Network vs. Domain FAQ

Contributed by Ryan Kassel
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So, what are the differences between using a domain or a workgroup in Windows XP?

Windows has two modes of operation - Workgroup and Domain. Depending on the environment that your computer is in, you will be running in one of these two modes. Most home and small business environments will be Workgroup, and most mid- to large businesses will run in domain mode. There are different features and capabilities depending on each, and each serve a purpose.

Workgroups can be best understood as a loosely connected group of computers. They rely on each other for nothing, but they are there to share resources should the need arise. There is no centralized management and so there is a low barrier to use. By default, Windows XP is in this mode.

Domains, on the other hand, provide centralized management and security. User access is controlled from a separate server called a domain controller and there is a “trust” built between systems in a domain. There are much more robust systems for management as well.

Workgroup
A workgroup is best understood as a peer-to-peer network. That is, each computer is sustainable on its own. It has its own user list, it’s own access control and its own resources. In order for a user to access resources on another workgroup computer, that exact user must be setup on the other computer.

In addition, workgroups offer little security outside of basic access control. Windows “share permissions” are very basic and do not offer any kind of granularity for “who” can access “what”, etc. Workgroups are more than adequate, though, for most small business and home use.

Domain
A domain is a trusted group of computers that share security, access control and have data passed down from a centralized domain controller server or servers. Domain Controllers handle all aspects of granting users permission to login. They are the gatekeeper. In addition, most modern domains use Active Directory which allows and even more centralized point for software distribution, user management and computer controls. In addition, please see the table below for the main differences between the two models for windows networking:

Windows XP functions	On a workgroup	On a domain
NETWORKING		
Part of a local area network (LAN)	YES	YES
Part of a peer–to–peer network (for small businesses)	YES	YES
Part of a home network	YES	YES
Creation of server user account required	YES	YES
GENERAL OPTIONS		
“Welcome” screen available	YES	YES
Fast User Switching available	YES	YES
Password Backup and Restore Wizard available	YES	YES
New and classic Windows desktops available	YES	YES
Guest account automatically included	YES	YES
Internet and e–mail access	YES	YES