However you can also click on the function "Apps" in the Charm «Search» without any search term being entered.

☺ Tip: **Be careful** with the prompt **"Add Microsoft account"**. On the topic "Connecting to the Cloud" it is explained in the local Windows Help: "When logging in with a Microsoft account, the PC will be connected with the cloud" and "The contact information and the status of your friends will be synchronized automatically with services such as Hotmail, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn without you having to register yourself with any of these services." The Microsoft account is online and not a local Windows user account.

In the «Touch screen user interface» there are no buttons to minimize or terminate (close) launched applications as it was common in Windows in the upper right corner of a window. The launched application will not even stop with a click on the button «Cancel» or «Close» at the prompt «Add Microsoft account» (e.g. «SkyDrive»). The taskbar at the bottom of the screen will not appear in the «Touch screen user interface» because it is part of the Desktop. As before, the active application can be closed by using the key combination [Alt] + [F4].

☺ Tip: If you move the mouse on the left side of the screen to the upper left or lower left corner of the screen and from there somewhat down or up, a panel is displayed on which all currently in the «Touch screen user interface» launched applications, but not the currently displayed application, are shown in thumbnail view along with a tile for the «Start user interface». If launched, the «Desktop» appears as a tile as well. A tile is activated by mouse click or "pulling to the right". A click with the right mouse on one of these tiles brings up a context menu with the function «Close» (see the picture above with the context menu of the top tile). To close the currently displayed application, it is for example necessary to go to the Desktop first, so the application will appear in this panel on the left side of the screen and can be terminated with the function «Close» in the context menu. Alternatively, and much easier, it is possible to move the mouse to the top of the screen to display a small hand symbol with which the displayed application can be grabbed with left mouse button pressed and moved down to the bottom of the screen to simply "sunk" the application. In this case, the application is closed and terminated.
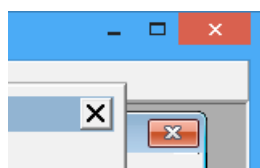
- **The new [Windows Logo key]**

If you use a new keyboard with the [Windows logo key], you will find explanations of the function in the locally installed Windows Help «Mouse and keyboard: What's New in Windows». The main functions and key combinations are:

[Windows Logo key] ... switch between active application (e.g. Desktop) and the «Start user interface»

[Windows-Logo-Taste] + [F1]　　... open the locally installed help

[Windows Logo key] + [D]　　... show the Desktop

[Windows Logo key] + [E]　　... open the Windows Explorer

[Windows Logo key] + [C]　　... show or hide the panel with the «Charms»

[Windows Logo key] + [Q]　　... search Apps

[Windows Logo key] + [W]　　... search settings

[Windows Logo key] + [F]　　... search files or folders

[Windows Logo key] + [R]　　... open the dialog «Run»

[Windows Logo key] + [Print]　　... create screenshot (stored in folder ".../ My Pictures / Screenshots")

- **The representation of windows in the Windows Desktop**

In Windows 8, the windows of an application (e.g. Microsoft Word) and a dialog box (e.g. an application message) are displayed with an improved design. After various design experiments in older versions of Windows the new design appears lighter and more modern. The color of the window frame can be selected for personal taste.

Unfortunately, this new design does not function consistently compatible. For existing applications, it happens that three different design versions are displayed simultaneously. The example shows the application window of a Microsoft Access application in the new «Windows 8 Style» with the wide blue window frame. In this application window is a detail window of this application in the rounded «Windows XP Style» and in the foreground is a toolbar of this application in the «Windows Classic Style». This erroneous compatibility of Windows 8 to display detail windows and toolbars within an application windows should be fixed.

The previous option to display windows and buttons in the style «Windows Classic Style» does not exist anymore, even though the «Windows Classic Style» is still preferred by many users as an efficient and user-friendly presentation. The individual installation of the «Windows Classic Style» by additional programs, as offered variously in the Internet, is no solution to this problem. For the appearance of windows and buttons the options «Windows 8 Style» and «Windows Classic Style» are desirable in an improved version of Windows 8.

- **The playback of DVDs** (e.g. with «VLC Media Player»)

Windows 8 does not support playback of DVDs. This lack of compatibility with previous versions of Windows is very incomprehensible and will hopefully be fixed in a better version of Windows 8.

☺ Tip: On the Internet, various applications can be found for playback of DVDs, which can also be downloaded partially for free. For example the VLC Media Player is offered completely for free and is free distributable with no spyware, no advertising and no user tracking (http://www.videolan.org/vlc).

- **Turning off the computer** («Shutdown»)

Shutting down and switching off was already subject to debates in previous versions of Windows (shutdown via the «Start Menu»). With Windows 8 shutdown has become even more incomprehensible and almost hidden. Windows 8 makes the impression that we would hardly turn off our computers. However, switching off the computer after completing the work is highly recommended for reasons of safety and energy saving.

To shut down and turn off the computer with Windows 8 the mouse is first moved into the right upper or right lower corner of the screen to display the «Charms» (a function panel on the right side of the screen with 5 buttons). With a click on the lower «Charm», ie the lower button «Settings», the panel «Settings» appears at the right side of the screen. At the bottom center in the panel «Settings» you will find the icon «On / Off». By clicking on the icon «On / Off» a menu with the function «Shutdown» appears (please note that the figure shows the German version). This solution is "creative" but not user friendly. It should be possible to copy (pin) the icon «On / Off» on the Desktop, on the «Start user interface» and on the taskbar. At least as an option this icon «On / Off» should display a confirmation dialog with the choice to avoid accidental "Restart" or "Save energy" when the user wants to "shutdown and turn off" the computer.

- **Conclusion**

Windows 8 with the new «Charms», the new «Start user interface» and the new «Apps user interface» is prudent and advisable for use on touch screens with direct finger operation. However, these new elements conceptually and functionally appear not yet mature. When using touch screens and pen (input pen) there will be lovers for both, the new «Start user interface» as well as the classic «Start menu». Even when using a mouse, Windows 8 can be simple and useful not only for new users of Windows, provided that after the installation of Windows 8 the overcrowded «Start user interface» is cleaned up and all unneeded tiles are beeing deleted.

However, for professional computer work the usage of a mouse and the «Start Menu» is more quickly and more accurate than operation with a mouse, finger or pen on the «Start user interface». The classic «Start menu» is integrated into the Desktop and the user does not have to leave the Desktop when navigating. The greater functionality makes the «Start Menu» for many users more efficient, more flexible and more user friendly than the «Start user interface».

Instead of the dominating «Touch screen user interface» it could be more flexible and easier to provide a configurable option to display the Desktop in a «Windows Touch Screen Style». A matter of taste is the black background of the panels on the sides of the screen, which do not fit with the otherwise friendly, lightweight and modern design of Windows 8. The settings for adjusting colors for the Desktop and the «Start user interface» should have an impact on the background color of these panels as well.

Windows 8, with the «Touch screen user interface» and the the many pre-installed web applications and cloud connections almost gives the impression that Microsoft's actual user interface and control center of the computer, the Windows Desktop, is regarded only as one of many application anymore, or that Microsoft even has the goal that the users in future move onto the cloud – and the perhaps fall from the clouds ...

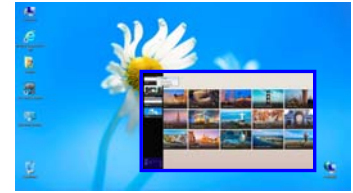- **Ten suggestions for improvement** (operation and technical behavior)

The next version of Windows 8 should include at least the following improvements:

1. A «Start Menu» in the classical representation, which is directly integrated into the Desktop and provides access to programs, recently used documents, settings, find, help, and on / off.

2. The options «Windows Classic Style» and «Windows 8 Style» and possibly a configurable option to display windows and buttons in the Desktop «Windows Touch-Screen Style».

3. An option to directly display the working surface of the computer, the Windows Desktop, after logging in to Windows (instead of displaying the «Start user interface»).

4. The separate panel «Charms» is useful for small smartphones. For other devices, the icons of the «Charms» could be integrated on the top right of the title bar on the «Start user interface», the «Apps user interface» and the other «Charms» (possibly together with the icon «On / Off»). This would make the panel «Charms» superfluous, the navigation of the «Charms» would become easier and more user-friendly. The «Start user interface» and thus all new «Charms» can then be displayed with the [Windows logo key], with a mouse click in the lower left corner of the screen or a with a finger motion. Since most desktop applications have main menus at the top left and the buttons to close the application at the top right of their windows, no navigation function of Windows should be available in the upper corners of the screen. The lower right corner of the screen is already used to display the taskbar (and to minimize open applications) and therefore should not be used to display the «Charms» as well.

5. The situational function panel (context menu) on the bottom of the screen, which is displayed with the right mouse button for a tile on the «Start user interface» or for an icon on the «Apps user interface» could be replaced by a context menu, which, as usually in Windows, is displayed user-friendly at the current position (mouse, pen, ...). Thereby a second of these to many new panels on the sides of the screen would become superfluous and would be integrated by an efficient and user-friendly context menu for operation with mouse and touch screen.

6. On the «Apps user interface» the icons of menu functions within the menu groups of applications should be shown or hidden intelligent, analogous to the classic «Start Menu», or optionally shown or hidden by the user.

7. When installing Windows 8 the «Start user interface» should contain less and just generally needed tiles. Special tiles such as Microsoft's Internet services should be unobtrusively placed in a separate menu group on the «Apps user interface».

8. A playback capability for DVDs.

9. The Ikon «On / Off» (with optional confirmation dialog) should be available to be copied to the Desktop, the taskbar and the «Start user interface» or be placed as a «Charm» on the «Start user interface».

10. With regard to the technology, the "Program Compatibility Assistant" and the "User Account Control" are to be improved. Both do not work correctly, already in Windows 7. Even when applications had been correctly installed (e.g. for various applications with Setup.exe installers) the "Program Compatibility Assistant"appears, but has no effect on the applications installed by the setup program. Upon such installations Windows 7 and Windows 8 do not automatically create all the necessary permissions to the installation folder (target directory) of the application, for example if all access rights are required. **Windows 7** (with active "User Account Control") and **Windows 8** (even without active "User Account Control") do **bypass missing access rights** of users without any notification. To do so, Windows secretly creates a copy of the launched application file in a hidden user folder (... <user code>\ AppData\Local\VirtualStore\ ...), in which the user has full access rights, and executes the file from there. Analog, Windows creates copies of the registry keys of the application in the Windows Registry. The applications can not recognize and can not control these multiple existing copies of the application file and the application registration keys, which leads to various problems (e.g. when installing new versions of an application). To avoid these problems, all newly installed applications in both, Windows 7 and in Windows 8, currently should be checked manually for correct permissions before the first start. **These problems should be fixed urgently** in Windows 7 and in Windows 8.

We hope Microsoft implements the points mentioned here in an improved version of Windows 8 and that Microsoft restores the compatibility, which is currently missing.

☺   To support these requests for improvements, this article may be circulated, published or sent to Microsoft (DolphinsDesign.ch/E/Downloads/Articles/ Windows8_Usage_Tips_SuggestedImprovements.pdf).