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Open format rule could signal big changes

By **HELP DESK***Al Gordon*

Help Desk

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An obscure regulation promulgated by a little-known Massachusetts agency may do what years of antitrust litigation could not: break Microsoft's stranglehold over the computer desktop.

Last month, the Massachusetts Information Technology Division (a unit of the Executive Office for Administration and Finance) released its "Enterprise Technical Reference Model v.3.5" setting state software policy for the next several years. Most significantly, it requires that by January 2007, all offices in the commonwealth's executive branch must save documents in "open" (meaning not controlled by any one company) formats such as the commonly used PDF (Portable Document Format) or a new standard called "Open Document." Ruled out are the familiar file formats used by Microsoft Office — ".doc" for Word, ".xls" for Excel, and so on.

In this context, "format" doesn't mean the styles you use in a document — doing a letter in 10 point Arial, for instance — but rather the coding in the file that tells your computer to use 10-point Arial. Governments, big corporations, and other large institutions ("enterprises" in tech jargon) want file technologies based on a standard called XML ("Extensible Markup Language"). A product of the Internet age, XML can be used interchangeably to define a conventional document or a Web page reflecting the fact that the lines between the two have blurred in today's business world.

Microsoft also is planning to adopt XML in the next version of Office. But as is its wont, the company plans its own proprietary version. Massachusetts's new policy is a big thumbs down to that idea. The commonwealth is insisting on Open Document, which is a version of XML available to any company. If Microsoft does not want to support that — and right now it says it won't — state agencies won't license its software. Massachusetts officials say the

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move protects public information from being rendered inaccessible by Microsoft's, or anyone else's, corporate fiat.

Of course, this being Massachusetts, politics have come into play. Gov. Mitt Romney's administration is backing the plan. So, inevitably, Democratic critics such as Secretary of State William Galvin and members of the Legislature are questioning the idea. No doubt some lobbyists are about to get rich here.

Even if the open document standard is adopted in Massachusetts, one state's action is not a particularly big deal. But if other large customers join in — and a new alliance between Sun Microsystems and Google has been formed to encourage just that — the computer world could be in for big changes. Alternatives to Microsoft Office could be viable. And consumers such as you and I might see something we haven't seen in the software business for a long time: competition.

If you want to get a look at what an Open Document environment is like, it's easy — and free.

Start first at www.openoffice.org, where you can download the new 2.0 version of the OpenOffice suite, which contains all the usual tools: word processor, spreadsheet, presentation program, database, plus graphics and math software. Sun Microsystems acquired the predecessor software and has since released it to the open source world where software is distributed without charge and users are free to tinker with it.

OpenOffice doesn't have a counterpart to Microsoft's Outlook personal information. To plug that hole, go to www.mozilla.org for the Firefox Web browser and Thunderbird e-mail program, both free and both highly regarded. Essential PIM (www.essentialpim.com) will manage your calendar, address book, and tasks.

How do they work? Pretty well, actually. OpenOffice's interface looks to be a generation or two behind Microsoft Office in terms of 3D icons, clever toolbars, and such. But it has most of the same functions. On the other hand, Office's years of evolution show in its generally superior ease of use.

Compatibility with Office documents is good. OpenOffice opened Microsoft Office documents seamlessly and saved to Office formats without problem. One interesting discovery: open document files consistently were much smaller than Office format files.

I wrote this column in OpenOffice Writer, and found it simple to use. But let's face it, word processors long ago stopped being interesting. There just aren't any especially innovative ways to type a sentence. This means, frankly, that if you are pressed for cash, Writer will serve you as well as Word.

There were glitches in OpenOffice — some minor: the transition effects in Impress (the PowerPoint substitute) performed poorly; some major: the Mac version I tested would not install.

But, then, at the price, you really can't complain much.

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