

Microsoft Shrewdly Funds Open XML Translator Project

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Microsoft is taking an unusual approach to OpenDocument support for Office by enabling other companies and the open-source community to do the work. This is a good move that will help diffuse criticism of Office 2007.

Event

On 6 July 2006, Microsoft announced it had created an open-source Office Open XML Translator project to build tools that would convert Microsoft Office documents to the OpenDocument Format (ODF) recently certified by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). Microsoft will support three companies — Clever Age, Aztecsoft and DiaLOGIKa — and the open-source community in building a tool that will be available under the open-source Berkeley Software Distribution (BSD) license and posted on SourceForge. The completed tool for Word 2007 is scheduled to be delivered by the end of 2006. Tools for other Microsoft Office components and older versions of Microsoft Office will follow.

Analysis

Microsoft has been under scrutiny of late for the proprietary document formats used in Office. Late in 2005, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts decided to require some departments to standardize on the Organization for Advancement of Structured Information Standards (OASIS) ODF, which Microsoft did not participate in, and which has since been ratified as an ISO standard (see "ISO Approval of OASIS OpenDocument Is a Blow to Microsoft"). The governments of Denmark and Belgium are also looking at ODF.

In response, Microsoft announced in December 2005 that it would ask the Ecma International to prepare Microsoft Office Open XML format for adoption as a standard by ISO. Microsoft also opened up its binary formats so other vendors can develop products that use them more effectively.

Microsoft continues to discuss the technical merits of Office Open XML, such as better compatibility with Office features and support for the huge installed base of binary Office documents. But Microsoft also appears to have come to terms with the increasing importance of ODF, especially within the public sector, and the necessity of providing some level of interoperability.

Microsoft's strategy for attaining interoperability is shrewd. By using third parties to do the work and opening the project to the open-source community, Microsoft will minimize potential criticism from those who claim that Microsoft aims to undermine the ODF standard. The "open and save to ODF" function will be integrated into Office 2007, but will be a separate menu item and so less seamless than the open and save functions for other file formats (which occur from the standard open and save dialogue boxes). Gartner believes that the project should add a "compatibility checker" function for ODF documents to provide guidance regarding which functions will not translate.

Gartner expects uncertainty regarding which document format will become the de facto standard to continue through at least 2008. Through 2009, the majority of documents will still be exchanged in Microsoft binary formats (0.7 probability).

Recommendations

- Continue to follow developments in XML document formats, including Ecma's submission of Open XML to ISO.
- Make provisions to be able to support users that need access to Microsoft binary documents, OpenDocument documents and Office Open XML documents.

- If you use Microsoft Office and need to send and receive documents in OpenDocument format, test your documents and provide feedback to the project, including a suggestion that it should add compatibility guidance.

Analytical Sources: Michael Silver, Andrea Di Maio and Rita Knox, Gartner

RECOMMENDED READING

- "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 and others**
- "Microsoft's Open XML Moves May Stall OpenDocument Format" — Microsoft is moving toward making its Open XML file format a true open standard. **By Rita Knox and Michael Silver**

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