



Debunking Myths on Open Document Formats (ODF)

Myth #1 – Mandating ODF is about choosing technology company winners and losers.

Reality - The decision to move to ODF is about citizens and governments winning. ODF provides freedom of action, choice, flexibility and reliability. It's your document; do with the data what you want, now and forever. You win.

Myth #2 – Mandating ODF limits choice and locks-out vendors.

Reality - ODF is the only alternative that increases choice and prevents vendor lock-out. Published fully and freely available for anyone to implement, ODF enables increased competition. Any company wishing to implement it can do so easily. Developed and approved by OASIS (on whose board IBM, Microsoft, Sun and others sit), in an open, inclusive and transparent process, ODF has no restrictions limiting its use in any software, be it customer unique code, a vendor product or open source.

Myth #3 – Migration to ODF is technically challenging.

Reality – Nothing in particular about ODF makes it technically challenging to implement. Conversion to any new product or migration to a new product upgrade may present some technical challenges, largely in the area of training. For example, the research company Gartner published that "Office 12," the name for next year's update to Microsoft Office 2003 (which will use a new XML-based Microsoft proprietary document format), "will differ significantly from its current form," and concludes that migration may be rough for some users and the IT departments which support them. Moving to an ODF implementation involves the same, if not less, technical complexity, training and compatibility challenges than migrating to Office 12.

Myth #4 – Migration to ODF is costly.

Reality – As with any conversion, there will be initial costs associated with migration. It is likely, though, that migration to an ODF-based product will be substantially less costly than alternatives in the long run as purchasers will have many more cost-competitive alternatives available to them and greater freedom of action in their use of their technology.

Myth #5 – ODF is a new and an unproven specification.

Reality – Based on technology that has been around since 1972, ODF is very well proven and highly reliable and it has evolved steadily in the marketplace. The current specification will continue to evolve, supported by a broad community of interested parties in an open forum. Earlier versions of this XML-based specification have been in use for years in various products and open source projects. Microsoft's proposed Office Open XML-based format is not well understood nor is it available in any commercial product. It will apparently only be available in product, "Office 12," from one company sometime in 2006.

Myth #6 – Citizens will not be able to access government documents based on ODF.

Reality - Today, anyone can freely download OpenOffice and read, create, modify and save documents in ODF. Currently, IBM, Sun, Novell, Red Hat, Koffice, Abiword and others offer or are developing implementations for the marketplace. Furthermore, the stance that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and other governments around the world are taking on this issue is promoting development investment from vendors. Citizens will have many robust, flexible and interoperable alternatives available to them.

Myth #7 – Massachusetts is alone in its support for ODF.

Reality - While it is true that Massachusetts has taken a leadership position in adopting a policy to protect its sovereign control over its documents for the long term, the desirability of open document formats is well understood and has been discussed for many years in both the public administrations and in businesses. Governmental departments in various countries such as France, Germany and Thailand are either already using ODF or are planning migrations in the near future. Other countries such as Norway have declared comprehensive openness policies that incorporate ODF that are planned to be implemented in the next couple of years. In addition, companies including IBM are implementing ODF in their own organizations.

Myth #8 – ODF is a security risk.

Reality - There is nothing distinct about ODF that makes it any more or less vulnerable to security risks, code manipulation and content access than any other format. Security is an imperative and should be addressed through policy decisions on information sharing regardless of document format. Security exposures caused by programmatic extensions, such as the visual basic macros that can be imbedded in Microsoft Office documents, are well known. The many engineers working to enhance the ODF specification are also developing techniques to mitigate any security risk exposures that may exist.

Myth #9 – ODF stifles innovation and can't keep pace with technology developments.

Reality – This assertion could not be further from the truth. The open, collaborative process for ODF management ensures it will keep pace of change. The economics of an open freely available specification mean that any number of commercial and non-commercial entities can bring truly innovative functions to the market and can realistically pursue marginal niches of market opportunity. This much broader potential for innovation at a product level, combined with the open specification development process creates more potential to collaboratively innovate the specification itself. As innovation occurs and technology develops, ODF will evolve accordingly.