



ODF-OOXML Harmonization: Yes, We Can!

With 90 percent functional overlap, convergence is both feasible and desirable

Many National Bodies raised the issue of harmonization in their OOXML (DIS 29500) ballot comments. Korea, South Africa, Belgium, Peru, Switzerland, and the Czech Republic, among others, requested harmonization, while others like France and New Zealand went one step further, developing a roadmap to achieve it.

Ecma's Proposed Disposition of Comments, however, promotes "translation" between ODF and OOXML and denies the ability to add harmonizing features. Yet with 90 percent functional overlap¹, convergence is both technically feasible and desirable.

Harmonization is technically feasible, as Microsoft has acknowledged. Harmonization starts from looking at where the two formats overlap – and there is a significant, perhaps 90 percent or more, area where OOXML and ODF do overlap – and expressing this functional overlap identically. This common functionality between ODF and OOXML would also include a common extensibility mechanism. The remaining 10 percent of the functionality, where these standards do not overlap, would represent the focus of the harmonization effort. That portion which represents a widespread need could be brought into the core of ODF, as Microsoft's Gray Knowlton said (quoted right). The remaining portion which only serves one vendor's needs, such as flags for deprecated legacy formatting options, could be represented using the common extensibility mechanism.

"Also, if individual governments mandate the use of ODF instead of Open XML, Microsoft would adapt, Knowlton said. The company would then implement the missing functionality that ODF doesn't support. However, those extensions would be custom-designed and outside of the standard, which is counter to the idea of an open document standard, Knowlton said."

-[PC World interview](#) with Gray Knowlton, Group Product Manager for Microsoft Office

Translation is a poor substitute for having a single format. As EU advisory bodies have concluded, translator tools are imperfect (even for conversion within the same office suite), require user intervention, and add complexity, reduce performance and increase costs.² Even if translation as proposed by Ecma can be done perfectly, then the necessity of two formats is questionable. If translation introduces errors, it is clearly inferior to having vendors work to harmonize their formats.

1 The documentation that emerged from the ODF-OOXML translator project lists 497 features in total for word-processing documents. The list of known issues contained 36 features, 4 hidden OOXML features, and 4 hidden ODF features, for a total of 44. Feature overlap therefore is 91 percent (453/497).

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>

Waiting only makes matters worse. The idiosyncrasies of the binary formats and replicating them into the next generation is problematic enough. If we wait, we will then need to consider legacy OOXML documents as well as legacy binary and legacy ODF documents.

Before proceeding to ISO approval, harmonize features that lead to a single format. Recall that ODF (ISO/IEC 26300:2006) is already a “harmonized” standard – various applications like OpenOffice, Koffice, AbiWord, etc., all came with different native file formats and worked together to develop a harmonized format. With Microsoft's recent announcement promising interoperability, now is the time for a pause in the approval process – to agree on a harmonization of features that lead to a single format, and to ensure that promises made are promises delivered. The OASIS ODF Technical Committee Chairs have said that they are ready and willing to host such a harmonization effort.

The Ecma response for “translation” between ODF and OOXML does not move us toward harmonization, but starts us down the road toward further divergence, a long and costly divergence. With a bloc of countries now in favor of harmonization, why not build on the proposals of France, New Zealand and others, and just do it!