Microsoft to Support Emerging Chinese Document Format

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Microsoft will announce May 21 plans to create a project to develop an open-source translator project between China's Unified Office Format and the Ecma Open XML File Formats, which are closely tied to Microsoft Office.

The Redmond, Wash., software company will also release the beta for its translation tools for PowerPoint and Excel that support the OpenDocument Format, or ODF.

The emerging UOF standard is being developed by the Chinese Office Software Work Group, led by the Ministry of Information Industry as well as suppliers of Chinese office software suites and academic institutions such as the Beijing Information Technology Institute.

"This Open XML-UOF translator will be similar to the Open XML-ODF translator that has already been developed and will follow the same model," Jean Paoli, Microsoft's general manager for interoperability and XML architecture, told eWEEK.

Microsoft will be creating an open-source project, hosted on SourceForge, and using the BSD license, he said, noting that the first prototype is expected to be posted publicly on July 30, with the first version released in January 2008.

As the UOF-specific translator has to meet the needs of government and public-sector customers in China, the translator tools themselves will be

developed and tested by leading Chinese ISVs (independent software vendors) and academic institutions.

Microsoft has signed up four partners to help with this: the Beijing Information Technology Institute—one of the co-creators of UOF—on the design side; Beihang University on overall development; Tsinghua University on extensibility, making sure that the translator will work well with individual products as well as in a batch process; and Litsoft, a member of the Lenovo Group, which will take responsibility for overall quality control and ensure that specific customer scenarios are covered, Paoli said.

"The UOF standard is oriented toward the Chinese market, and the tag names in the XML are written in Chinese. The Chinese government is aware of our plan to write a translator for this and is very pleased about it," he said.

"Once again, Microsoft is funding, project managing and engaging deep architectural resources because of our knowledge of Open XML. As a result, Microsoft users will be able to download a plug-in that will enable UOF files to be opened and saved from Microsoft Office," Paoli said.

As this is an open-source project, it can be used by others in different environments and outside of Office in batch mode to translate many files, he said.

Microsoft knows that one document format will not meet the needs of all of its customers and believes choice across document formats is important. "Microsoft will support their needs through interoperability initiatives," he said.

But some software executives, like Sun Microsystems Chairman Scott McNealy, have called for the merger of UOF and ODF into a single

standard.

At an April 2007 conference in Beijing, convened by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, China's State Intellectual Property Office and Sun, McNealy said the UOF is "one of the three main document formats in existence today," the other two being Microsoft Office Open XML and the ODF OASIS/ISO standard.

The same call for merger was made even more forcefully later in the day by Crawford Beveridge, an executive vice president at Sun, said Andy Updegrove, a partner with Boston law firm Gesmer Updegrove and editor of the ConsortiumInfo.org standards blog.

"At one level, ODF and UOF could be harmonized in such a way that implementations of each could natively (rather than through plug-ins) save documents in the other format. And at the highest level, the specifications for the two formats could actually be merged into one, which I'm told would be technically possible," Updegrove said.

"For China to give up its independence with UOF would run counter to this trend, and would provide a very interesting bellwether indeed regarding China's future standards strategy. To provide for the two standards to coexist in a way (through harmonization) that would add power to each would make good sense by any strategy," he said.

An actual merging of the standards would be evidence of a braver and more sophisticated strategy that would be more focused on achieving the desired end result through international collaboration, rather than simply through the unilateral exercise of its independent—and very substantial—domestic market power, Updegrove said.

But Microsoft's Paoli told eWEEK that he does not believe the formats can be merged. "It doesn't make any sense to go and merge. The people

who are doing these other formats know what they are doing and have a reason for doing this," he said.

"The Chinese government decided to create their own format, and we respect that choice. What we are doing is enabling Microsoft Office users to read and write UOF files through this effort. The trend is not about merging or substituting these days, but rather about pragmatic interoperability," he said.

But others, like IBM, do not see it that way. An IBM spokesman told eWEEK, "We have supported and encouraged harmonization of the two formats for quite some time now."

Microsoft will also release May 21 the beta for its translation tools for presentations and spreadsheets, namely the XP, 2003 and 2007 versions of Microsoft Office Excel and PowerPoint as part of the Open XML Translator project launched in July 2006.

"Users will be able to go and download a plug-in and then be able to read and write ODF files from PowerPoint and Excel. The translation is not 100 percent, but we are working on real-case scenarios. The plan is to finalize those versions in the fall of 2007," Paoli said.