

ISO Approval of OASIS OpenDocument Is a Blow to Microsoft

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International standards bodies' unanimous approval of ISO/IEC 26300 moves OASIS OpenDocument Format to being the official XML document format. It is now unlikely that ISO will adopt Microsoft's Open XML document format.

Event

On 8 May 2006, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) approved the OpenDocument Format (ODF) for release as ISO/IEC 26300. ODF, an XML-defined specification created by OpenOffice.org and developed by the Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards (OASIS), aims to enable different applications to exchange documents.

Analysis

This validates the OASIS technical committee's nearly four-year effort (led by Sun Microsystems, and including Adobe Systems and IBM) to develop an XML representation for document formats such as text files and spreadsheets. From the outset, we predicted that Microsoft would face greater competition if OASIS succeeded (see "XML Content Standard Could Challenge Microsoft"). Government agencies worldwide are increasingly seeking document format compatibility among users who don't have access to common applications, particularly Microsoft Office applications.

ODF opens up opportunities for new products — for example, users could create integrated "composite" documents using text, graphics or spreadsheet elements, without shifting between applications. Applications and suites that support ODF include Google's Writely, IBM Workplace and Sun's StarOffice. By 2010, ODF document exchange will be required by 50 percent of government and 20 percent of commercial organizations (0.7 probability).

The future of Microsoft's proposed Open XML format is unclear. Microsoft only submitted this format for the European Computer Manufacturers Association's (Ecma's) approval in late 2005, after Massachusetts mandated that agencies use ODF for office productivity documents. Until Massachusetts' decision, Microsoft seemed to ignore growing support for ODF. Microsoft plans to submit its XML format to ISO after Ecma approval. But ISO will not approve multiple XML document formats (0.7 probability).

Recommendations

- **Users:** Recognize that you eventually will be saving your office product data in an XML-based format. Users that need ODF support today or need to comply with ISO standards should explore applications that support ODF. These applications may be cheaper to acquire, and enable different functionality, but the migration will not be inexpensive and will involve compatibility issues when exchanging documents with Microsoft Office users. If you need compatibility with Microsoft Office formats or cannot cost justify a migration, lobby Microsoft to support ODF and look for plug-ins that allow you to open and save ODF files from within Microsoft applications.
- **Vendors supporting any application using document formats that deliver content to people:** Seek opportunities to leverage ODF, particularly "mash-up" approaches to content creation and sharing.

Analytical Sources: Rita Knox and Michael Silver, Gartner Research

RECOMMENDED READING

- "Use XML to Structure and Manage Content" — XML is becoming the tool that knowledge workers use to structure content and ensure semantic consistency throughout the enterprise. **By Rita Knox**
- "Office Software Battle Moves to Open-Source Theater" — We don't believe that Microsoft Office will be replaced, but it will likely decline in importance as users spend time in other productivity applications. **By Michael Silver, Rita Knox and others**

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