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Window Manager *Brian Livingston*



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Want to use FAT-32 under NT 4.0? Finally, there is a solution

Fat-32 is one of the nicer features of Windows 98 and Windows 95B (also known as OSR2). But Microsoft has never released Windows NT 4.0 support for FAT-32, saying you should wait for NT 5.0 (now called Windows 2000).

For NT users who know where to look, however, a solution is at hand.

FAT-32 (a file format with a 32-bit file allocation table) allows you to create drive letters (or disk partitions) larger than the old FAT-16 limit of 2GB. FAT-32 also saves disk space by using a more efficient cluster size than the FAT-16 file format uses.

Depending on the files contained on your drive, converting from FAT-16 to FAT-32 usually frees up at least 20 percent of hard disk space that was previously wasted. To find out how much disk space you would gain, run Microsoft's FAT-32 Win utility. This program is located on the Windows 98 CD-ROM at D:\Tools\Reskit\Config (where D: is the letter of your CD-ROM drive).

Under Windows 98, FAT-32 also enables faster loading of Microsoft Office applications (and some others). After converting a drive to FAT-32, you run Win98's Disk Defragmenter. It writes the files of compliant applications back to your drive in the proper sequence to optimize their load times.

To run Win98's FAT-32 Drive Converter, click Start, Run, and type cvt1. To see some caveats about the process, click Details in the Drive Converter program. For greater control over the process (such as the ability to reverse it), you should use PartitionMagic, a utility from PowerQuest. (See www.powerquest.com/product/pm/PMdescription.html.)

If you want the capability to dual-boot NT 4.0 and read FAT-32 partitions, you need a little-known product from a company called Winternals Software. Winternals' FAT-32 for NT 4.0 is a file system driver that gives NT the ability to read FAT-32 partitions just as easily as it does FAT-16 and native NT File System volumes. A version of the driver that allows read-only access to FAT-32 drives is downloadable for free. A version that also allows writing to FAT-32 drives costs \$39 per seat (with network licensing terms available).

Although numerous satisfied users report running FAT-32 for NT successfully for months, it has escaped public notice to the extent that it's practically an NT secret. I scoured several search engines and found only a mention in a German-language magazine and a handful of Web sites.

You do need to respect a few minor limitations, though.

- Don't convert your NT 4.0 boot partition to FAT-32, because NT won't be able to boot from it.
- To run FAT-32 utilities such as Scandisk, you'll need to boot into Windows 98.
- Microsoft has no official position on the product, but Winternals' chief system architect, Mark Russinovich, notes, "We've had several orders from people at Microsoft."
- When you upgrade to Windows 2000, Russinovich says Microsoft's own driver automatically will take over FAT-32 support. You can then uninstall Winternals' product.

Go to www.sysinternals.com/fat32.htm for the free version or www.winternals.com/products/fat32.shtml for the read-write version. My thanks for this tip go to reader Marcus Boulware, who will receive a free copy of *Windows 98 Secrets*.

Calling all Windows 2000 beta testers

Send me e-mail with "W2000" as the subject, and tell me your thoughts on the progress of this new release.



Brian Livingston's latest book is Windows 98 Secrets (IDG Books). Send tips to brian_livingston@infoworld.com. He regrets that he cannot answer individual questions.

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