

“Why ODF?” - The Importance of OpenDocument Format for Governments

Documents are the life blood of modern governments and their citizens. Governments use documents to capture knowledge, store critical information, coordinate activities, measure results, and communicate across departments and with businesses and citizens. Increasingly documents are moving from paper to electronic form. To adapt to ever-changing technology and business processes, governments need assurance that they can access, retrieve and use critical records, now and in the future.

OpenDocument Format (ODF) addresses these issues by standardizing file formats to give governments true control over their documents. Governments using applications that support ODF gain increased efficiencies, more flexibility and greater technology choice, leading to enhanced capability to communicate with and serve the public.

ODF is the ISO Approved International Open Standard for File Formats

ODF is the only open standard for office applications, and it is completely vendor neutral. Developed through a transparent, multi-vendor/multi-stakeholder process at OASIS (Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards), it is an open, XML-based document file format for displaying, storing and editing office documents, such as spreadsheets, charts, and presentations. It is available for implementation and use free from any licensing, royalty payments, or other restrictions. In May 2006, it was approved unanimously as an International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) standard.

Governments and Businesses are Embracing ODF

The promotion and usage of ODF is growing rapidly, demonstrating the global need for control and choice in document applications. For example, many enlightened governments across the globe are making policy decisions to move to ODF. These ODF and open standard policy leaders include Belgium, Brazil, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Denmark, Norway, France, and Thailand (<http://www.odfalliance.org/resources/GlobalViewODFPolicy.pdf>). Some of these governments and many others are already successfully using applications that support ODF. In addition to these policy actions, more than 50 federal agencies and state/local bodies across the globe are using office applications that support ODF (<http://opendocumentfellowship.org/government/precedent>).

Businesses are responding to the needs of governments and their customers, and implementing ODF in their products. A variety of applications are in the market today supporting ODF, ranging from open source solutions like OpenOffice.org and Koffice to commercial software solutions like Sun's StarOffice and IBM's Workplace. A complete list can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_applications_supporting_OpenDocument.

The Advantages of ODF are Obvious; Key Benefits for Governments Include:

- Information Ownership. Alarmingly, governments today may no longer truly own their documents; they may lose the ability to access, modify and save archived documents at some future date. ODF, as an open, durable standard, can ensure that a government document saved today will not be technologically locked or abandoned tomorrow. A government should never be dependent on a single vendor's technology to use its own information.
- Access. Worries over long term access to documents are real. Governments and their citizens are needlessly struggling to open older documents. What's more, if they can be opened, the documents are sometimes completely indecipherable because the technical specifications used to produce them are not available. ODF's entirely open nature solves these problems.
- Interoperability. ODF helps separate the document (information) from the application that created it. This document can then be processed by other applications seamlessly and with fidelity, without interference of any proprietary code or any other restrictions.
- Competition. Because ODF is a truly open standard, it levels the playing field for multiple software providers to compete on functionality and price.
- Choice. Governments are often tied to the upgrade paths, strategies and pricing decisions of a single supplier, sometimes without reasonable access to viable alternatives. ODF provides greater choice due to competition among vendors, including both proprietary and open source applications.
- Lower Cost. ODF is cost effective because competition among applications that implement ODF will provide a variety of solutions (including open source solutions) at competitive prices. This will also help citizens who will not have to buy a specific application to access government information – indeed, free-of-charge solutions are already available.
- Innovation. ODF provides a platform-independent format on which any company can build and distribute new applications and services. By providing a base-line open standard, documents will remain accessible even after innovations have been added.
- Preservation of Cultural Heritage. As more and more documents of potentially historical significance are being created and stored in digital form, it is essential that governments retain the ability to keep these documents and files free and accessible not only today but for future generations. ODF is the only open, XML-based document file format currently on the market that satisfies this basic test of public service.
- Emergency Management. The need for open standards is also compelling in the context of emergency preparedness. When the tsunami struck Thailand, its government and responding domestic and international agencies were unable to share and secure access to information essential to the relief effort because each used different data and document formats. Public access to essential government services, in emergency situations or otherwise, should never be restricted to users of one brand of software.

Within a Spectrum of Openness, Truly Open Standards Can Be Clearly Defined

Openness is a continuum with various degrees. When considering technologies that impact the exchange and interaction of information, it is wise to select technologies that are as open as possible and that demonstrate potential to evolve towards full openness. At the most open end of the spectrum, open file formats are:

- Developed, maintained and controlled by an open standards organization whose development and management process is well-defined, collaborative, democratic and inclusive. With stability and the assurance of open and fair access, requirements can be submitted, prioritized and incorporated into the specification. The standards body can also facilitate the proper evolution of a specification in the broader ecosystem of related and complementary open standards. With this approach, one single vendor cannot arbitrarily change the format and licensing terms to the detriment of others. Ideally an open file format is open to extensive public review at least once in its life-cycle, with comments duly discussed and acted upon, if required. Organizations that offer membership on reasonable terms to individuals, end users, and other interested parties are also preferred as they allow broader participation by stakeholders in the standards.
- Published without restrictions or royalties. Anyone, including a government itself, can freely see the specification and can freely design implementations to create, modify and save documents. No restrictions exist that would limit its use in any software, be it customer unique code, a vendor's application with a proprietary license, or a community's software with an open source license.
- Freely available for adoption by industry. This removes artificial barriers to market entry, promotes healthy competition, increases cost effectiveness and enables innovative alternatives.
- Fully and independently implemented by multiple software providers on multiple platforms without any intellectual property reservations for necessary technology. Implementation of open file formats by numerous vendors enables choice and longevity and spurs innovation. Further, the specification is supported by multiple applications with demonstrated interoperability. A faithful implementation of the open file format can fully interoperate with other implementations, allowing users to more easily interact with each other and share information.

Purchasers Should Ask Questions

While many governments and software vendors recognize the value of open standards and are embracing ODF and openness, purchasers should pay attention to some key features when 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 toward 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 unreadable, 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.
- Ask for inter-platform portability. Can a document created on one platform or operating system be accessed and edited completely on any other platform or operating system? Or are the users of the document locked into using the same platform for accessing the document as the one on which it was created. In several decades when the document still needs to be accessed, will that same platform still be available?

Insisting on ODF Makes Sense

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

- Insist that vendors implement ODF as “save” defaults in their applications.
- Encourage participation by stakeholders, including users, in OASIS technical committees, support appropriate technical contributions (e.g., donate schema) and consider more active participation in the evolution of a truly open standard.
- Contribute user requirements to the OASIS ODF Technical Committee.

The ODF Alliance Provides Excellent Resources

The ODF Alliance, launched in March 2006, promotes and advances the use of OpenDocument Format (ODF) so that public administrations can have greater control over and direct management of their own records and to ensure that public access to government services is not restricted to users of any particular brand of software. The considerable momentum behind ODF is reflected in the surging membership of the ODF Alliance, which has grown from 36 member organizations to more than 360 from 50 countries in less than one year. New members are welcome. The Alliance web site serves as an excellent resource for those wishing to join, know more about ODF, and/or implement ODF within their government.

Please visit www.odfalliance.org today for more information.