

Office Open XML Clears First Standardization Hurdle

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Ecma's approval of the Office Open XML document format as a standard helps Microsoft respond to organizations that want to use standardized open document formats. But do not expect a victor in the format war until 2008.

Event

On 7 December, 2006, Ecma International voted to approve Microsoft's Office Open XML document format as an international standard. Ecma will submit Office Open XML to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) for fast-track approval.

Analysis

In this latest battle in the format war, Microsoft gained ground on OpenDocument Format (ODF), which the ISO ratified as a standard in May 2006. ODF was created by OpenOffice.org and developed by the Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards (OASIS). The ISO fast-track approval process likely means that the ISO will vote on standardization in 2007. The Ecma vote gives Office Open XML a higher chance of ISO approval.

Standards ratification is important because some organizations, especially governments, prefer to use products and formats that conform to standards. In the case of document formats, IBM, Sun Microsystems and others, pushing ODF, got some government organizations to conclude in 2005 that they needed to adopt standard document formats to ensure that official documents could be opened years into the future. These vendors argued that a product might not be available that could read a document created in a closed, proprietary format 50 years hence, but if a format was open and documented, anyone could write an application to manipulate it.

This spurred Microsoft to submit the XML document formats, released with Office 2007, to Ecma. In 2006, Microsoft opened its proprietary binary formats and funded an open-source project to create ODF translators for Office.

- IBM, the sole dissenter before Ecma, voted against the certification because it believes:
- Office Open XML serves Microsoft's interests first, while ODF serves the broader industry
- The Office Open XML format's 6,000-page specification is too large for anyone to really implement

Microsoft argues that the specification is so large because:

- Its software provides a richer feature set than ODF
- It includes customer-defined schema support
- It provides backward compatibility with billions of existing documents and legacy formats
- The specification grew as a result of other TC45 vendors' contributions

Some vendors argued that the specifications for the ODF spreadsheet and presentation formats are insufficient for them to create lossless converters.

Vendors that consider themselves neutral, such as Novell (OpenOffice) and Corel (WordPerfect) have committed to supporting the Office Open XML and ODF formats in their products.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Do not expect a victor in the format war to emerge before 2008.
- If you have a specific requirement for an XML document format, investigate ODF and Office Open XML. Understand third-party product support and select the format specification that better serves your needs.
- If you believe you should move to an XML document format but have less-pressing business needs, continue to use legacy binary formats, if you can, until the standards situation stabilizes.

RECOMMENDED READING

- "Microsoft Shrewdly Funds Open XML Translator Project" — Microsoft is enabling other companies and the open-source community do support work for Office. **By Michael Silver, Andrea Di Maio and Rita Knox**
- "Office Software Battle Moves to Open-Source Theater" — The next battle in the office software war will be to replace proprietary formats with "open" or "standard" ones. **By Michael Silver, Rita Knox and others**

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