

-- OOXML (Office Open XML) in 10 Points --

A handout prepared for the All Party Internet Group (APIG)

- 1** OOXML (also known as Ecma-376 and DIS 29500) is a 6,000 page technical specification largely originated by Microsoft, and standardised by the European standards group Ecma last year. It attempts to describe the file formats of files saved by the computer applications in the Microsoft Office suite (principally Microsoft Word, Excel and PowerPoint).
- 2** Ecma, with Microsoft's backing, have submitted this specification to become an ISO standard (the most prestigious sort of standard). They are employing a special "fast track" procedure which means the entire text can become a full standard approximately one year after its first submission.
- 3** A commercial motivation for this is that some US states, and some EU governmental bodies, have indicated they are restricting their purchase of computer systems to those based on international standards. If OOXML did not become an ISO standard, Microsoft's sales revenues from such clients could be compromised.
- 4** A recent alternative standard for office documents, called ODF - Open Document Format - or ISO 26300, already exists. Its backers include a number of Microsoft's arch-rivals, including Sun and IBM, as well as many who are motivated to oppose Microsoft and/or the ethos of commercial software, and promote open source or free alternatives.
- 5** The high commercial stakes, and an element of zeal in the rival camps, has led to a heated debate on the merits and acceptability of OOXML as an ISO standard. Both sides appear to be pursuing mail campaigns and petitioning aimed at those who they think might influence the standardisation process.
- 6** As with the Year 2000 (Y2K) bug panic, there is a danger of a hot technological issue having a disproportionate input into questions of public policy and interest. In reality, the success or failure of OOXML's standardisation effort has at most a very minor bearing on the national interest.
- 7** There is however a case to be made that having Microsoft's formats standardised would be of benefit to UK plc. Many thousands of business systems (including those used by the UK parliament) rely on these formats, and having them locked down and documented as standards would significantly ease these systems' future maintenance and development.
- 8** BSI is responsible for coordinating the UK's technical input into the international standardisation process, and has delegated part of this responsibility to its technical committee IST/41. To scrutinise the text IST/41 has assembled a diverse panel of approximately 30 experts. Panel members represent (to give a selection): BSI itself, small companies, large companies (including Microsoft and IBM), public sector organisations, other standards bodies, user groups, academia, and government.
- 9** BSI has been making its scrutiny process transparent by assembling comments on the Web in public view, and is recognised as leading the international scrutiny effort. The German standards body DIN are adopting a similar process, and one US standards committee member has written "when I compare [our process] to the BSI's excellent work developing detailed comments on a publicly-readable Wiki, I think we in the US should be ashamed ..."
- 10** The BSI panel has uncovered hundreds of technical and editorial flaws in the OOXML text, some of them serious. As its contribution to the standards process, the UK will undoubtedly be submitting a large "shopping list" of required changes to the specification. These will need to be addressed before the UK can approve OOXML as an international standard.