



OOXML Implementations: A Community of One

When standards are based on applications, there will be only one full implementation

ISO approval is generally reserved for standards that have achieved widespread implementation, acceptance, and use. Before ISO approval, OOXML should therefore be implemented widely in a variety of applications – word processors, spreadsheet, and presentation applications – to offer citizens choice from among competing software products. This is not the case.

There are no proven implementations of DIS 29500 (OOXML) apart from Office 2007. Lists of OOXML-

supporting products are offered as evidence, but as BSI British Standards noted in its comments, "there was no other proven implementation of OOXML apart from Office 2007." Even files produced by Microsoft Office 2007 are *not* OOXML (DIS 29500). Microsoft Office 2007 documents contain many elements not specified in DIS 29500, such as binary code, macros, OLE objects, ActiveX, DRM and SharePoint metadata. Additional changes are likely to be made as a result of the Ballot Resolution Meeting, further distancing OOXML from what is found in Office 2007. Should OOXML be approved as an international standard without a single reference implementation or interoperability test suite?

"Well, it's too early for other vendors to commit to this file format. After the BRM (Ballot Resolution Meeting - in February 2008) there may be changes to it, so it is risky, and may not make commercial sense to implement OpenXML as it is at the moment." - [Doug Mahugh, TechEd 2007, Kuala Lumpur Malaysia](#)

For many so-called OOXML "implementations," the ability to create, edit, or even save in OOXML may not exist. Take, for example, the claims that OOXML is supported in several Apple products, among them *iWork 08*. Beyond opening OOXML documents, users are unable to create OOXML documents, make changes to them and return to sender, or even save them in OOXML!¹ Another example, OOXML is only partially supported by Novell's edition of OpenOffice through the use of a plug-in.

Filters, converters, and plug-ins are no substitute for full native support. Most of the referenced implementations are just using filters, converters or file viewers. Yet "support" for OOXML through these tools is imperfect (even for conversion within the same office suite), requires user intervention, and adds complexity, reduces performance and increases costs.

Nor does the existence of several ODF-to-OOXML translators obviate the need for a single, universally-agreed document format for office applications. As an EU advisory body has noted², "*The potential arrival of a second international standard for revisable documents may mean that administrations will be required to support multiple formats leading to more complexity and increased costs. Although filters,*

¹ <http://notebook.bekkelund.net/2008/02/13/ooxml-%E2%80%94-the-apple-headache/>

² See PEGSCO (Pan-European eGovernment Services Committee), Conclusions and Recommendations on Open Document Formats, 6 December 2006) at <http://ec.europa.eu/idabc/servlets/Doc?id=26971>

translators and plug-ins may theoretically enable interoperability, experience shows that multiple transformations of formats may lead to problems, especially as there is no complete mapping between all features of each of the different standards.”

There is strong reason to believe that there will never be another full implementation of OOXML. OOXML's complexity, extraordinary length, IPR concerns, technical omissions and single-vendor dependencies combine to render the development of alternative implementations commercially inviable.

In comparison, there are over 40 implementations of the ISO-approved OpenDocument Format (ISO/IEC 26300:2006). In its Annual Report 2007³, the ODF Alliance accurately describes the level of support for ODF implementations for word processors, spreadsheets, and presentations, up to and including full, native support.

"Nor will the collaboration team attempt to build file converters that can make files 100 percent compatible between the two file formats [ODF and OOXML]...But it will achieve the level of interoperability that customers can work with."

-Steve Ballmer, speaking to eWeek

Though many plans regarding full OOXML support in office suite applications have been *announced*, none has actually been *achieved*. Filters, bridges and promises are not ideal platforms for dynamic collaboration of office documents. So why the rush to ISO approval for a document format neither widely implemented nor used?

Unless there are multiple, competing, full implementations of OOXML, citizens will be faced with a choice of one – and only one – office suite based on OOXML, Microsoft Office. Until OOXML moves beyond its current single-vendor status, National Bodies should vote “No” (disapprove).

3 <http://www.odfalliance.org/resources/AnnualReport2007.pdf>