

Microsoft Declares Interfaces Accessible; Royalties May Apply

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Microsoft's new interoperability principles go much further than before, but questions remain about Microsoft's royalty terms and conditions and how they will affect the benefits of interoperability.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

On 21 February 2008, Microsoft said it would implement four new principles to increase openness and spur greater interoperability with Windows Vista (including the .NET Framework), Windows Server 2008, SQL Server 2008, Office 2007, Exchange Server 2007, and Office SharePoint Server 2007 (and future versions.)

Analysis

Microsoft has long resisted publishing interfaces that might help competitors and independent software vendors (ISVs) integrate products with its software stacks. During the past two years, Microsoft has become more willing to collaborate on interoperability. It has now yielded, under pressure from the market and from the European Commission.

Microsoft has pledged to support industry standards, data portability and improved interoperability with open access to all the application programming interfaces (APIs) and protocols in its high-volume products that are used by any other Microsoft product. If protocols are covered by patents and the implementations are for commercial use and distribution, however, Microsoft reserves the right to seek royalties or cross-licensing agreements, using reasonable and nondiscriminatory (RAND) terms and conditions. Microsoft has not specified how it would assess royalties.

Gartner believes this is an important change in Microsoft's willingness to encourage interoperability. We do not expect this new attitude will pervade the whole company, but we do think that attitudes are changing as new executives replace the old guard. But many members of the open-source community remain cynical, and the European Commission is seeking substantiation by action.

This move is not wholly altruistic. Many open-source software (OSS) packages already run on Windows, and Microsoft surely will entice many OSS developers to port applications to Windows in addition to Linux. This will help Microsoft expand the Windows platform as an organic and thriving ecosystem. More look-alike products to Excel, Word, Office and PowerPoint could emerge (with the caveat that the likely incompatibility between RAND licensing terms and important OSS licenses such as the General Public License will continue to discourage open-source developers from working with patented APIs and protocols).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Users and ISVs:

- Watch for collaborative agreements with major OSS consortia.
- Monitor the expansion of Microsoft's Interoperability Lab, which uses equipment and personnel from Novell and Microsoft.
- Ask Microsoft to publish the RAND terms (including costs) for each protocol as a measure of its open-access policy.

OSS Developers:

- Do not use Microsoft's documentation unless you have rigorous processes to keep track of applicable patents. Keep work that depends on these patents separate from other OSS work, to avoid exposing downstream distributors and users to litigation risk.

Additional research contribution and review: Mark Driver

RECOMMENDED READING

- "Microsoft Reaches Toward a More Consistent OSS Strategy" — Microsoft's recent announcements help clarify its position on open-source software. **By Mark Driver**
- "Evaluating IBM, Microsoft, Oracle and SAP Open-Source Software Strategies" — Software vendors are learning that they must find innovative methods to compete with the open-source model. **By Mark Driver**

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This research is part of a set of related research pieces. See "Enterprise Architecture Research Index: Enterprise Solution Architecture" for an overview.

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