

OOXML or ODF? Or is it odious to have both?

Alliances Firm Up Across The Divide Ahead Of Thursday Deadline

Harsimran Singh
NEW DELHI

THIS has all the elements of a corporate battle but what has made things even more hot is that even academics and the country's top institutes of higher learning have thrown in their hat.

The war of formats between the world's largest IT superpowers — Microsoft versus IBM-Sun-Google-Red Hat is now reaching its climax with companies scheduled to vote on

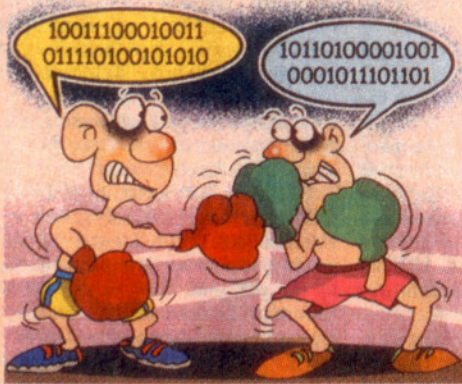
Thursday on deciding which format will be used for storing electronic documents. Will it be Microsoft's Open Office XML (OOXML) or the one backed by the Big Blue and others called Open Document Format (ODF)? What's more, according to sources, both parties are offering director level jobs at 200% hike to each other to help switch votes in their favour.

Interestingly, Infosys chairman NR Narayana Murthy has also joined the debate by supporting multiple

standards. TCS, meanwhile, is in the other camp where its being backed by the IITs, IISc, IIM Ahmedabad along with Sun Microsystems India MD Bhaskar Pramanik. Nasscom and MAIT, however, are finding it hard to support any party — both the camps being members of the respective hardware and software associations.

Speaking to ET on the issue, Mr Murthy said that multiple standards are beneficial for the country.

► Many disagree with Murthy: P 3



SALAM

SENSEX ▼438.44pts; Nifty: ▼134.15pts; Rs/\$: ▼06p; Rs/£: ▲24p; Rs/€: ▲01p; Gold: ▼Rs.15; Silver: ▼Rs.120; Crude(Dubai): ▲0.31; Nikkei: ▲168.86pts

THE ECONOMIC TIMES HYDERABAD WEDNESDAY 22 AUGUST 2007

Many disagree with Murthy

Harsimran Singh
NEW DELHI

"KEEPING aside the technical issues, I think we should pitch one standard against the other as long as they are interoperable. As a business strategy, I see multiple standards being good for Indian IT companies. I am for making sure that there are two standards so that we are the beneficiaries," he added.

There are several in the academia and the IT industry who disagree strongly with Mr Murthy adding that OOXML is not interoperable with ODF.

Referring to Microsoft's OOXML, this is what Sun Microsystems, India president Bhaskar Pramanik had to say: "It's necessary to have truly open standards that are technically sound and are royalty-free to reduce the digital divide. It would be extremely harmful for India to adopt standards that are technically flawed and that are not clear about the royalty implications on India and on Indian firms." The ODF alliance along with the IIT academia have raised about 200 technical issues with Microsoft's OOXML. One of the issues raised by the ODF alliance is that OOXML is inappropriately tied to Microsoft tools and software. Besides, they say that it doesn't fit the definition of an open standard and so making it one is inviting trouble.

Microsoft, on its part, claims that there are multiple implementations of OOXML available and Denmark and Switzerland have adopted it as a standard. "It's already an ECMA standard duly examined by Novell Intel and Apple. It's ODF and OOXML not ODF versus OOXML. We have published a 6,000-page manual on OOXML and any other issues which people have will be resolved in the ballot resolution process after September 2," says Microsoft legal affairs head Rakesh Bakshi. Some experts feel that allowing both standards could also be an option. However, this could be fraught with problems.

Says IBM India Software Labs vice-president Harish Grama: "We've seen many examples where multiple formats can slow growth and limit interoperability. For example, in the US, multiple, competing cellular telephone networks have fragmented the market, and have limited the travel of consumers with their telephones. Back in the early eighties, consumers who opted for the Betamax video format were left with expensive paperweights as VHS won out. When it comes to vital government and corporate records, we can't afford to make that mistake again." IBM's Ashish Gautam adds that two standards are always harmful. "Internet would not have come up if we had two HTML standards," he points out.

The ODF Alliance also alleges that many large IT companies are part of the BIS committee and are supporting Microsoft because they have large business commitments with it. Microsoft disagrees. It counters the allegations by saying that whilst Infosys, TCS and Wipro were members of the BIS committee before, Red Hat and Sun

Microsystems (ODF members) joined only later.

The debate has also put industry associations in a precarious position. Nasscom president Kiran Kamik was non committal. "We are facing a tough time taking a decision as both parties are our board members. Nevertheless, we will finalise our view by tomorrow," he remarks. Hardware association MAIT also echoes a similar sentiment.

Meanwhile, Google has also come out openly against Microsoft's OOXML. "We don't think it's beneficial to introduce an alternative standard when the ODF already meets the common definitions of an open standard. ODF has received ISO approval and is in wide use around the world," Google said in an email statement.

OOXML and ODF are standards on which word processing software are produced. It can be likened to various standards for saving images like GIF, Tiff and Jpeg. The market for office suite is huge as almost all computers in the world are equipped with one or the other.

Indian academia is also completely split. The IITs and IISc are pitched against Indian Institute of Information Technology (IIIT). Besides, B-schools are also divided, with Indian School of Business (ISB), Hyderabad pitched against the IIMs. "The real benefits of multiple standards arise if interoperability across standards is encouraged. If that can be ensured, there is no reason not to endorse the addition of Open XML to the ISO," said ISB's Centre for IT and Networked Economy executive director Ravi Bapna.

Founder director of IIIT, Bangalore, Prof Sadagopan disagrees. "OOXML as a standard must be evaluated thoroughly. Multiple standards are good for the industry. But more debate is needed to take a final view on the issue. Enough intellectual debate has not happened on the topic," he points out.

The ODF alliance supported by IIT Delhi, however, claims that OOXML is really not open since it has not given permissions to access older versions of MS Office software (binary format) and is not interoperable with ODF's own Open Office. Microsoft counters that anybody can access binary formats, though only by sending a mail to Microsoft. Hewlett-Packard (HP), however, has a different view. "It seems that the whole process is being done in a hurry. There should be more debate on it and only then India should go for voting," HP government affairs director P Ravindran said. Microsoft's legal affairs head Rakesh Bakshi, however, says that delay in voting always causes an undue loss in marketing the standard and should thus be avoided.

The issue at hand is whether voting for a particular standard will make India's legacy documents locked into a proprietary standard, experts question. There are about 21 members in the BIS technical committee and which way India votes on Aug 23, will be known only on Thursday. Watch this space for more from the software battlefield.

harsimran.julka@timesgroup.com

