



## Microsoft Cuts Off Access To Old Documents: What happened and why open formats matter!

Tucked in with the many security updates (and the restoration of one's ability to paste text from a web page into a Word document!), a very interesting modification to the Office 2003 software waits quietly for installation with Service Pack 3. Unbeknownst to the user installing this "Pack 3", their Office software is about to be imbued with a runaway power: the cutoff of access to your old documents.

With the blink of a 117 MB download (and an even lengthier installation process), Office users will no longer be able to open files in 24 older file formats. That means users – citizens, government employees, small business owners, etc. – will not be able to open their own documents saved in file formats used by Corel (Wordperfect), Lotus, and most versions of MS Office products before 2000. Instead, users will see the not-so-user-friendly statement below:

"You are attempting to open a file type that is blocked by your registry policy setting."

When a user attempts to open one of these older files, they will receive the above in a dialog box and no alternative actions are given to help users get access to their information in these "blocked" files.

When pressed for answers regarding this change, Microsoft eventually admitted that their action was in response to concerns with their parsing of Office 2003 code that presented a risk, but only after they suggested the move was in response to security concerns with the files themselves. Microsoft continues, in our view, to erroneously maintain that files in these formats are creating a "security risk."

Really, what is at risk is Microsoft's ability to sell more products, namely their new Office 2007 which will lock users into their new file format, Office Open XML (OOXML), which despite its name, is not open. What is at risk is Microsoft's own coding errors.

To make matters worse, users who want to restore their ability to open these files cannot simply uninstall Service Pack 3. Instead users are forced to remove Office 2003, in its entirety, and reinstall the software and any patches that were present before the upgrade to Service Pack 3. After widespread anger broke out within the user community, Microsoft posted a registry hack that would unblock the files. Still, Microsoft warns, "Unless you need to work with these very old file types on a regular basis, it's probably not a good idea to keep these file types unblocked for long periods of time." The spokesperson, Microsoft Office product manager Reed Shaffner, fails to mention what should be done if one does need ongoing access to older documents.

This is of critical importance not just for users of Office 2003, but as a warning sign for anyone considering moving to a document format that is not completely open and free of dominance by a single company. Specifically, Microsoft's Office Open XML (OOXML) is beginning to show signs of similar issues. Many of the features of the Ecma standard that Microsoft insisted were critical for backward compatibility with previous versions of Office are being deprecated.

Just like Office 2003's lack of older file format support problems, OOXML compatibility with proprietary components like Windows Meta File (wmf) and Vector Markup Language (vml) have been deprecated because of “security concerns” that might prevent ISO approval next month.

This lack of support example is not the first time that Microsoft's commitment to standards, or even its own APIs and protocols, has come into question. This means that users are now expected to pay additional license fees to get the functionality back. For example:

- Microsoft Exchange 5.5 (in 2002) supported the Network News Transfer Protocol (NNTP) standard; today it does not. Applications that once used this standard must now be rewritten.
- Exchange 2000 (in 2003) supported the WebDAV; today it does not. To use WebDAV now requires the additional purchase of Microsoft Office SharePoint Server.
- Office 2003 supported Reference Schemas that Microsoft offered to make public to governments requesting openness in file formats. Today, Office 2007 has obsoleted these schemas. Further, it is unknown what file formats Office 2009 - a product Microsoft is currently developing - will support

Recent events with Office 2003, and the examples above, should act as a cautionary tale of proprietary product, vendor, and platform lock-in. Although individual users are likely to experience frustration with compatibility issues seen in Office 2003 and OOXML, businesses and government agencies face a much more serious set of problems due to the ever increasing demands for document retention. Imagine the expense that a government agency using OOXML will incur for the initial conversion of documents and subsequent conversions that would be required whenever Microsoft is inclined to change their "standard".

A more secure future, given the growing importance of digital files for both individuals and governments, would be based on a long-life document format. A long-life document format is one whose underlying structure is resistant to changes in the tools used to produce them, the systems upon which they run, and the changing priorities of vendors in the marketplace. The OpenDocument Format (ODF), an ISO standard, employs this type of design. Additionally, as ODF is supported by several vendors, platforms, and implementations, no user of ODF documents is at the mercy of any particular vendor.

This vendor-neutral quality makes ODF a superior format for document retention. Third-party developers are not second class citizens because all of the companies implementing the standard are, in effect, third party developers. As a result, a document archive is beholden to no particular vendor and no particular platform.

If any large-scale document conversion is in your future, as the result of this recent Microsoft file “block,” governments would be well advised to consider moving to ODF. With ODF, users get multi-vendor support, flexibility and longevity rather than one vendor's dubious history, documented here, of unstable “legacy” support. The ODF Alliance advises governments to demand choice – not of standards – but of the products that support open standards for file formats. Without choice of products, long term document access may be in jeopardy.