

Microsoft's Open XML Moves May Stall OpenDocument Format

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Microsoft is moving toward making its Open XML file format a true open standard. But enterprises seeking an open document format do not need to delay current projects until they evaluate the Microsoft specification.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

On 22 November 2005, Microsoft announced that it will submit its Open XML document format — planned as the default document file format for the forthcoming Office 12 suite — to the Ecma International organization for standardization work. Microsoft and its co-sponsors, which include Apple Computer, Barclays Capital, Intel and Toshiba, hope that Ecma will eventually submit the format to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) for approval as a standard.

Analysis

This announcement will help Microsoft address industry criticism that the Open XML format is really a proprietary format. These efforts will also be aided by Microsoft's recent decision to change the format's licensing to allow sublicensing and application development without attribution. The Ecma submittal's co-sponsorship by other leading stakeholders will be very useful in gathering support for the specification, and will also open up the work to the viewpoints of other Ecma members that may see requirements that Microsoft has not anticipated.

This move will help to alter the perception that the Microsoft specification is not as open as the OpenDocument Format for Office Applications, which was approved by the Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards (OASIS) in May 2005 and submitted to the ISO in September. The OASIS OpenDocument Technical Committee — led by Sun Microsystems, and including Adobe Systems, IBM and Textuality (a company created by XML co-author Tim Bray, who is now a Sun employee) — has increasingly been seen as a serious competitor to the Microsoft specification. Microsoft's moves will likely stall that trend. The Massachusetts state government, for example, had previously made a highly publicized decision to adopt OpenDocument and drop the Microsoft Office formats, but may now be considering a broader range of options in its approach to this issue.

Recommendations for enterprises seeking an open XML-based document format: The OpenDocument specification's richness will meet many needs, but documents created with it will not necessarily be interchangeable with applications that can process the Microsoft specification. Gartner believes the Ecma specification will not appear before 1Q07 (0.8 probability). Adopt the OASIS format if you can exploit XML now for significant business advantages.

Analytical Sources: Rita Knox and Michael Silver, Gartner Research

Recommended Reading and Related Research

- "Office 12 File Format Will Bring XML Benefits, Migration Pain" — Enterprises should plan to deploy converters once Office 12 shifts to a default XML file format. **By Michael Silver and Rita Knox**
- "Use XML to Get More Value From Your Content" — XML-based products enable enterprises to reuse content, which maximizes its value. **By Rita Knox**

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