

Massachusetts Pioneers a New Standard in Openness

State of Massachusetts pioneers a new era of openness in software.

By [David Bollier](#)

Let us meditate for a moment on the power of a single, courageous innovator in changing a landscape that everyone else takes for granted. I'm thinking of the State of Massachusetts. Yes, the government. A few public-spirited officials there have pioneered a new procurement standard for state software that will assure that all government documents will be open and accessible to all citizens. And it may well spark a new movement among governments worldwide to adopt open standards in their procurement practices, at least for computers and software.

“Open” means unencumbered by gratuitous intellectual property restrictions or obsolete technical designs – something that grasping tech vendors spend a lot of time contriving. Indeed, one of the most potent tools that Microsoft has for preserving its monopoly on office software is the proprietary formats and licensing terms of its Office software applications. Word, PowerPoint and Excel use closed technical standards that are “undocumented,” i.e., not available to other programmers who might wish to build compatible or derivative software programs.

Are proprietary standards a good policy for the citizens of the Commonwealth? Eric Kriss, the Secretary of Administration and Finance for the State of Massachusetts, thought not. In 2005, he took the bold step of declaring that open government requires open software formats. He told the Massachusetts Software Council, “We cannot have our public documents locked up in some kind of proprietary format, perhaps unreadable in the future, or subject to a proprietary system license that restricts access.”

By establishing an open, universal standard for documents, Kriss hoped to spur greater competition and innovation while saving taxpayers millions of dollars over the years. The State could avoid gratuitous and expensive software upgrades. It could avoid problems in accessing documents created on old equipment. And it could avoid price and service disadvantages of “vendor lock-in.”

But achieving a goal of open state records would require challenging Microsoft, a formidable political and PR challenge. Microsoft with one hand jealously guards its closed, proprietary software while with the other hand tries to create *the appearance* of openness.

After a long set of open deliberations, Massachusetts decided in September 2005 to adopt the Open Document Format (ODF) as the default file format for saving and exchange editable documents in executive department agencies. (ODF is short for “the “OASIS Open Document Format for Office Applications,” which was developed by the OASIS industry consortium using an XML-based file

format originally created by OpenOffice.org.) The new standard is expected to go into effect in January 2007.

What's remarkable is that Microsoft's suite of Office software programs *are not compliant with the new ODF standards!* Since the new standard affects only 80,000 state employees – out of a universe of 400 million users of Office, one is tempted to shrug, so what? But Microsoft understands the dangers of a renegade who successfully defies an overlord. A successful dissenter points up the vulnerability of the Top Dog. Defiance suggests that better alternatives are feasible. And it emboldens others to take similar action. And, in fact, more than a dozen other countries – Brazil, Thailand, Peru – are considering adopting open computer systems, including open file formats.

In a [fascinating blow-by-blow account](#) of the fight to establish the ODF standard, journalist and blogger David Berlind describes how Microsoft apparently tried to snow state decision-makers with specious technical and legal arguments. It had its own narrow interpretation of what is “open,” and it used the time-honored FUD strategy – sowing Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt – to try to taint the motives of other software makers.

Massachusetts' test for software openness consisted of three key factors:

- It must be published and subject to peer review.
- It must be subject to joint stewardship.
- It must have no or absolutely minimal legal restrictions attached to it.

“Peer review” means the larger community of software developers must find it acceptable by consensus. “Joint stewardship” means that no single company owns the standard to the exclusion of others. And “legal restrictions” means that the licensing terms do not prevent anyone from developing compatible software for reading, writing and sharing documents.

Last September, Microsoft declined to challenge the three-pronged test but simply said that it had a different interpretation of what was “open.” As Berlind dryly noted, “It was probably not a good time for a vendor to tell a customer with 80,000 employees that it doesn't like the customer's application of its own test.”

But Microsoft's definition of “open” – by the reckoning of many software experts and the State of Massachusetts – was insufficiently open. In fact, since it was incompatible with open source software (because it forbade the sublicensing or transferring of rights), Microsoft's software was significantly, well...closed.

Fortunately, Massachusetts had the guts to stand its ground and insist upon real openness despite its huge existing investment in Microsoft products. The State has an open invitation to Microsoft to revise its software design and licensing terms to make them ODF-compliant, according to Berlind, but it seems as if Microsoft's rep is more interested in bad-mouthing the state's standard-setting process than in changing its licensing terms. Microsoft accuses Massachusetts of an anti-Microsoft bias and denying it due process. (Read Berlind's account to see why this is bogus.)

Berlind called the Massachusetts policy “one of the most brilliant chess moves by a handful of industry titans with a common interest in breaking Microsoft's dominant grip. The [Massachusetts ODF] proceedings are where some of Microsoft's biggest competitors (IBM, Sun, HP, Novell and Adobe) gathered to make sure Microsoft was checkmated with a devastating weapon that they themselves have been unable to unleash on the American chessboard: Democracy.”

All in all, an inspiring story. It will be fun to watch as other states and nations begin to emulate Massachusetts by adopting open-format standards.

For more on this story, check out [a good Wikipedia entry](#) and the [State of Massachusetts' FAQ](#) on the standards.

Posted March 10, 2006