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Laughing Matters

Frank Hayes

February 19, 2007 (Computerworld) For pure entertainment value, the best show in the IT business today is Microsoft. There are lawsuits, like the one in Iowa that was just settled — though not before it turned up a memo from Windows guru Jim Allchin saying he preferred a Macintosh. There are Vista snafus, like the critical security hole in Vista's anti-malware system. There's clumsy astroturfing, like Microsoft's failed try at rewriting Wikipedia the Redmond way.

And last week, there was an "open letter" from Microsoft complaining that IBM is stifling user choice by slowing down standardization of Office 2007's document format, Open XML.

OK, that one's not really so entertaining except to hard-core standards geeks. For them, it's pretty funny stuff.

Put simply, the letter signed by two Microsoft managers accuses IBM of playing politics within the international standards group ISO and of trying to prevent Open XML from quickly becoming an ISO standard. The Microsoft guys are deeply offended that a vendor would try to use a standards process to its own advantage and are shocked — shocked! — that IBM would prevent users from getting the benefits of Open XML.

So, what's funny? The obvious thing is that Open XML is already in Office 2007. Neither IBM nor the ISO could prevent any customer who wants the benefits of Open XML from using it.

The not-so-obvious howler — except to standards geeks — is Microsoft's deep offense that a vendor would try to get an advantage from a standards process. Standards geeks know that *all* vendors do that. Always have, always will — Microsoft and IBM included. That's why it usually takes so long for groups like the ISO to produce a standard. Every vendor gets to pore over the specification and object to anything that would put it at a disadvantage.

There *is* a special fast-track process that can speed up approval for standards that are well understood, widely used and utterly noncontroversial. And, wouldn't you know it, that's the process Microsoft is trying to use to get quick ISO approval for its 6,000-page specification for Open XML, which only exists in a brand-new product from a single vendor.

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ways to know it first, try it out, share it with others, and keep it running.

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Chuckling yet?

Microsoft picked the fast track for Open XML because otherwise it could take years for it to become an ISO standard. Other vendors would get to study the spec and suggest tweaks, and by the time it got the ISO's stamp of approval, Open XML might even be available in products that compete with Microsoft Office.

And already-ISO-approved formats such as OpenDocument (which IBM likes and Microsoft loathes) would have a years-long head start with customers that want ISO-standard documents — customers like Massachusetts, which Microsoft lobbied unsuccessfully to accept Open XML.

Got all that? Trust me, for standards geeks, this is hi-larious.

For regular IT types, it all sounds meaningless. And it is. For us, here's what matters:

Real standards make products from different vendors more interchangeable.

That means we can dump Vendor A's sorry excuse for a product and replace it with one from Vendor B or Vendor C or anyone else with something that's a drop-in replacement.

With real standards, we can keep vendors from locking us into their products with proprietary protocols or formats or connectors. We can bargain down prices by leveraging competition. We can choose our own IT future.

But that only happens when there are plenty of competing products that all use the standard in the same way, so they all interoperate and can be swapped out — think PCs or TCP/IP. That's when we get real choice and bargaining power.

Remember that the next time someone protests mightily about some standards issue. Ask this: Will this mean I'll get more choice, more buying leverage and more control?

If it does, it's something you have a stake in. If not — hey, sit back and enjoy the show!

Frank Hayes, Computerworld's *senior news columnist*, has covered IT for more than 20 years. Contact him at frank_hayes@computerworld.com.