The Importance of Document Format Choice in Government

Overview

Recently, public policymakers have begun to look at technology issues that impact how government works and serves citizens via improved e-government systems. Policymakers are focused on ensuring the effective use of technology to create, use, and archive government documents. Because governments need different technologies to accomplish various tasks (and because they are already faced with the challenges associated with the deployment of legacy systems from multiple vendors), it is important to foster innovation and choice through neutral and competitive procurement policies that do not exclude vendors from the process. Unfortunately, a minority of voices is arguing that policymakers should lock in a single document format standard, called OpenDocument Format or "ODF." However, there are many choices among document format standards, and limiting the choice to ODF would impede the ability of governments to effectively serve their citizens, to pick the best technology for a specific need, and to manage archived documents. An ODF mandate would also drive up governments' costs and chill competition and innovation in the IT eco-system.

The Value of Choice

While ODF is used by some applications, a more robust open standard called "Open XML" is now available. This standard was developed in a technical committee of Ecma International, a widely respected international open standards organization, and was approved by Ecma (with an overwhelming vote of 20-1) as an international open standard last year. Open XML is now going through the "Fast-Track" process for additional approval by the International Organization for Standardization / International Electrotechnical Commission (ISO/IEC); that process should be completed early next year. Open XML offers numerous benefits:

- Is optimized to achieve backward compatibility with billions of existing documents, including government documents, helping to preserve customers' investments and meet their archival needs. By contrast, ODF is a narrower document format standard that was only designed to reflect the information created by one application (OpenOffice) and thus focuses on more limited functionality suitable for simpler applications;
- Delivers interoperability, is platform- and application-neutral, and is supported by Novell's OpenOffice and by Corel's WordPerfect offerings, as well as by products from Apple, Sun, and others;
- Enables data to be categorized in a custom way for easier searching;
- Accommodates multiple languages;
- Includes financial formulas for spreadsheets, which ODF now lacks;
- Allows data from other systems -- *e.g.*, healthcare and financial records -- to be easily incorporated and to be updated in real-time; these functions are not currently supported by ODF;
- Works with document format translators such as the freely available Open XML-ODF Translator to translate documents saved in Open XML to ODF, and vice versa;
- Is covered by irrevocable, royalty-free patent commitments from Microsoft, which both Ecma and ISO/IEC have declared satisfy (and, indeed, exceed) the minimum licensing requirements of Ecma and ISO/IEC. Accordingly, there are no IPR concerns associated with Open XML; and
- Supports technologies that help computer users with disabilities.

Procurement Preferences or Mandates for Document Formats Disserve Governments and their Constituents

Should policymakers, then, create a preference for Open XML? The answer is no. Government would not mandate a single vehicle for all government needs: heavy trucks, snowplows, passenger vehicles, ambulances, buses, and so on all play different necessary roles in government services. The same is true when it comes to document formats. The reality is that many document formats exist to satisfy the incredible diversity of needs in software applications. Some document formats are optimized to present a fixed representation of information so that it cannot be changed, ever. Editable document formats are designed to maximize editability. Other formats, like spreadsheets or page layout formats, are designed to suit the specific needs of software applications and systems. Since each of these features can be necessary given the goals of a specific project, locking in a single document format standard simply makes no sense. Indeed, the latest version of Corel's WordPerfect Office indicates that it supports *over 60 different document formats*. Rather, choice among document format standards best enables governments and other customers to meet their needs, and fosters greater competition and innovation in the IT marketplace.