

OpenXML: A Poster Child for Open Standards Development?

I have seen some attacks on OpenXML saying it is not an "open" standard. I am quite puzzled by those attacks and think that OpenXML makes the case for open development of standards.

Understand that as the Project Editor for ISO/IEC 26300 and the OpenDocument Format TC editor in OASIS, I carry no brief for OpenXML. However, a well defined and publicly controlled OpenXML would be a great benefit for future work on the OpenDocument Format standard so I have no reason to wish it ill.

OpenXML has progressed from being developed in a closed environment to being handed over to approximately 70% of the world's population for future development so I am missing the "not open" aspect of OpenXML. If anything, the improvements made to OpenXML during that process make it a poster child for the open standards development process.¹

The development of OpenXML illustrates a steady progression towards being more open and the benefits that result from opening up the process. I am going to elide over a lot of detail and examples in order to paint a view of the development of OpenXML as briefly as possible.

OpenXML development began in the closed echo chamber of Microsoft Corporation. That version bore all the marks (scars if you like) of that style of development. It largely ignored the XML and Unicode standards and invented its own versions of other standards such as SVG and MathML. Not to mention that it fell short in terms of documenting what a large portion of the proposal actually meant. Not a good start but typical of echo chamber development of this type of material.

Enter Ecma TC 45. TC 45 is composed of a wide variety of users, developers and others interests who wanted to see Microsoft Corporation adopt an XML based format for its office software. Over the course of a year with a very aggressive meeting schedule, TC 45 produced a document that was approximately three (3) times longer than the original submission and that was in many ways a better proposal. That to me illustrates the difference between talking to yourself and opening up the development process to a larger group of people.²

After being revised by TC 45, OpenXML was submitted via fast-track for approval as an ISO/IEC standard (DIS 29500) in JTC 1/SC 34. If you look at the roster for SC 34, approximately 70% of the world's population has a seat at the table via their national bodies to discuss the final version of OpenXML.

The fast track process created unnaturally short deadlines but the national bodies labored very hard to produce over 3,000 comments on OpenXML and TC 45 labored just as hard to produce answers for those comments. Answers that often offered substantial changes, I think for the better, to OpenXML.

I think you can see the pattern I am trying to develop. At every stage of becoming more open, OpenXML has changed, and, at least in my opinion, has improved.

1 Granted, I have a number of issues with the current OpenXML proposal but experts do disagree in good faith even within open standards development projects. If a proposal cannot progress until we all agree, then we risk proposals being held hostage to whim and caprice.

2 TC 45 did not have an open discussion list for its work and did not release meeting minutes to people outside TC 45. Both of those were serious mistakes in my opinion but neither is sufficient to damn a proposal for all time.

The issue at hand is what is the next step in the evolution of OpenXML?

I understand that SC 34 will be taking on the maintenance and future development of OpenXML (with the participation of Ecma). That will mean that approximately 70% of the world's population will have a say (through their respective national bodies) on how OpenXML continues to develop. I can't speak for anyone other than myself but that sounds pretty open to me. (That presumes approval of OpenXML as an ISO standard, which must be decided by every national body for itself.)

The OpenXML project has made a large amount of progress in terms of the openness of its development. Objections that do not recognize that are focusing on what they want to see and not what is actually happening with OpenXML.

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