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Windows Whiz Sinofsky Faces Moment of Truth

By SHIRA OVIDE

No matter how the world greets Microsoft Corp.'s MSFT -2.90% next version of Windows, one man will receive most of the praise or blame: Steven Sinofsky.

The secretive software whiz, who is fond of yoga and devours management theory, has been climbing the ranks at Microsoft since he helped get Bill Gates excited about the Web in the early 1990s.

Associated Press

Steven Sinofsky, the engineering whiz in charge of Microsoft's flagship Windows software, shown in June demonstrating the company's Surface tablet.

Mr. Sinofsky put his stamp on the widely used suite of programs called Office and successfully overhauled Windows after a clunky edition nearly sent the company off the rails in 2006.

Now the 47-year-old Mr. Sinofsky faces a defining test: whether his radical overhaul of Windows can restore Microsoft's relevance on the high-tech scene and win over consumers who have flocked to Apple Inc.'s AAPL -3.60% iPad and other mobile devices.

If Windows 8, which arrives Friday, proves to be a success, it would be a major milestone in Mr. Sinofsky's 23-year Microsoft career and cement his reputation for pulling off complicated engineering projects.

"How Windows 8 does will determine the company's future, and—I wouldn't be surprised—it will also determine the future of careers at Microsoft," said Brad Silverberg, a technology investor and former Microsoft executive who led its Windows 95 development effort.

Some Microsoft watchers place Mr. Sinofsky on a shortlist of internal candidates to succeed Chief Executive Steve Ballmer. But some people close to the company say concerns about his ability to cooperate with other executives might hurt Mr. Sinofsky's chances of eventually becoming CEO.

Mr. Sinofsky declined to comment for this article.

In his latest development campaign, Mr. Sinofsky at times seemed to borrow from the playbook of Apple's late co-founder Steve Jobs.

Industry executives say Microsoft and Mr. Sinofsky have carefully controlled technical and marketing information about Windows 8, doling it out in Mr. Sinofsky's periodic blog posts, one of which ran to 8,500 words.

Mr. Sinofsky has pushed for Apple-like control over how the new software and hardware work together, dictating details usually left to computer makers, such as the degree of resolution for screens and how long a PC takes to start.

Mr. Sinofsky, who grew up in New York and Florida, taught himself to program early personal-computer models. At around age 10, he bought parts at an electronics store to build a mock-up of a weapon from "Star Trek," he said in a 2009 interview.

He joined Microsoft in 1989 as a software engineer, after earning computer-science degrees at Cornell University and the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

Early on, he drew the attention of Mr. Gates, who tapped Mr. Sinofsky as a "technical assistant" to research promising technologies.

At his alma mater during a 1994 snowstorm, Mr. Sinofsky emailed Mr. Gates about how the fledgling Web had taken hold at Cornell.

Discussions with Mr. Sinofsky and others helped spur Mr. Gates's call to refashion Microsoft for the Internet boom, Mr. Gates has written. Soon afterward, in his first management assignment, Mr. Sinofsky helped unify competing fiefs in the Office group who were resistant to making programs like Word and Excel work seamlessly together.

"He used a combination of cajoling, leading, influencing, jawboning and occasionally [figuratively] hitting people over the head with a baseball bat," said Pete Higgins, a former senior vice president in the Office group.

Mr. Sinofsky honed the pattern for which he has become known: meticulously mapping out a software project in the beginning, and then expecting people to hew to his road map.

His methods reflect his interest in corporate innovation and management, according to people who know him.

On a sabbatical from Microsoft 14 years ago, Mr. Sinofsky spent a semester at Harvard Business School as a visiting scholar.

"As opposed to most people who go on sabbaticals to relax, he was really working hard here," said Stefan Thomke, the professor with whom Mr. Sinofsky taught a product-development course.

After Mr. Sinofsky helped bring four versions of Office to market, Mr. Ballmer put him in charge of Windows engineering in 2006. The division was reeling from Vista, a long-delayed and troubled version of Windows that customers shunned.

People who have worked with Mr. Sinofsky say he relies on a close circle of confidants and is wary of sharing information about his projects. The tight leash forced some Microsoft officials to scramble to ensure their own software meshed well with Windows 8, according to people familiar with the development process.

Other complications include developing a variant called Windows RT that works on different hardware.

Despite the pressures, Mr. Sinofsky appeared to be keeping an even keel as Windows 8's New York launch approached.

Mr. Higgins said he was surprised to run into the executive a few weeks ago on his way to one of his frequent yoga classes.

"How come you're not panicking?" Mr. Higgins recalled asking him.

Unfazed, Mr. Sinofsky talked Mr. Higgins into buying a Surface, Microsoft's own soon-to-be released brand-name tablet.

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