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## Winning the OpenDocument vs. OpenXML war

By Tony Mobily

In August 2005 Peter Quinn, now retired Chief Information Officer of Massachusetts, decided that OpenDocument was the best way to store documents with the guarantee that they would be able to be opened 10, 30, 50 years from now. For a state government, this is particularly important. He led Massachusetts toward OpenDocument and OpenOffice.org. The move, which sparked controversy and ferocious lobbying, is likely to end-up in history books (and while we're at it, I'll mention that history books in particular ought to be accessible 50, 100, 1000 years from now!). Quinn's move was to create a snowball effect we have all witnessed over the past 2 years; when MA switched to OpenDocument, somebody at Microsoft realised that they had a problem—a real one—and that something needed to be done right away.

Having OpenXML (Microsoft's standard) approved by an official body quickly, very quickly, became Microsoft's priority. To start with, it looked like the software giant had managed to fool everybody and had things its way. Things turned out a little more complicated than that. Right now, the future doesn't look too bright for Microsoft, as the ISO fast-tracking of OpenXML is hitting problems on all fronts; money can open many doors, but it can't buy you broad consensus on a bogus standard pushed through via sneaky practices. Microsoft keeps managing to defend an indefensible format day after day, but it's proving to be an up-hill battle.

However, the real war has only just started. ISO allowing Microsoft to fast track OpenXML is in itself a really bad sign: a sign of a standard body that is willing to be bent by lobbying and by the big muscles (or dollars?) of a company that has grown too big. I know Microsoft, I have witnessed computer history unfold before me for decades, and I sadly believe that OpenXML will eventually manage to squeeze through the standardisation process, and well, become a competing standard (an expression that is absurd in itself, if you ask me).

While the standardisation war is absolutely crucial, I firmly believe that the only way this battle can be won is by making sure that people *use* OpenDocument in their everyday life. This sounds obvious, but well, it isn't—and it isn't an easy goal. Here are some things that can be done to fight the battle:

- Ask companies to make documents available in OpenDocument format. Bank forms, mortgage application forms, templates, etc.: write to every company you use, and ask them to provide ODF files as well as DOC/PDF ones.
- Lobby Microsoft so that it directly supports OpenOffice.org documents. Right now, there are two options: the [Sun ODF Plug-in for Microsoft Office](#) and the [OpenXML/ODF Translator Add-ins for Office](#). Neither of them are optimal. They both have problems and limitations mostly because of Microsoft. For example, Sun's plugin has problems that stem directly from Microsoft: every time you open an ODF document, you get: *"This file needs to be opened by the ODF Text Document text converter, which may pose a security risk if the file you are opening is a malicious file. Choose Yes to open this file only if you are sure it is from a trusted source."* Also, you can't open an OpenDocument file using the plugin with Office 2007, which has a bug that causes it to ignore... other input filters. These are obviously show-stoppers for the average user. I see these plugins as temporary solutions. Since OpenDocument is a standard, it should be included in Microsoft Office by default, even though this might take a great deal of lobbying and flexing of muscles.

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- Convince more and more OEMs to provide OpenOffice.org pre-installed with their computers. Dell is already doing it with their Ubuntu machines. However, what OpenDocument really needs, is to be an available option—a free one!—when you get a new Windows computer to have OpenOffice.org already available. This is made hard by Microsoft trying to put a “text drive” version of Office in OEM computers. Again, I have seen some movement here, and I think it’s a very obtainable goal.
- Make people and small offices realise that Office doesn’t come with Windows, and if they are using Office without paying for it, they are doing something illegal. Show them OpenOffice.org, a valid alternative. This seems obvious, but I am always amazed by the number of people who have never seen or heard of OpenOffice.org.
- If you have a popular web site, only give away ODF files; if people complain, tell them to download and install OpenOffice.org. In my view. OpenOffice.org should become “The Firefox of the office suites”.

Basically, members of the free software community can and should do more than just watch the fight and rest on their laurels: the more people that fight, the more likely we are to win this battle, which is anything but over. We should all keep in mind that OpenDocument might become, even in the long term, a “fringe format” that nobody actually uses. Microsoft’s monopoly on file formats, if that becomes the case, would create unimaginable damage.

## Biography

Tony Mobily (/user/2" title="View user profile.): Tony is the founder and the Editor In Chief of Free Software Magazine

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