FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is the goal of the ODF Alliance?

To enable the public sector to have greater control over and direct management of their own records, information and documents, the ODF Alliance seeks to promote and advance the use of OpenDocument Format (ODF).

What is OpenDocument Format?

ODF is an open XML-based document file format for displaying, storing and editing office documents, such as spreadsheets, charts, and presentations. ODF was developed as an application-independent file format by OASIS (Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards), a vendor-neutral standards organization. ODF was approved by the International Organisation for Standardization (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) as an international standard (ISO/IEC 26300) in May 2006

ODF is owned and maintained by OASIS, and is a genuine vendor-neutral, open standard specification free from royalty and restricting encumbrances. All developers are free to work with it. In fact, ODF is the only standard for editable office documents that has been vetted by an independent, recognized standards body, has been implemented by multiple vendors, and can be implemented by any supplier (including proprietary software vendors as well as developers using open source software licenses such as the GNU LGPL or GNU GPL).

What is the relationship between the ODF Alliance and OASIS?

The ODF Alliance, which is primarily focused on government policies, is a separate and unaffiliated initiative that is complementary and reinforcing of OASIS's ongoing work on ODF. OASIS formed an OpenDocument Format Adoption Technical Committee, which expects to "focus on accelerating the creation of innovative applications and solutions that adopt ODF as their primary file format." As the ODF Alliance and OASIS share many of the same members and complementary objectives of promoting ODF, they are in close contact and will identify opportunities to work collaboratively. For more information on the technical standard work maintained by the OASIS OpenDocument Technical

Committee please see www.oasis-open.org/committees/tc_home.php?wg_abbrev=office.

Why Open Standards and OpenDocument Format?

Open standards ensure that the users' information is accessible as platforms and technologies change. Organizations and individuals that store their data in an open format avoid being locked into a single software vendor, leaving them free to switch software if their current vendor goes out of business, raises its prices, changes its software, or changes its licensing terms to something less favorable for the user.

ODF protects users from ever having to seek permission or pay a fee to any technology provider to access the user's own intellectual property. Adoption of open standards is particularly important for governmental applications because they can effectively ensure that a government document saved today will not be technologically locked tomorrow. A government should never have to ask permission of a vendor in order to have the choice and control it needs to access its own information.

Does the ODF Alliance support only ODF, or open standards in general?

The Alliance is focused on ODF, but the general messages about the value of truly open, non-vendor directed standards should be clear to everyone who understands what we are saying and doing with ODF.

What is the difference between "open standards," and "open source?"

Open standards are not the same as open source. The term "open source" is used to refer to the development model and distribution of software whose source code is available freely subject to the terms of a licensing agreement. This is in contrast to most proprietary software that is available only in binary, or closed, form. A more complete definition is available at: www.opensource.org/docs/definition.php

Open standards are standards, or "blueprints," that are created and maintained in an open manner, using a democratic approach, where no single individual or company controls the standard. This is the most important quality of an open standard. In addition, open standards are available to all, generally free of cost with no royalty or fee for creating an implementation conforming to the standard. Vendors may create either open source or proprietary software conforming to an open standard. Open standards provide choice and interoperability between systems.

What is an "open standard?"

"Open" must be more than merely a marketing term. There are multiple key criteria that must be met to be an open standard. The Alliance recognizes the following criteria as essential for determining an open standard:

- Developed, maintained and controlled by an open standards organization whose development and management process is well-defined, collaborative, democratic and inclusive;

- Published without restrictions or royalties;

- Freely available for adoption by the industry; and

- Implemented by multiple interoperable offerings.

Aren't all XML standards open standards?

Unfortunately, just using XML does not make a file format either "open" or a "standard." There is a considerable amount of confusion about the qualities and qualifications of XML. While XML is an open standard from the W3C, it does not mean that everything you do with it immediately becomes an open standard. Consider this analogy: in the English language we have 26 letters, a bunch of punctuation marks, and grammar and syntax rules. No one owns these, so we can call this bit "open." With these, however, I can create secret or confidential or proprietary documents that are not open. In the same way, someone can use XML (which is an open standard) and create proprietary specifications. Indeed, merely incorporating XML does not make a format open.

What are the issues around accessibility support for people with disabilities and ODF?

There are two levels that need to be addressed with any document format; ODF is not unique in this regard. #1: the file format itself must provide a way to encode the information needed by people with disabilities - such as alternate text descriptions of images, among other things; and #2 the application(s) that read and write a file format must support the accessibility features of the platform(s) they run on, and must interoperate with and be supported by the assistive technologies used by people with disabilities to interact with their desktop and applications. Many people with disabilities use the Microsoft Windows platform with commercial assistive technologies such as screen readers, screen magnifiers, on-screen keyboards, and voice recognition products that mediate their experience. These assistive technologies are usually customized when working with complex applications like office suites, providing for a productive environment and a good user experience (custom scripts in the screen readers to

re-present the user interface in a more efficient fashion, user-trained macros in the voice recognition programs to efficiently control the user interface, etc.).

What is being done to support people with disabilities use of ODF?

Support to read and create documents must include people with disabilities. The ODF Alliance supported the work of the OASIS ODF Accessibility Subcommittee, which completed its first accessibility evaluation of the OpenDocument v1.0 specification. The report identified 9 accessibility issues in ODF 1.0, and proposed candidate solutions to them. With these changes, the Subcommittee believes that ODF will meet or exceed the accessibility support provided in all other office file formats as well as that specified in the W3C Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0. OASIS has announced the public review of the OpenDocument Format 1.1 specification, which in large measure is focused on addressing the accessibility concerns raised by the Accessibility Subcommittee. The 60-day review period runs from 27 July 2006 through 25 September 2006. If all goes according to plan, ODF version1.1 could be finalized before the end of 2006.

In parallel to the file format work, a number of the organizations and companies developing ODF applications are working with assistive technology vendors to improve the adaptation and customization of those assistive technologies to the ODF applications.