

New Microsoft Edge helps with passwords, reading, research, copy and paste

Microsoft on Monday released a new version of its recently overhauled Edge browser designed to excite ordinary consumers, not just IT administrators.

A collection of new browser features is designed to make Edge more useful, less frustrating and maybe even a better alternative to Google Chrome.

The features are designed to improve password security, tab management, online research and even lowly copy and paste. They're also designed to make browsing better for people who are learning to read, struggling with cluttered websites or using the web with dyslexia or vision problems.



Microsoft has struggled for years with its browser ambitions. Its older Internet Explorer dominated the market two decades ago, but Microsoft let it languish for years with few improvements. Rivals like Mozilla Firefox, Apple Safari and Google Chrome pushed IE aside and transformed the web into a constantly evolving technology foundation.

Microsoft tried a fresh start by stripping IE down into a new browser called Edge, but it still couldn't keep up. Now it has rebuilt Edge with Google's open-source Chromium project, the core software the Chrome browser uses.

Even though the new Edge is used only by those who take the trouble to download it themselves, Microsoft is encouraged. "Seekers looking for the new Edge beat our expectations and targets fivefold," said Liat Ben-Zur, Microsoft's Edge and Bing marketing leader.

Here's a look at the new features:

1. Password monitor will check any passwords you save with Edge to make sure they haven't been discovered in a data breach. If they have, Edge will warn you so you can change it. The feature is based on Microsoft's own research on the dark web. So far, it only works in Edge for Windows. It doesn't link with third-party password managers, which sometimes offer a similar feature.
2. Smart copy processes website data so it won't be a badly formatted hodgepodge of text and graphics when you paste it into a word processor, note app, email message or other destination.
3. A vertical tab arrangement offers a new way to organize all the websites you have open. The tabs appear in a vertical column on one side of your browser instead of a tab strip across the top. It's similar to options like the Tree Style Tab extension or a built-in option in the Vivaldi browser.
4. Immersive reader offers ways to improve the look of a website, useful for accessibility or just making reading easier. For example, it can strip out ads and other distractions, increase font size and change background colors. A focus mode restricts viewing to just a few lines of text, which is useful for people with dyslexia. You can also color-code different parts of speech, like nouns, verbs and adjectives, a useful feature for people just learning to read.
5. Edge already let you gather text, photos, and other website data into a side panel called Collections. Now Edge synchronizes your collections wherever you have the browser running -- Windows, MacOS, iOS or Android.
6. A feature called Give with Bing lets people donate rewards points earned by using Microsoft's search engine to more than a million nonprofit organizations. Through June, Microsoft will match contributions made to CDC Foundation, an organization that transfers the points to victims of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.

Microsoft also hopes you'll like a privacy feature that's not changing -- the ability to set Edge's tracker blocking to lightweight, moderate or serious.

Overhauling a browser is hard, but convincing millions of people to switch to it is arguably even harder. Chrome is the dominant browser, accounting for 64% of web usage today, according to analytics firm StatCounter.

For now, Microsoft is letting interested people download the new Edge on their own, but this spring, it will start distributing the browser to everyone through Windows Update. That's a powerful distribution advantage for the personal computer market, but it won't directly help spread Edge to smartphones, a crucial market.

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