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THE MICROSOFT CONVERTER, NEWS SHOPPING AND TECTONIC SHIFTS

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It's been a week now since Microsoft [announced](#) its ODF/Office open source converter project – time enough for at least 183 [on-line stories](#) to be written, as well as hundreds of blog entries (one expects) and untold numbers of appended comments. Lest all that virtual ink fade silently into obscurity, it seems like a good time to look back and try to figure out What it All Means.



There are two ways to go about that task. One is the "have it your way," news channel technique (simply pick the channel that serves up your daily news just the way you like it, whatever that may be – liberal, conservative or just plain snarky). Nothing better than the Internet for that, where you can go shopping in the great marketplace of interpretation (as well as willful misinterpretation), and find more flavors than you could ever possibly imagine. If you do want to test that premise, you won't be disappointed with the myriad ways in which people have examined the entrails of the converter story to divine (or dictate) what's up.

For example, there is metaphorical religious conversion theory, from Martin LaMonica:

[Redmond has "road to Damascus" open source conversion](#)

As well as differences of opinion about whether ODF supporters are jumping for joy or expecting the worst:

[OpenOffice developers rejoice at Microsoft's OpenDocument Support](#)

[ODF guardedly welcomes Microsoft's Office XML move](#)

And, of course, there are plenty of theories about what Microsoft may really be up to. Here's a sampling:

Vaughn-Nichols: [Microsoft not telling the whole truth about ODF translators](#)

Pamela Jones: [MS: OK. OK, so we'll set up an "OS" project to build an ODF killer. Er, we mean translator](#)

If you want to read just one analysis, though, by all means make it the acute, thorough and balanced report by Redmonk's Steve O'Grady. His thoughts, as always, are a "must read." You can find it, together with links to additional reactions to the announcement, [here](#), and a follow up entry posted by Steve the next day [here](#).

The second way is to go direct to the sources, and make up your own mind, which is what I'll do here to provide my take on what led to Microsoft's decision, and what it's likely to mean.

Although I've read many different interpretations of this story by knowledgeable parties, I'm going to focus today on just one source: Microsoft itself, and more specifically, its July 6 press release, together with a conversation I had with Jason Matusow, Microsoft's Director of Standards Affairs. I don't rank as high in the blogging food chain as Steve O'Grady (he was one of two analysts that Microsoft briefed in advance), but Jason was good enough to call me the morning after the press release was issued, to answer any questions that I might have.

Let's start with the press release, which is useful for two purposes: first, to learn the basic facts, and more intriguingly, to find the messages that Microsoft wants to deliver. Those messages relate both to the facts at hand, as well as to a bigger and ever evolving strategic picture, because every press release provides an opportunity to insert another piece into the mosaic that is the public image that the issuer wishes to reinforce.

Press releases are especially useful in interpreting what underlies a vendor's desired public image and strategy, because they are extensively worked over and reviewed by multiple parties, and therefore are as authoritative as their authors can make them. Hence, while a press release is hardly the most objective source in the world, it is highly indicative of what the issuer wants the market to think at that point in time. More intriguingly, and due to the same process by which they are written, press releases are also highly indicative of the bathwater that the issuer is drinking as well.

As I read the press release, Microsoft wants the following points to sink in regarding its new converter project:

1. The converters (one each, serially, for Word, Excel and PowerPoint) are being developed at the request of government customers.
2. The converters will be created within an open source project, for maximum transparency.
3. OpenXML and ODF were created for two very different purposes, and OpenXML is far superior to ODF. This will unavoidably result in some deficiencies in how well the converters will work.
4. This announcement is further evidence of Microsoft's new commitment to "interoperability by design," a four-pronged approach (only one of which involves an open process – standards).

Here's how I see these messages fitting into the big picture:

1. At the government customer's request: I have heard this phrase explained by two Microsoft sources as follows: "if even one citizen wants to send a document to a government in ODF form, they have to be able to deal with it." The net desired impression, then, is that the need to accommodate ODF is minimal (so don't take this as an admission that ODF is taking off), but when the customer asks, Microsoft listens.
2. Open source project: Microsoft deserves points on this one. They aren't monkeying around, but are putting the code out front and largely in the hands of others, while still paying the bills. Is it perfect? Of course not. But neither is OpenOffice.org, where Sun pays the bills and supplies most of the programmers to write the code, and largely selects what code will be written. It's only fair to be consistent in how we judge competitors.
3. Different formats: Indeed the two formats were created for two different purposes, and I expect that there will likely be some inabilities for ODF documents to replicate, for example, all 200 Microsoft Word borders back through 1993. But I assume that there won't be (or at least won't need to be) any such problems in the other direction. The main difference between the two format approaches is that OpenXML is a format standard created to serve a single product line, while ODF was developed to enable the creation of multiple competing products, which is already occurring. Losing a few borders along the way is considered to be a pretty easy tradeoff if your goal is the latter rather than the former, because the anticipated rewards are very different. In fact, there is a place for both standards, and they should not be directly compared to each other any more than, say, a telephone and an intercom should

be directly compared, although you can talk into each of them and they share some of the same technology.

4. Interoperability by design: Microsoft has realized that standards are not going to go away, and that customer demand for standards in general, and interoperability in particular, will rise rather than fall. It has taken a thorough approach to creating a new internal standards structure (interestingly, it has many lawyers, as opposed to just technical and business people, in key positions in its standards department), and has constructed its four-point program to address that need.

It is important to note that Microsoft calls this program "Interoperability by Design," rather than "Interoperability by Collaboration." The salient difference between these two designations is that only one of the four roads to the interoperability goal (standards) of the Microsoft program involves an open process. The others leave Microsoft in the senior, or at minimum parity, power position in negotiating the means of achieving interoperability – how, and with whom it pleases.

The official way that Microsoft phrases this "commitment to interoperability" can be found in the same press release (as well as in many other press releases, statements and documents), and reads as follows:

Ongoing Commitment to Interoperability

As demonstrated by the recent announcement of the Interoperability Customer Executive Council and the significant industry contributions to the Open XML file formats from leading institutions like the British Library and Apple Computer Inc. at Ecma International, Microsoft is broadening its long-term investments in and attention to interoperability across industries and platforms *through such avenues as product design, collaboration agreements with other companies, standards and the effective licensing of its intellectual property.* Additional information about Microsoft's customer-focused interoperability commitment, including an open letter titled "A Foundation for the New World of Documents" by Chris Capossela, corporate vice president of the Microsoft Business Division Product Management Group at Microsoft, may be found online at <http://www.microsoft.com/interop>. (emphasis added)

Jason Matusow and I have debated what this means in several blog posts, the latest one of which is [here](#), and you can read a wide variety of other opinions in the 274 comments on and off topic about the same piece that appear at [Slashdot](#).

Now to my conversation with Jason, which was pretty far ranging and candid. Jason said, and I believe him, that the real motivation behind the conversion project is the need to serve government users, and especially those in countries with strong commitments to use and honor ISO standards (ODF, of course, is now ISO/IEC 26300). That's a credible reason, and if converters are going to be built anyway, as they are, Microsoft might as well be seen to be facilitating their development rather than holding back, and having at least some say in how the process evolves.

I also believe that placing the project in an open source venue was a smart move, and an honest effort to be seen as not trying to play games. As Jason said – and who can question the statement – everything that Microsoft does is going to be questioned and attacked, so they decided to initiate the project in a way that would leave as little to question as possible. Of course, one can still poke at different aspects of how things are set up, but that's inevitable, given that certain decisions have to be made, and when they are, they have to come out one way or another, each with intended as well as unavoidable potential implications. The choice of the BSD open source license is a good example of this, and you can find quite a bit of discussion on line about whether this was a good choice or a bad one, and what the motivations might be for so choosing. Jason [answers a few questions](#) on this topic in the comment thread at his blog.

On a related note, I asked Jason why there was no mention of the converter project in the May 19, 2006 Microsoft response to the Massachusetts converter RFI, given that the concept had obviously been

kicking around for some time. He responded that final plans for the project had only come together in a detailed fashion in recent weeks, and that Microsoft did not want to be accused of making a "vapor ware" (my choice of words, not Jason's) announcement that could be suspected as an effort to chill independent development efforts without a real intention of delivering on the promise. Again, that's a reasonable enough explanation, even if other considerations might have been involved as well.

More intriguingly, Jason also noted that a decision like this is still difficult to reach within Microsoft, with some constituencies hewing to the historical, proprietary way of looking at things, while others argue for a more adaptive, open approach.

I expect that this is accurate as well, and have heard the same observation from various people I know inside Microsoft for the past year, and at each step along the way as Microsoft has loosened up in the ODF saga: first, on licensing terms, then on issuing its covenant not to compete, next on the submission to Ecma, and so on. It is logical to assume that just such a process of cultural shift would be required, that it would be difficult and slow, and that change agents would need real issues in the customer base to point to in order to carry the day.

So my personal take is that we are observing a fairly consistent, significant and, well, fascinating evolution in the strategic thinking of one of the most powerful players in the IT industry. Placing this progression in tectonic terms, there have been some major shifts – earthquakes, if you will – at Microsoft in the past year, such as the organization of the new open standards (and even open source) structures within Microsoft, and the genesis and articulation of the Interoperability by Design public message. We have also seen smaller tremors and aftershocks, of which each concession in the ODF story is an example.

Obviously, there is still much unrelieved tension between the Interoperability by Design message and the real world of technology and customer expectations, both as respects open standards as well as open source software. Perhaps it is as accurate to call the Interoperability by Design program an articulation of an internal "belief system" as it is to see it purely as a public marketing message, since I expect that there is passion behind maintaining this halfway house position between a proprietary world and an open environment. Corporate belief systems can be almost as strong as religious convictions, and no conversion is easy or succeeds at a uniform basis at the level of the individual.

Perhaps Martin LaMonica's Road to Damascus metaphor is then not so inappropriate after all, although I doubt that the establishment of the open source converter project will prove to have been the particular step along the way at which the defining revelation in Microsoft's future was delivered. But some day, I think that the remaining tension between Microsoft and the marketplace will need to be released. Whether that will be through the gelling of a new corporate *gestalt* that well-serves Microsoft and its customers, or through an earthquake (a catastrophic antitrust penalty? The rout of Microsoft products by Linux/FireFox/ODF and other open source challengers to come?) remains to be seen.

It will be fascinating to see whether the transition from Bill Gates to Ray Ozzie in the master architect's chair will prove to be an opportunity to provide a smooth and easy release of this tectonic tension, or simply a ratification of the *ancien regime* that sets up an ultimate catastrophe.

Only time will tell.

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