



How to configure your SOLIDWORKS workstation

If you're in the market for a SOLIDWORKS workstation, you should begin by asking yourself three basic questions: How big are my assemblies? How many geometric surfaces do I have? How complex are my parts files? Based upon your responses, you can begin to formulate a plan.

Start With Cores

Selecting the number of processing cores in your workstation is critical. SOLIDWORKS is a **frequency bound** application (meaning that it predominantly uses only one core). Since the frequency of that core determines performance more than any other variable, a workstation with fewer cores (but higher frequency) is ideal. If you're running only SOLIDWORKS and absolutely nothing else (not even an operating system) you could get by with as few as two cores. However, in practice, Windows is quite proficient at moving tasks to "free" cores, so that an intensive application like SOLIDWORKS can get 100% of the performance from the cores that it is using (because they are not burdened with other tasks). Therefore, six or eight cores are ideal for a typical SOLIDWORKS user who is also multitasking.

Redundant Cores

"You can buy more cores, but why?" says Adrian Fanjoy of Computer Aided Technology, Inc. (CATI). Fanjoy, along with CATI Support Manager Josh Altergott, are a pair of SOLIDWORKS gurus responsible for the SOLIDWORKS World presentations "Achieving Extreme SOLIDWORKS Performance: Hardware/Configuration" and "Achieving Extreme SOLIDWORKS Performance: Modeling Methodology." On the subject of configuring the correct SOLIDWORKS platform, both agree that, "When looking at cores, it becomes a money issue and you'll never use them (additional cores) anyway." As an example, Fanjoy cites a pair of workstations from a commodity computer manufacturer that are virtually identical in configuration except for the fact that one is a single processor and the other a dual. "The dual processor model is over \$800 more," he says, "\$800 more for cores many CAD designers won't be using. That's when it goes from being a performance issue to an ROI one."

The Need for Speed?

SOLIDWORKS Simulation and CPU rendering outside of SOLIDWORKS are bandwidth bound, meaning they commonly utilize multiple cores simultaneously. Therefore, if you incorporate these applications into your SOLIDWORKS workflow, a workstation with more cores can provide better performance to complete your renderings or simulations faster. In this case, more cores & threads can be advantageous, and it is best to find a good balance that maintains higher GHz and still fits within your budget. Would adding an additional processor (and therefore more cores) be beneficial? According to the CATI experts, it can, but only if you have a need for frequent local rendering.

Overclocking: The BOXX Advantage

“Overclocking matters,” says Fanjoy. “It allows you to take hardware and give it a boost. Everything runs faster. Re-builds are noticeably faster.” Referring to their own testing of SOLIDWORKS on an overclocked BOXX workstation, the two experts noted that overclocking offered significant performance increases. BOXX is the only workstation manufacturer offering professionally overclocked systems with full Intel® warranties.

The most popular CPU used for SOLIDWORKS is the 9th Generation Intel® Core™ i7 featuring a base clock speed of up to 3.6GHz. But with clock speeds up to 4.9GHz, BOXX APEXX workstations are the fastest SOLIDWORKS workstations on the market. Even better, unlike Intel® Turbo Boost Technology, which boosts the base clock speed on just two CPU cores, a BOXX overclocked solution operates at 4.9GHz across all eight cores. Fanjoy insists that overclocking is also part of a much larger picture. “Because all processes are moving faster,” he says, “working becomes more efficient, you’re more productive, and it’s a better overall user experience.”

BOXX Recommendations

APEXX S3 - Featuring a professionally overclocked, 9th generation Intel® Core™ i7 processor (4.9GHz), the BOXX flagship workstation provides SOLIDWORKS users with maximum performance at an affordable price.

APEXX X3 - For the SOLIDWORKS user who requires occasional rendering and simulation, BOXX recommends the industry’s fastest single-socket workstation (up to 18-cores), liquid-cooled and powered by an Intel® Core™ X-Series processor.

renderBOXX - Free your workstation and maintain peak productivity by offloading multi-threaded, CPU-intensive tasks to render-BOXX. For SOLIDWORKS users who need to rapidly render models in KeyShot (or other CPU-based rendering tools), this is the ideal solution.

APEXX 8R - The ideal platform for GPU-accelerated rendering, APEXX 8R is configurable with up to eight professional, dual-width NVIDIA® Quadro™ or AMD® Radeon Pro™ graphics cards and substantially accelerates GPU rendering and look development.



What About Memory

“RAM is the lynchpin,” say the CATI experts. You need enough RAM so you don’t have to swap or borrow from the hard drive, i.e., the virtual memory.

If you make sound decisions in these areas and pay attention to ROI and its relationship to performance, your result should be a SOLIDWORKS system that will save you time and money, while increasing your productivity and profits. But as you configure your system, keep in mind the parting advice of Adrian Fanjoy and Josh Altergott: “No amount of hardware can substitute for good modeling practices.”

Getting Graphic

When engineers and CAD designers set out to configure the ideal SOLIDWORKS system, the area that seems to cause the most confusion (due primarily to a wealth of misinformation) is the graphics card or GPU.

“The biggest misconception is that a bigger GPU is always the way to go,” says Altergott, “but that is simply not the case.” At larger companies or engineering firms, the confusion is an unfortunate byproduct of the relationship between the SOLIDWORKS user and IT personnel. A CAD designer may have to rely on an inadequate workstation which causes SOLIDWORKS to run slowly or the rendering and simulation processes to take hours. The user then pleads their case to management which hands it off to IT, and in this instance, wrong decisions are made.

“In some cases,” says Fanjoy, “the IT department, in order to get the SOLIDWORKS engineer off of their backs, will purchase the biggest, baddest system on the market—but it’s unnecessary. An NVIDIA Quadro P1000 card will work absolutely fine in most workflows. Now, you can opt for the NVIDIA Quadro P2000, P4000, or even a P5000, but keep in mind that the majority of SOLIDWORKS video tasks are done on CPU and RAM.”

At BOXX, we recommend the NVIDIA Quadro P2000 as an ideal mid-range graphics card for most SOLIDWORKS workflows and the CATI experts are quick to agree. “For core SOLIDWORKS design,” says Fanjoy, “Quadro P2000 is a good choice.”

BOXX also recommends moving to a higher GPU like the NVIDIA Quadro P5000 if you are looking for the ultimate in performance in a complex production pipeline. Fanjoy and Altergott stress that if SOLIDWORKS users also rely on other GPU-needy applications like SOLIDWORKS Visualize, a higher grade GPU is definitely a good idea.



The SSD Difference

The calculation is simple. Your choice of hard drive makes a significant impact on performance - especially if you lack sufficient RAM of which you can take advantage. As for Fanjoy and Altergott, both are staunch proponents of solid state drives, standard features in BOXX APEXX workstations. "With SSD," says Fanjoy and Altergott, "the workstation boots up and loads faster, so it's worth the expense, assuming your company is using good data management as well. And you don't necessarily need a huge drive especially if you can rely on a secondary drive for additional storage."

The Case for Dedicated Rendering

Because rendering is such a critical aspect of many SOLIDWORKS workflows (requiring substantial time and processing power), BOXX recommends off-loading to renderBOXX, a dedicated rendering solution for CPU-based rendering engines. Available with up to 56 processing cores, a renderBOXX node enables SOLIDWORKS users to deliver complex projects within budget and on schedule by drastically reducing rendering time. For GPU rendering engines like SOLIDWORKS Visualize, the fastest solution on the market is the BOXX APEXX 8R.

Conclusion

If you make sound decisions in these areas and pay attention to ROI and its relationship to performance, your result should be a SOLIDWORKS system that will save you time and money, while increasing your productivity and profits. But as you configure your system, keep in mind the parting advice of Adrian Fanjoy and Josh Altergott: "No amount of hardware can substitute for good modeling practices."

