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### Office Open XML Down but Not Out

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By Peter Galli


Microsoft may have lost the battle to have its Office Open XML file formats approved as an ISO standard, but the war is far from over.

The Redmond, Wash., company's OOXML (Office Open XML) file formats failed to achieve the two-thirds vote needed for approval as an international standard by the International Organization for Standardization, the standards body said Sept. 4.


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The vote was also not as close as some had predicted, with 53 percent of the national bodies participating in the process voting to approve the move and 26 percent voting against it, with the rest abstaining. But, because the votes to approve were 13.6 percent below the two-thirds majority required, the draft OOXML file format standard was not approved as an ISO standard.

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That brings to an end a five-month ballot process, which closed Sept. 2 and which was open to the International Electrotechnical Commission and ISO national member bodies from 104 countries, including 41 that are participating members of a joint ISO-IEC technical committee, the JTC 1, Information Technology.

But all is not lost for Microsoft, since the comments that were made with the votes will be discussed at

a ballot resolution meeting in Geneva in February. The goal of those at the meeting will be to try to find consensus on modifications to the document in light of those comments.

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If the proposed modifications persuade enough of the national bodies to withdraw their negative votes—and at least two-thirds of the votes cast are then positive, with no more than 25 percent of the total number of the national body voting against the move—the draft OOXML file format standard can still be published. Otherwise, "the proposal will have failed and this fast-track procedure will be terminated," the ISO said, noting that this would not preclude the draft standard from being submitted again under the normal ISO-IEC standards development rules.

Microsoft officials are upbeat about their prospects. "This preliminary vote is a milestone for the widespread adoption of the Open XML formats around the world for the benefit of millions of customers," Tom Robertson, Microsoft's general manager of interoperability and standards, told eWeek. "Given how encouraging the results were, we believe that the final tally in early 2008 will result in the ratification of Open XML as an ISO standard."

But Marino Marcich, executive director of the ODF Alliance, which is pushing the Open Document Format alternative, disagreed, saying that no matter what the final outcome, the comments submitted from countries that voted indicate misgivings about OOXML's interoperability and openness.

"These concerns included the insufficiency of Microsoft's patent pledge, the undocumented features of OOXML preventing its use by other vendors, dependencies on other Microsoft proprietary products and technical defects which will have to be resolved at the ballot resolution meeting in February 2008 if OOXML is to ultimately achieve ISO approval," Marcich said.

Long term, governments would think twice before using a format so closely linked to a single vendor's products, he said.

Part of the reason for the negative vote was Microsoft's hardball lobbying tactics, which included "committee-stuffing activity and attempts to upgrade more countries to voting membership," Marcich said. "This would only serve to delegitimize the process. Eleven countries were upgraded to voting status during the five-month ballot period, and nine of them voted for approval despite having no history of involvement in fast-track IT standards."

Jason Matusow, Microsoft's director of corporate standards, said he wants to see matters move toward a more constructive dialogue. "I think we could all wish for this entire process to have been less messy," Matusow said. OOXML was being widely adopted, had significant independent implementations and now stood to benefit from the hard work put into the comments submitted through the JTC 1 process, he said.

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So why is having OOXML approved as an ISO standard so important to Microsoft? Revenue, said Jim Zemlin, executive director of The Linux Foundation, in San Francisco.

"The Office division [at Microsoft] racked up some \$15 billion in revenues last year, and anyone would want to hang on to a franchise like that as hard as they could," Zemlin said. "ODF represents the first credible threat to that franchise since it coalesced more than 15 years ago. Microsoft also clearly sees Linux on the desktop as its next big challenge. Desktop users will need compatible applications to run on those desktops, and the more successful ODF is, the more credible those Linux desktops will be."

Microsoft also seems to have misjudged the impact of the fallout from the rejection of the vote to make OOXML an ISO standard, the most significant of which is the credibility boost the vote gave ODF, which is already an ISO standard.

"That has ripple effects, such as providing greater incentives for other developers to implement it, and for customers to take ODF-compliant products more seriously," Zemlin said. "It will also have the reverse impact on Microsoft's partners: How much work would you want to put into complying with OOXML right now if it might change radically tomorrow?"

Even more significant is the fact that, for customers, as ODF gets some meaningful wins, the

momentum behind the perception that there really is a viable alternative to Office will build—as will the realization that this alternative is cheaper, has more options and is more open, Zemlin said.

The ODF Alliance's Marcich agreed, saying that governments worldwide are demanding products based on open standards in their procurement, with nine national governments, four regional or state governments, and more than 50 government agencies having already adopted policies calling for the use of ODF for document exchange.

What will happen during the next six months is open to debate, but to Zemlin, Microsoft officials face two choices: to make a good-faith effort to meet the objections in the middle and truly satisfy those who voted no, or see if they can bulldoze the industry a second time.

"They need to decide whether they can meet in the middle, as well as how much proprietary advantage they're willing to give up," Zemlin said. "If they take this alternative seriously, I expect that they will turn enough votes to eventually achieve approval. If they take the second, bulldozer approach, I expect that there will be an even bigger backlash, as there are many eyes watching."

Marcich does not have high expectations and thinks that Microsoft will keep moving the goalposts to find the configuration of voting countries necessary to satisfy the two-thirds requirement.

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