

# Interoperability, Choice and Open XML

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<http://www.microsoft.com/interop/letters/choice.mspx>

## Interoperability and Microsoft

Over the past year, Microsoft has stepped up efforts to identify and meet the interoperability needs of our customers. Among other things, we have launched the Interoperability Executive Customer Council, made up of senior CIOs from the public and private sectors around the world, who are working closely with us to help us understand their most critical needs. We have also worked with others to found the Interoperability Vendor Alliance, built interoperability collaborations with vendors such as Novell and JBoss, delivered the Open Specification Promise, and supported Open XML becoming an international standard. All of these represent an ongoing commitment to delivering interoperability by design through consistent, customer-focused activities.

Microsoft understands that addressing interoperability involves drawing upon a variety of tools. We are deploying all of them: designing products so that they are interoperable with other products out of the box, without need for extensive consulting services; collaborating with others in the community to jointly solve interoperability challenges; broadening the ways we provide access to our technologies so that others can create interoperable solutions; and participating in efforts to develop standards that create common solutions to interoperability challenges.

A lot of hype – and smoke and mirrors obfuscation -- surrounds interoperability these days. The best way to cut through it is to focus on what is really happening, what steps are actually being taken, rather than the rhetoric. A good example is the debate surrounding document file formats.

## Document Formats and XML

In document formats, customers have said loud and clear that they want interoperability, choice and innovation. On these criteria, Microsoft has long believed in the power of XML-based file formats to unlock data in documents and to help integrate front and back office processes – while providing significant opportunities for independent software vendors to create high-value applications. Microsoft has increasingly implemented XML-based formats in successive releases of Office. With Office 2007, the default file formats for Word, Excel and PowerPoint are now based on Open XML, which is also supported in Office 2003, Office XP and Office 2000 through a free update. In fact, Office has long supported multiple formats.

We believe that Open XML represents an exciting advance toward achieving the original vision of XML, where broad interoperability allows documents to be archived, restructured, aggregated and re-used in new and dynamic ways. We believe that Open XML can help spark an explosion of innovation and investment, which will bring great benefits for customers in the years to come.

## Open XML, an International Standard since December 7, 2006

Customers, particularly government customers, have told us they would prefer that Open XML become an open standard. Members of the broader community have said they would like broad rights to use, without cost, any Microsoft patents necessary to implement all or part of the format.

Responding to these interests, Microsoft and others called for the standardization of Open XML. We submitted it to Ecma International, a highly respected standardization body that has developed hundreds of international technology standards over the past 46 years. Ecma formed a technical committee that represented a wide range of interests, including information technology companies (Apple, Intel, Novell, Microsoft, NextPage, Toshiba), government institutions that archive documents (the British Library, the U.S. Library of Congress) and sophisticated "power users" of information technology (BP, Statoil, Barclays Capital, Essilor). The technical committee worked intensively for nearly a year and ultimately produced a specification that met its key objectives. The original specification submitted to the technical committee grew from approximately 2,000 pages to over 6,000 as a result of the committee's requirement that it comprehensively detail all aspects of the format. The specification enables implementation of the standard on multiple operating systems and in heterogeneous environments, and it provides backward compatibility with billions of existing documents.

To ensure that any issues with Open XML were identified and resolved before Ecma completed its process, the technical committee posted drafts of the specification for the community's review and comment. Meanwhile, Microsoft brought the Open XML specification under our Open Specification Promise, clarifying that any Microsoft patent needed to implement any part of the specification was available to anyone for free to do so. Already, Corel and Novell have announced they will implement Open XML support in WordPerfect and OpenOffice. We understand that others also plan to implement Open XML support because doing so is in the best interests of their customers.

On December 7th, Ecma [approved](#) the adoption of Open XML as an international open standard. The vote was nearly unanimous; of the 21 members, IBM's was the sole dissenting vote. IBM again was the lone dissenter when Ecma also agreed to submit Open XML as a standard for ratification by ISO/IEC JTC1. Some governments had encouraged Ecma to seek this additional recognition to establish choice among ISO/IEC JTC1 standards, including Open Document Format (ODF). Microsoft congratulates Ecma and the many participants in its labor-intensive, successful effort. Open XML is now before ISO/IEC JTC1 for ratification.

### **ODF and Open XML**

Some discussion of the ratification of Open XML has focused on comparisons between it and ODF. It is important to recognize that ODF and Open XML were created with very different design goals and that they are only two of many document format standards in use today, each of which has characteristics that are attractive to different users in different scenarios.

ODF is closely tied to OpenOffice and related products, and reflects the functionality in those products. It was first developed in OASIS, another standardization body, before going to ISO/IEC JTC1, and a project is currently underway in OASIS to revise the version of ODF that went through ISO/IEC JTC1. Open XML, on the other hand, reflects the rich set of capabilities in Office 2007, offers a platform for exciting user productivity scenarios through user-defined schema, and was designed to be backwards compatible with billions of existing documents. (See the [Office Open XML Overview](#) released by Ecma for more detail on this standard.) So, although both ODF and Open XML are document formats, they are designed to address different needs in the marketplace. These are just two of the many formats in use today, including PDF/A and HTML, which are already accepted as ISO standards and supported by Office. One can see a similar

dynamic in the case of digital image formats, such as CGM, JPEG, and PNG, each of which is an ISO standard and meets different needs in the marketplace.

### **Open XML and ISO Standardization**

The ISO/IEC JTC1 process for considering Open XML (called "fast track") involves a one-month period when national standards bodies can raise perceived contradictions between this and existing or in-process ISO/IEC JTC1 activities. That's followed by a five-month technical review and balloting process.

The time period is essentially the same as that provided for consideration of ODF in ISO/IEC JTC1. When ODF was under consideration, Microsoft made no effort to slow down the process because we recognized customers' interest in the standardization of document formats. In sharp contrast, during the initial one-month period for consideration of Open XML in ISO/IEC JTC1, IBM led a global campaign urging national bodies to demand that ISO/IEC JTC1 not even consider Open XML, because ODF had made it through ISO/IEC JTC1 first – in other words, that Open XML should not even be considered on its technical merits because a competing standard had already been adopted. IBM has declared victory in blocking Open XML, hyping the comments that were filed. IBM ignores the fact that the vast majority of ISO members chose not to submit comments and that most if not all issues will be addressed during the technical review still to come.

This campaign to stop even the consideration of Open XML in ISO/IEC JTC1 is a blatant attempt to use the standards process to limit choice in the marketplace for ulterior commercial motives – and without regard for the negative impact on consumer choice and technological innovation. It is not a coincidence that IBM's Lotus Notes product, which IBM is actively promoting in the marketplace, fails to support the Open XML international standard. If successful, the campaign to block consideration of Open XML could create a dynamic where the first technology to the standards body, regardless of technical merit, gets to preclude other related ones from being considered. The IBM driven effort to force ODF on users through public procurement mandates is a further attempt to restrict choice. In XML-based file formats, which can easily interoperate through translators and be implemented side by side in productivity software, this exclusivity makes no sense – except to those who lack confidence in their ability to compete in the marketplace on the technical merits of their alternative standard. This campaign to limit choice and force their single standard on consumers should be resisted.

We have listened to our customers. They want choice. They want interoperability. They want innovation. We and others believe that Open XML achieves all these goals, and we look forward to supporting Ecma as it works positively with national standards bodies throughout the ISO/IEC process. See [OpenXMLDeveloper.org](http://OpenXMLDeveloper.org) for an indication of some of the support for Open XML and for more information on the rapidly growing community that is developing with the Ecma Open XML standard.

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