



Attorneys at Law

Consortium Standards Bulletin

A *ConsortiumInfo.org* publication

February 2006

Vol V, No. 2

STANDARDS BLOG

February 27, 2006

Mitt Calls the ODF Coin Toss Right

It's no secret that Mitt Romney wants to be president. That means he knows that everything he does and says will be under the microscope, and every decision he makes is an opportunity to further his ambitions - or a chance to call the toss wrong and lose the game. Surprisingly enough, a technical standard has presented one such decision to Romney, and the stakes for calling the toss right for his presidential ambitions may be high.

Massachusetts has been in the middle of a fracas for the past six months that has not only pitted factions of the state government against each other, but also set the largest IT companies in the world in opposition as well. The battle involves a technology standard called OpenDocument Format (ODF), which the State is to implement on January 1, 2007. When the champion of that policy, Massachusetts State CIO Peter Quinn, abruptly announced his resignation on Christmas Eve last year, the man that appointed him had two choices: duck and cover, or gamble that toughing it out would be a shrewd political decision.

That man, of course, is Mitt Romney, and the easiest path available to him was to say that he wished to consult with Quinn's successor about his or her recommendation, and then simply drag his feet in making that appointment as his term as governor rapidly expired.

The riskier path was to stick with his policy, and announce that he would not give in to local forces, including Secretary of the Commonwealth William Francis Galvin (affectionately known locally as the "Dark Prince"), or to "special interests" - in this case Microsoft, which has directed its substantial lobbying forces to heading off ODF at the pass in Massachusetts, lest the virus of implementation spread to other states - because ODF is a format for office productivity suites, and directly threatens Microsoft's vastly lucrative monopoly in that market.

Romney seemed to waver at first, when a spokesman welcomed the news that Microsoft had submitted its rival XML Reference Schema to Ecma for approval as a standard. But then the statements by members of his administration suddenly firmed up, and announcement followed announcement indicating that he would hold firm in his support for ODF.

What happened? Here's what makes sense to me, as I explained it in an interview I gave to Lisa Vaas at Publish.com after Romney's office issued a press release announcing that Quinn's successor would be Louis Gutierrez:

"The whole press release is clearly being used as a vehicle to convey the strong support of Romney for ODF," [Updegrove] said.

The reason Romney is investing political capital in a technological debate likely has to do with Romney's intention to run for president in the next election, Updegrove suggested.

First, because Romney has continued to be asked about the ODF controversy, he had to decide how to come down on it, and he likely wouldn't want to be seen as flip-flopping going into a presidential race.

Second, the Abrahamoff [sic] scandal is likely influencing Romney, as politicians become leery of succumbing to aggressive lobbying, Updegrove said.

"What with the Abrahamoff scandal, and with Microsoft pushing very hard for a reversal, would you rather look like you're giving in to a special interest or would you rather look like you're standing up to a special interest?" he said....

Lest I focus only on the presumed *realpolitik* of Romney's strategy, I should also give him credit for, well, standing up to the local politicos and powerful special interests, when ducking and covering would have been so easy to do. As I said to Vaas in the same interview:

And regardless of the political winds that brought Gutierrez to the position, Updegrove said, Romney merits praise for doing the right thing.

"You have a governor who's deciding what is the smartest thing for [him] to do here, and really, to his credit, he's doing the right thing," he said.

"He's standing up to special interests, he's standing behind the recommendations of the highly skilled professionals that he hired. He's keeping with a policy, he's going against the political maneuvering of [Massachusetts Secretary] William Francis Galvin and others on Beacon Hill, [the location of the Massachusetts State House]. He's sticking with it."

Decisive and principled - not a bad way to be viewed in a presidential campaign, if that's how others decide to view Romney's determination to stay the course as well. But would the story be reported by the press that way? And would it break out of the technical press and into the mainstream media?

It looks like Romney's bet is already paying off. Yesterday, Forbes Magazine (no less) posted a story on Romney and the ODF story at the "Faces in the News" section of its Website that begins:

Goliath software companies and executive resignations are no match for the state of Massachusetts.

The commonwealth said Monday it would stick to its guns and implement open document software standards in every state government agency.

Governor Mitt Romney stood by the policy as his Chief Information Officer Peter Quinn resigned over the issue last month, and has put its foot down by saying it wouldn't natively support the OpenDocument standard in Office 12, due out mid-year.

Granted, the Forbes reporter is a little unclear about what's actually going on at the technical level, but then again, most Massachusetts legislators are, too. The article concludes by commending Massachusetts' steadfastness in its resolve to stand up to Microsoft, saying:

When Massachusetts announced its decision to switch over to [ODF, Microsoft] called the move "inconsistent and discriminatory." The mere fact that Microsoft appears irked by the New England state's plan shows just how powerful a statement Massachusetts is making.

If one state shows it can run its IT operations just fine while shunning Microsoft's dominant software products, the door will be left open for other states, organizations and companies to do the same.

So Romney's decision to stand fast as David against the Goliath of Redmond has begun to succeed in raising his profile nationally. That's good for the Governor – and it's good for everyone that believes in open standards as well.

And it's also good in another, less obvious way: it has been repeatedly noted that Romney's successor will be entitled to replace the state CIO come November, and that the new governor could then abort the ODF transition.

Yes, that's true. But if Romney's stand continues to draw national publicity, what new governor will want to be seen as giving in to Goliath? Every day that this story grows, such a reversal will become more politically untenable.

And one thing more: it will make it easier for other state CIOs to implement ODF as well, off-setting the chilling impact of the Boston *Globe* instigated investigation into Peter Quinn's travel documentation that significantly contributed to his decision to resign as CIO.

Speaking of which: I'm still waiting for *Globe* Ombudsman Richard Chacon to fulfill his promise, made on December 12, to look into the matter. If you happen to be speaking to him or sending him an email, you might ask him when he expects to present the results of his investigation.

Bookmark the Standards Blog at <http://www.consortiuminfo.org/newsblog/> or set up an RSS feed at: <http://www.consortiuminfo.org/rss/>

Comments? updegrove@consortiuminfo.org

Copyright 2006 Andrew Updegrove