

The Importance of Open Document Formats for Governments

Governments Depend on Documents

Documents are the life blood of modern governments and its citizens. Governments use them to capture knowledge, store critical information, coordinate activities, measure results, and communicate across departments and with businesses and citizens.

To adapt to ever-changing technology and business processes, governments need flexibility and reliability in accessing, using and maintaining these documents. Open file formats -the technology behind documents that determine the level of control governments have to create, exchange and archive information- are the key enabler of this flexibility and reliability.

Open File Formats Enable Future Access to Documents

The requirement to share and save documents with high degrees of fidelity drives common usage of a small number of common file formats. Governments that are tied to technology, strategy and pricing decisions of a single supplier, sometimes without reasonable possibilities to find alternative vendors, are having technology decisions imposed on them, and the businesses and citizens that need to interact with those documents. More alarmingly, governments may not have many options or the right to modify and save archived documents at some future date.

That future access is a compelling impetus to move to an open file format. When the format is open, rather than controlled by one particular vendor, governments get the access, flexibility, and reliability they need. Further, they can ensure interoperability between systems, better cost effectiveness, freedom of action, a level playing field and choice for themselves and their citizenry.

Be Aware of Alternative Approaches

While many governments and software vendors are supportive of the principle of open file formats, purchasers should pay attention to some key features before procuring a solution, if they want to ensure the flexibility and interoperability of open document formats.

- Check the default save format. Some purported open solutions require user override intervention to save the file in any but the default “closed” formats. Designed to bias the proprietary formats by saving to them (including “auto save”), this hidden default creates increased user dependence on a limited choice of vendors.
- Ask about proprietary tags to XML specification. XML allows the creation of any tags, even specific, non-portable, proprietary data tags. If the meaning of the information between the tags is unknown, another application will not likely have the ability to make any sense of the data, even if it understands the reference schema. In some situations, vendors have created tags attaching un-readable, proprietary, platform specific, non portable information. This practice of obscuring and changing tags makes accessing and manipulating files difficult.
- Understand modification consultation procedures. If a format is fully licensed and not “controlled by an open industry organization”, it can be modified and changed without consultation, giving proprietary control to a single vendor.

- Read licensing agreement. Some purported open format solutions have licensing terms that are incompatible with the GPL and restrict use of the format by open source implementations.

OASIS Open Document Format is a Viable Open Alternative

A technical committee at OASIS is standardizing the open document format specifications. This is the most viable alternative for an open file format. The specifications have the advantage of being: functionally rich; fully published with free availability; controlled by an open industry organization; and implemented in the market by a variety of vendors, including IBM, Sun, KingSoft and Red Hat.

Which vendor's open document format implementation is selected is not ultimately important, as long as it complies with the principles of openness. The OASIS formats have considerable technical merit, and are relatively widely supported with great potential to be pervasively supported. They can evolve openly in an appropriate manner with broad industry participation.

Governments Can Ensure Open File Formats through Procurement

Insistence on openness needs to be tempered with pragmatism. In general, the best procurement policies are those which meet the technical requirements and adhere to the principles of openness which, for the most part, incorporate business requirements and cost effectiveness.

Governments should move aggressively towards the use of open file formats as a matter of principle and require support for such open file formats. In software procurements, governments can insist on open document formats. To achieve the benefits of pervasive open file formats more quickly, governments should:

- Adopt the OASIS open document formats as a standard.
- Insist that vendors implement open file formats as “save” defaults in their applications.
- Encourage major vendors to participate in OASIS technical committee, to make appropriate technical contributions (e.g., donate schema) and actively participate in the evolution of a truly open industry specification.
- Contribute user requirements to the OASIS open document format technical committee.