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Insight

# The OOXML Debate What Does It Mean To You?

The run-up to the acceptance of Office Open XML (OOXML) as a standard by the International Standards Organisation (ISO) has been rather turbulent, with open source advocates opposing what they believe to be a pseudo open standard. Now that OOXML is here to stay, what does it mean to Indian IT solution providers and end-users—are they even concerned?

**a** brief flashback is essential to set the context for this story. In 2000, Microsoft realised that developers found it difficult to work natively with the binary formats used in Microsoft Office, since the specifications were not publicly available. So, they gradually ported their Office applications to an XML-based specification, beginning with Excel in Office XP. Considering the high population of people dependent on these applications, for quite some time, governments—especially in the European Union—had been requesting Microsoft to publish the XML specification as a standard, through the required regulatory procedures. Later, Microsoft handed over the potential standard to Ecma International, which put in all the required efforts to publish it as an ISO standard. And hence began a political drama in the tech world!

## Tough competition

While OOXML was on the anvil, the open source community pushed the OASIS Open Document Format for Office Applications (ODF) that was based on specifications originally developed by Sun Microsystems, as an international standard. ODF was approved by the ISO in 2006 as a publicly available specification, and was published as *ISO/IEC 26300:2006*.

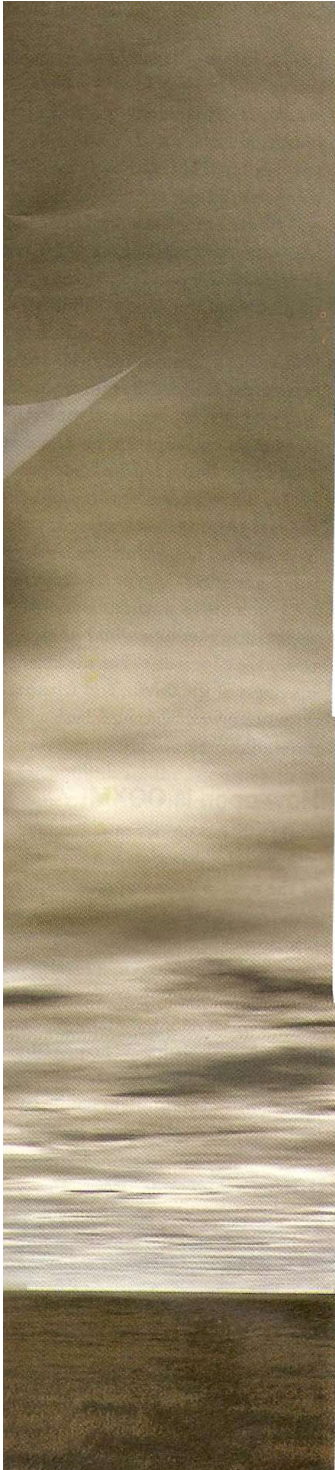
The advantages of open standards are obvious. Some records, especially concerning e-governance (e.g., land records) have to be maintained for ages, sometimes for centuries at a stretch. Such documents should not be closely tied to proprietary formats—that is, the data should be clinically separated from



## The fortune cookie

With the standardisation of OOXML, there are now two popular document standards on the scene - ODF and OOXML. Do you have to comply with both? If so, which one first? We need to follow the trends to figure that out.





the layers of formats and applications, so that it can be retrieved irrespective of whether the software that stored it (and the company that sold the software) exists or not.

Venkatesh 'Venky' Hariharan, co-founder, Open Source Foundation of India, explains that open standards are important even to individual/personal users—apart from the sheer freedom that comes with open standards, there is also a cost advantage. One simple example cited by him is the DVD player. While a DVD player can be put together within a few hundred rupees, these devices cost so much because of the money that manufacturers have to pay for compatibility with various video formats. Open standards avoid such hidden costs.

Therefore, the ODF standard was considered a respite by those who feared that their documents might 'become' locked up in a proprietary format promoted by Microsoft, and some organisations (including a few government agencies) migrated—or considered the migration of—their data to the open source standard.

### Once pushed down, to step up again

Undeterred by the emergence of another strong document format on the scene, Ecma International tried to push OOXML through ISO's fast track standardisation process in 2007. But some experts felt the 6000-page OOXML specification was flawed and undeserving of standardisation at that point of time, and also that Microsoft was not disclosing certain details needed to qualify the specification as truly open.

Ecma and Microsoft persevered on OOXML, and following a ballot resolution process, OOXML was approved as a standard by the ISO on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008. It will very soon be published as *ISO/IEC 29500*. Of



Shankar Krishnamoorthy, CTO, Aspire Systems (India) Pvt Ltd

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course, open source advocates are still dissatisfied with the poll results, and anti-trust investigations are on in the European Union regarding allegations that Microsoft 'rigged' the votes!

For now, however, it seems like OOXML is here to stay as an international standard, and Microsoft is confident that all is right about OOXML. "Having been shaped 'by an unprecedented number of technical experts from around the world, the Open XML specification has been greatly improved as a result of the standardisation process. We've listened to the global community of independent service vendors (ISVs), customers, and governments and learned a lot, and we are committed to supporting the OOXML specification approved by ISO/IEC in our products," says Vijay Kapur, national technology officer, Microsoft India.

He adds, when asked about the doubts regarding the ISO process: "The ratification shows that the process is valid, useful and worthwhile.

Insight



Sanjay Mehta, CEO, MAIA Intelligence

**"A variety of governmental and institutional organisations have become involved in the file-format battle because of their interest in a standardised file format that could last beyond any particular company."**

The outpouring of interest in this technical standard on a global basis is unprecedented and demonstrates the support of the community for such processes and the desire for the community to take stewardship of OOXML. We respect the standards process, and we have worked hard alongside many other participants to ensure that the process was conducted consistent to the guidelines of national bodies and those of ISO/IEC. We think it is very significant that 86 per cent of the countries voted to approve OOXML after a rigorous 14 month process."

That said, at 'I.I.', we are more interested in how this is likely to affect the way software is made and used in the future—and how aware and concerned are users in India regarding this?

**Are you concerned?**

In fact, less than 10 per cent of the companies we polled responded

saying they were concerned about standards and were following the standards debate. What about the others? Standards are about choice and flexibility—it's about knowing what choices you have in the future and which of your current choices are going to remain so. Considering this, it is surprising that very few end-users and solution providers actually followed the process on the Web.

However, in all fairness, there are some who are really concerned and have been following the debate very closely. Sanjay Mehta, CEO of MAIA Intelligence, a provider of business intelligence solutions, says, "This will have a great impact on organisations looking to move data to other systems. A variety of governmental and institutional organisations, for instance, have become involved in the file-format battle because of their interest in a standardised file format that could last beyond any particular company, as well as the possibility of having choices other than Microsoft Office."

"It is also very important for software companies to follow standards," adds Shankar Krishnamoorthy, CTO, Aspire Systems (India) Pvt Ltd. "It will make your systems open and also facilitate exchange and integration of data with other systems easily. If you adopt open standards, it will also help you become agile in responding to future requirements."

He has been following the OOXML debate on the Web, as it is very useful



Vijay Kapur, national technology officer, Microsoft India

**"We believe users should have the freedom to choose the format that best meets their needs. And we will continue to work with standards bodies, governments and the industry to promote greater interoperability."**

for a software company like Aspire to evolve and fix the gaps in each other's standards. "If you draw a parallel to industrial Ethernet, there are different standards available (from different companies) for connecting machines and systems in a shop-floor. Mitsubishi has come up with CCLink, Allen Bradley has DeviceNet for network communication between different devices in the shop floor, and there is OPC (Open Connectivity via Open Standards), which helps in connecting multiple systems. And everyone claims advantages and superior features over each other. Basically, these standards evolve over a period of time, and from the end-customer's standpoint, you have options to go with one or the other provider."

Foremost in the minds of application developers and users today are concerns about the extent of openness of OOXML, and whether the existence of multiple standards will be cause of concern.

**How open is OOXML?**

Hariharan opines that developers and users worldwide are not aware of the hidden costs of proprietary standards. Also, ISO standards are not necessarily open standards that can be implemented on a royalty-free basis. He also voices doubts about how open OOXML is really going to be. "Microsoft has a chequered history regarding intellectual property litigation, and they might some day find a way to slap royalties even on

those who use OOXML," he says.

For now, however, we have no clue regarding that point since Microsoft has released OOXML under the open specification promise and handed over the standard to ISO. Further, the OOXML format is supported by Adobe Buzzword, Symbian, Apple, Google Docs, etc—it is worth considering whether these companies would have supported the format if they saw any fear of future IP issues. So, at the moment, it seems as if Microsoft does intend OOXML to be an open standard that encourages choice, flexibility and interoperability for the IT industry and IT users.

Several Indian IT solution providers have also started using the format as a preferred technology standard for applications addressing both Indian and global customers. Kapur points out that Intrasphere Technologies, PacSoft Solutions, MS Technology, Skelta Software Inc, Aztecsoft, Processware Systems, AppPoint Software Solutions and Compulink are the latest to join the clique of Indian IT companies building products based on OOXML.

"The standardisation of OOXML is a welcome step. It will help those who are using or working on different operating systems and applications by easily accessing the files developed on the Microsoft platform and applications," says Mehta. "A document or spreadsheet created using one vendor's application can be opened and modified in another's because these would have been created around standardised formats. For a developer, this means a massive broadening of arenas for collaborations... XML-based programs that blend across different products and applications, and a common skeleton that can be done up the way your unique application demands." But as an application developer, he is a bit concerned about whether or not OOXML is actually an open format that can be used by

any desktop productivity application or whether it is simply a new but proprietary Microsoft file format that locks users into the Microsoft way of doing things. Technically speaking, both OOXML and ODF are tied to products, so the debate is both technological and political. In many ways, this could become like the DVD format wars!

### Multiple formats: good or bad?

What does the presence of multiple document formats mean to users? Ideally, standards are meant to unify. The longevity and expanse of the Internet is exemplary of the advantage of having a single standard—HTML is one of the best examples of how standardisation around a single format made the Web universally accessible and benefited consumers and industry. Hariharan points out that in 1995, companies like Microsoft and Netscape attempted to make their own proprietary extensions to HTML, which only resulted in confusion. The fact that HTML retained its openness and universality is what makes the Internet so eternal. That is typically the purpose that a standard should serve—when we attach a document to an e-mail sent across the globe, we should be certain that the recipients will be able to open it, irrespective of which software they use. But that might not really be the case when we have multiple document formats.

On the other hand, Microsoft feels that no single file format can meet all the needs of governments, enterprises and consumers today. Customers should have the ability to choose what format best meets their needs—in fact, this is why a lot of governments, including ours, are technology-neutral. Furthermore, with continuing advances in the field of information technology, the preservation of documents created using programs that are becoming



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increasingly incompatible has become a critical requirement. One of OOXML's stated objectives is to address this very need by ensuring the long-term preservation of documents created over the last two decades. Some features, such as compatibility with the content and functionality in billions of existing documents; enhanced archiving facilities; support for multiple languages and scripts; etc, seem like a step in that direction. With its Custom XML Schemas, OOXML also provides for separation between data and presentation, making the data independent of the application.

The spokesperson also clarifies that Microsoft's software is compatible with ODF. "In our attempt to enable customer choice and interoperability, we have strongly supported the development of OOXML-ODF translators on SourceForge.net. Office users can today use this translation technology to work with ODF-based documents. We have consistently said that we believe users should have

the freedom to choose the format that best meets their needs. And we will continue to work with standards bodies, governments and the industry to promote greater interoperability,” says Kapur.

Hariharan explains that even though there will be interoperability between the formats, users will still have to contend with migration/conversion headaches and accommodate the extra effort when they decide to move from one format to another.

### Take your pick: OOXML or ODF?

That said, what does the presence of multiple document formats mean to the intermediate users—that is, the application developers and solution providers? Do they have to take sides, and decide which platform to base their solution on, or should they go the extra mile and support both? Will it affect their work in any way?

Krishnamoorthy feels that the presence of multiple data standards will not hamper application development, but will actually be healthy for data exchange. “We just need to make sure that any two systems, which are going to be integrated, support the required document standards (either ODF or OOXML),” he says.

Mehta also shares similar sentiments. In fact, he projects that this interoperability move will also help the XBRL (extensible business reporting language) initiative that has been put forward by the developers of ODF and OOXML. XBRL standards already exist. With OOXML, it will have a greater reach and access to the users.

Hariharan points out the flipside of multiple formats for application developers: having to comply with

had been just one format.

### Do you have to take sides?

Krishnamoorthy suggests that ISVs and systems integrators should not sideline either of the standards. Instead, application developers should go with what the product requires and implement that standard, attempting to make the products more open. If the product is closed to one standard, it will hamper growth.

This does not mean that all developers have to rewrite their applications. It just means an extension of features. A software will typically have its own internal storage and processing algorithms. The adoption of standards like OOXML, ODF, HIPAA and HL7 comes into picture when the data needs to be exchanged with another system. In these cases, the product developer needs to extend the product to support these standards for outgoing/incoming data.

Most importantly, Krishnamoorthy highlights a key decision area that might concern many other CTOs like him: “Our product roadmap will definitely have both milestones (implement ODF and OOXML), except that one needs to take a call of what is required first. And, that will be based on market requirements!”

That, precisely is what we need to watch out for. More than the political debate surrounding the standards, solution developers are likely to be more worried about which way the market leans, in the coming days, as that is what will affect decisions about which format to adopt first, and which one to add in later as an extra fitting. We will keep you posted! **IT**

