

OOXML Questions Microsoft Cannot Answer in Geneva



International
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Standardization

There are some important questions regarding OOXML's upcoming ISO bid that Microsoft cannot answer or just simply won't. From 25-29 February 2008 in Geneva, Switzerland, the ISO community will hold a [Ballot Resolution Meeting](#) (BRM) of the National Boards to discuss and vote finally on OOXML as an ISO standard. This article raises questions

that Microsoft should answer to the satisfaction of the ISO community as part of the deliberation leading up to the BRM vote.

Today our society depends upon an enormous variety of software applications and easy access to information in order to function on a day-to-day basis. Everyone knows the pain of moving office documents around. There is a level of interoperability that is missing in today's world, and OOXML's adoption will just perpetuate and worsen this problem. And we all want interoperability. We also all want the ability to implement a standard. A standard that can be neither implemented nor used is useless.

Open Standards represent a democratic ideal, which means accountability. When one proposes one's own property to become an ISO standard, we have a right to know all the answers before we vote you in.



At Left: Highly respected [Martin Bryan](#). As outgoing Conveyor of ISO/IEC JTC1/SC34 WG1 he accused MS of stacking his group and said, "The days of open standards development are fast disappearing. Instead we are getting 'standardization by corporation,' something I have been fighting against for the 20 years I have served on ISO committees."

As it currently stands, for the ISO community to adopt OOXML as a standard would be the first step toward our cherished Open Internet and Open Standards becoming an asset on the balance sheet of just one company, Microsoft. Recall that Microsoft was held liable by the US government and the EU as a proven monopolist, which illegally leveraged that monopoly to stifle competition. Here are some of the unresolved questions regarding OOXML that Microsoft cannot or simply will not answer:

- What will be the default file format of Office 14 (Office 2009)? Will it be identical to that described in Ecma-376? We don't know, because Microsoft is not providing us with a clear roadmap. Further more, there appears to be a very real question as to whether or not MS's covenant not to sue applies only to the current implementation, MS Office 2007, if you read the fine print. Where is Microsoft taking the world with OOXML? We just don't know.
- As part of the comment disposition process in JTC1, Microsoft is proposing to make thousands of changes to the Ecma-376 specification. When will we see a version of MS Office that implements all of the revised specification? Currently, not one single version of Microsoft Office is capable of actually implementing the OOXML specification.

- Thousands of changes are being made to OOXML as part of the JTC1 comment resolution process. Is MS going to implement those changes, and if so, and how?
- We have the OOXML “standard” and we have the MS-OOXML “reality”, what Microsoft Office actually writes out. It is known, for example, that MS-OOXML can contain scripts, macros and DRM, features that are not documented at all in the OOXML specification. What other features are output by MS Office but not described in the OOXML specification?
- The Microsoft Open Specification Promise (<http://www.microsoft.com/interop/osp/default.msp>) says that it only covers things that are “described in detail and not merely referenced in such Specification.” What are the technologies that are not covered by the OSP, the technologies that Microsoft believes are not described in detail or are merely referenced? What is shown in the OSP simply reinforces that the whole OOXML spec cannot be implemented. Rather than this vague language, why doesn’t Microsoft give an explicit list?
- What comments from the general public did Ecma TC45 receive during its review period in Ecma? Why have these public comments been suppressed?
- If Microsoft Office “Open” XML is truly “open,” why is it that the OOXML specification is tied so heavily to only one vendor’s products, as opposed to 40 applications currently capable of supporting the ODF specification?
- OOXML still has many technical shortcomings, as failed tests demonstrate. A couple of examples:
 - 1) Excel 2007 can produce a fully binary file format that has the same extension as OOXML for spreadsheets, so the application knows what is inside, but the user will never be privy to that information, absent specific accommodation from Microsoft on a case-by-case basis, which is an accommodation that Microsoft is unlikely to grant to the public at large; 2) try setting a password on an OOXML spreadsheet file from Office 2007. The document is no longer in OOXML format and the user is given no indication that they are no longer in a documented file format. Is OOXML ready to be an International Standard?
- From the overall document contents, it is acutely clear that no effort has been made in OOXML to start from the existing ISO standard for the representation of documents in XML. (The current standard is ODF 1.0, formally known as ISO/IEC 26300:2006). OOXML is unneeded and only harmful. Why did MS embark on this deliberate departure from an internationally recognized standard?
- If you read through the draft submitted to ECMA and ISO you will see MS has only disclosed a disabled subset of the markup and functionality of its new file formats. Lots of elements designed into OOXML are left undefined in the specification and require behaviors upon document files that only Microsoft Office applications can provide. Why? Also, when MS released the feature RTF format for interoperability initially in OOXML, it supported both read and write capabilities in Office. But they changed that so Office 2007 can receive OOXML files but will only “Write” now to a different file format. Why did MS make this change?

- In addition to the “open specification promise,” Microsoft should change the licensing scheme for any relevant current patents which can be used to extend OOXML. Those patents should be made available under a license which is **clearly compatible with GPL and LGPL**. This licensing schema should apply to future relevant Microsoft patents, too. Will Microsoft make its relevant patents legally valid for Open Source use.
- The name “Office Open XML” is often mistakenly called “Open Office XML” implying a non-existent connection to the OpenOffice.org project. This naming confusion has been documented and has occurred numerous times, including by analysts and even in Microsoft press releases and blogs. Since “OpenOffice.org ” is the pre-existing name, by 6 years, Ecma should choose a new name, less apt to continue this confusion. Will Microsoft make this change as a condition of gaining ISO status for OOXML? Don’t hold your breath.
- The Open Specification Promise that covers OOXML explicitly covers only the “Ecma 376” version of the standard. However, thousands of changes are being made to OOXML as part of the JTC1 comment resolution process. Are these changes covered as well?
- While Microsoft originally made assurances that the ISO would take control of the standard if it were approved, Microsoft has now reversed that position and will keep near-full control over [OOXML within ECMA](#) [PDF], an industry group that exists to advocate its members interests. Since the development and standardization of OOXML has been opaque, what guarantee will MS make to assure those activities will be done in an open setting in the future, including changes to MS Office as they are made which have direct effect on the format? Will Microsoft fulfill their promise to transfer stewardship, control and ownership of OOXML over to ISO, a promise made they made publicly and repeatedly?
- There’s a limit to what you can do with metadata. Working with RDF is nice, but custom XML schemas are the complete opposite of interoperability. Custom schemas break interoperability as they are by definition not shared by everybody or every organization. It thus condemns documents containing custom XML schemas to be manipulated and shared only by the users who have access to those custom XML schemas (typically inside one organization, generating maintenance problems for the future). How can the ISO community ever be assured that OOXML will interoperate with the established ISO standard?
- Many countries, including Thailand, expressed that they had no time to review the MS OOXML Spec during the Fast Track process. Other countries combined submitted thousands and thousands of comments. Yet only a small percentage of those comments will be addressed at the BRM, and all of those comments to be addressed will be technical comments only. When will comments on IPR, ISO policies/goals and JTC1 “contradiction” be resolved if not at the BRM? These countries deserve a resolution. Will they be resolved in an open and transparent fashion?
- **MS claims that MS Office can support arbitrary user-supplied XML schemas.** If that is really true, then the established ISO standard ODF’s schema could be loaded into Office 2007 and future versions natively, with an ODF option as default and the cloaking of OOXML as a standard dropped? Why not?

Information and communication technology (ICT) devices are able to exchange information only if they adhere to common communication protocols, technical interfaces, and information formats. We all desire the freedom and ability to develop, and implement these ICT's. We all feel the need for ICT within the same field to be able to interchange data efficiently.

OOXML demonstrates a "standard" Microsoft hurried through ECMA and appears to be nothing more than a rubber-stamp of one vendor's product specification. Microsoft's OOXML is nothing more than a format Microsoft created by running a program that spits out the guts of MS Office in an XML form. Now MS appears to have realized this and expressed the "Intent" to [deprecate features](#) in the future. Microsoft appears to think it is best to get rid of references to legacy formats and other proprietary technology in experimental Version 1.

The trend is that Microsoft is opening up the boring legacy bits of OOXML, in stupefying detail, while neglecting to document the pieces actually needed for interoperability at a competitive level, like macros, scripting, encryption, etc. In essence, Microsoft is opening up and releasing the file format information that competitors like OpenOffice.org have already figured out on their own, while still at the same time restricting access to the information needed to compete. And the more MS realizes it has to open up the specification, deprecate and modernize OOXML, what do you get? You get XML. XML is XML. Strip out the non-XML garbage from OOXML and you will have the OpenDocument Format.

We need for MICROSOFT TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS. Rather than hiding all the information we need and trying to cloak OOXML as ODF, we ask Microsoft to please get off the sinking ship, collaborate with the global community (which will welcome Microsoft) and help develop one universal file format for all. Long term, Microsoft can only benefit from cooperating with the market!

To our readers outside Microsoft's walls, we ask that you please consider contacting the National Board in your country, and request complete resolution for all issues raised by the comments to Microsoft's OOXML ISO application. Please be sure to insist that both the technical and non-technical issues be completely resolved as a pre-condition before OOXML is granted ISO status. You can find your delegates here: <http://www.nooxml.org/delegations>

An ISO standards vote is an open process. You are entitled to express your opinion. Remember a YES vote for OOXML is a vote against democracy and the freedom of choice.

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