

Office Open XML Fact Sheet

On December 7, 2006, Ecma approved Office Open XML (OOXML) and plans to submit it to the Joint Technical Committee 1 of the International Organization for Standardization and International Electrotechnical Commission (ISO/IEC JTC1), triggering a 9-12 month process during which OOXML will be considered for adoption as an international standard. Several critical questions regarding the Ecma process itself and OOXML need to be carefully considered, given the long-standing policies of ISO and IEC regarding openness and transparency of the standards-development process, the technical quality of the standard, and the avoidance of “contradictory” standards.

We raise these questions below and provide some of the facts to help you answer them.

- **How open is the Ecma process?** Ecma Technical Committee 45 included the following goal in its terms of reference: “produce a formal standard for office productivity applications within the Ecma International standards process which is fully compatible with the Office Open XML Formats”. In other words, Ecma produced a standard restricted to be compatible with a single vendor's own product. Improving the standard, addressing the needs of users of other products in existence, and accommodating the functionality of any other products to ensure the widest degree of adoption and interoperability are hallmarks of an open standards process.
- **Does size matter?** Fast-track procedures should not be used to rubber stamp a single-vendor's specification of over 6000 pages. Can a National Body make an informed decision on such a large specification in the allotted time?
- **Why “reinvent” existing standards?** One reason for the length and complexity of OOXML is its failure to reuse existing standards. Programmers reuse existing tools and skills in the knowledge that these standards are well-tested and actually work. Examples of existing standards not used in OOXML include SVG for drawings and MathML for equations. Instead, OOXML “reinvents the wheel,” creating unnecessary complexity for programmers.
- **Do embedded binary formats make standards “modern”?** Ecma TC 45's charter prevented members from making any changes that would be incompatible with Microsoft's existing proprietary binary formats. For these so-called “legacy reasons,” OOXML grandfathers in old implementations, including their bugs. For example, the date mechanism used in the Excel spreadsheet application, which caused days of the week before March 1, 1900 to be off by one, continues to be off by one. Such deficiencies should not be perpetuated. There should be no room in an “open” standard for embedding the bugs of legacy binary formats.
- **How can interoperability be achieved?** As discussed above, the fact that OOXML was designed to be compatible with only one specific application makes interoperability more tenuous to achieve. An open standard for document formats should promote cross-vendor and

cross-application interoperability. Given OOXML's length and complexity, it is likely that there will be only one implementation.

- **Do we need two standards to do the same thing?** OOXML is in “evident contradiction” with other ISO/IEC standards. During the 30-day JTC 1 National Body (NB) review period, a NB may identify to the JTC 1 Secretariat any perceived contradiction with other JTC 1, ISO or IEC standards. The OpenDocument Format (ODF) is an approved and published international standard (ISO/IEC 26300:2006).¹ Both ODF and OOXML were designed for the same customers (users of text, spreadsheets, and presentations) and use the same technical means (XML in zip archives).

¹<http://www.iso.org/iso/en/CatalogueDetailPage.CatalogueDetail?CSNUMBER=43485&scopelist=PROGRAMME>