

The unattend file lets you configure Windows while it's installing, and in some cases it's your only chance

 devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20111005-00

October 5, 2011



Raymond Chen

Some Windows settings can only be established as part of the installation process. This is done with a so-called *unattend file*. (Remember, no matter where you put an advanced setting, somebody will tell you that you are an idiot.) In earlier versions of Windows, the unattend file took the form of an INI file, but Windows Vista hopped aboard the XML bandwagon, and the unattend file format changed to XML. The nice thing about using XML is that you can publish a schema so people can validate their unattend file without having to perform a test install (only to discover twenty minutes later that a typo resulted in an entire section of the unattend file being ignored, say). If you spend a lot of time setting up computers, you can use an unattend file to answer all the Setup questions (like “enter your product key”) so all you have to do is type “setup /unattend:myconfiguration.xml” and go out to lunch. When you come back, your machine will be installed and ready.

Here are two of the most popular unattend settings which must be set during installation. (There are a bunch of popular unattend settings for things that can also be changed post-install; for those other settings, the unattend file is not your only chance.)

- CustomDefaultThemeFile – sets the default theme and wallpaper.
- FolderLocations – moves the C:\Users and C:\ProgramData directories, say to a different drive.

Wait, the `C:\Program Files` directory isn't on the list of directories that can be relocated. There's a reason for that, which we'll look at next time.

Raymond Chen

Follow

