

MS Office 2007 Service Pack 2 With Support for ODF: How Well Does It Work?

Summary of Initial Test Results on Microsoft's Support For ODF

Microsoft's support for the OpenDocument Format (ODF) represents an important and ongoing test of its commitment to real-world interoperability. With SP2, Microsoft instantly becomes the ODF office suite with the greatest market share. Putting millions of ODF files into circulation that are non-interoperable and incompatible with the ODF support provided by other vendors, however, is a recipe for fragmentation, effectively breaking open standards based interoperability on the desktop.

Summarized below are the major shortcomings in Microsoft's support for ODF that have been identified after an initial round of testing. Left unaddressed, they chart a path toward greater divergence instead of the convergence around an open, editable exchange format that the marketplace, including and especially governments, is demanding. Looking forward, a number of recommendations are made to enable Microsoft to make good on its commitment of interoperable support for ODF.

ODF Spreadsheet Interoperability

When reading an ODF spreadsheet, MS Office Excel 2007 strips out formulas, breaking spreadsheet interoperability with all other ODF-supporting applications. While adequate for viewing, Microsoft's support for ODF spreadsheet collaboration is practically worthless.

- A test spreadsheet created in Google Docs, KSpread, Symphony, OpenOffice, and the Sun Plug-In 3.0 for MS Office, for example, when loaded in MS Excel 2007, failed to process correctly. This is because the formulas used to perform calculations within a spreadsheet (e.g., adding numbers in a column of cells) are simply removed in MS Excel 2007. Instead of performing the calculations, what is left is when the spreadsheet is loaded in MS Excel 2007 is the last value that cell had, when previously saved.
- The same test spreadsheet, when loaded and saved in all the other applications besides MS Excel 2007 (e.g., between KSpread and Google Docs), does process correctly. Most other ODF spreadsheet applications are able to interoperate just fine. The correct approach would have been for Microsoft to do the same to ensure that MS Office users can share spreadsheets with other ODF-supporting office suites.
- *The ODF plug-ins for Microsoft Office written by third parties were revealed to provide better support for ODF than the recently released Microsoft Office 2007 SP2.* MS Excel 2007 will process ODF spreadsheet documents when loaded via the Sun Plug-In 3.0 for MS Office or the SourceForge “OpenXML/ODF Translator Add-in for Office,” but will fail when using the “built-in” support provided by Office 2007 SP2.
- Though spreadsheet formula for ODF 1.0/1.1 (the version which Microsoft claims it supports in Office 2007) are implementation-defined, ODF implementations have nevertheless converged on increasingly interoperable spreadsheets formulas. Microsoft was a voting member of OASIS at the time of ODF 1.0/1.1's approval. ODF 1.2, expected to be considered for approval shortly

as an OASIS standard, will define spreadsheet formula using *OpenFormula*.

- ODF spreadsheets created in Excel 2007 SP2 do not in fact conform to ODF 1.1 because Excel 2007 incorrectly encodes formulas with cell addresses. Section 8.3.1 of ODF 1.1 says that addresses in formulas “start with a “[“ and end with a “]”.” In Excel 2007 cell addresses were not enclosed with the necessary square brackets, which could be easily corrected.
- Additional Reading: See *Update on ODF Spreadsheet Interoperability* by Rob Weir/IBM at <http://www.robweir.com/blog/2009/05/update-on-odf-spreadsheet.html> and *On the Microsoft ODF Support Fiasco* by Ditesh Gathani at <http://ditesh.gathani.org/blog/2009/05/10/on-the-microsoft-office-odf-support-fiasco/>

Encryption

Microsoft Office 2007 does not support encryption (password-protection) in ODF files.

- A MS Office 2007 user with access to the password cannot open a password-protected document created in any of the other major ODF-supporting suites.
- Password protection is an interoperable, supported feature between and among the other major ODF-supporting suites, including KOffice, Open Office, and Lotus Symphony.
- In the other direction, ODF files written in MS Office 2007 cannot be password-protected. MS Office 2007 users are presented with a warning message that you “cannot use password protection using the ODF format.”
- Encryption and password protection are fully specified in ODF 1.0/1.1 (item 17.3 of the [specification](#)), so the failure to define this feature in ODF cannot be cited as a plausible explanation. Microsoft should implement support for encryption immediately. ODF 1.2 will come with support for digital signatures. Microsoft should add support for digital signatures as soon as ODF 1.2 is approved.
- Additional Reading: See *Microsoft now attempts to fragment ODF* by Jomar Silva/ODF Alliance at <http://homembit.com/2009/05/microsoft-now-attempt-to-fragment-odf.html>

Tracked Changes

Microsoft Office 2007 does not support tracked changes in ODF.

- Tracked changes are essential to collaboration. Failure to include support for tracked changes rules out effective collaboration on an ODF file between users of MS Office 2007 and the ODF-supporting applications that do support this feature, including OpenOffice.org, StarOffice, Lotus Symphony, and Google Docs, among others.

- Tracked changes are specified in ODF 1.0/1.1 so the failure to define this feature in ODF cannot be cited as a plausible explanation. Microsoft should implement interoperable support for tracked changes immediately.

ODF Support in MS Office 2007 Only

MS has not implemented “native” support for ODF in Office 2003 or its predecessors.

- The vast majority of Microsoft Office users, especially and including most governments, are currently using Office 2003 or its predecessors.
- To receive “native” support for ODF MS Office government users will be forced to upgrade to MS Office 2007.
- For users of Office 2003 and its predecessors, Microsoft has promised to continue to support the SourceForge “OpenXML/ODF Translator Add-in for Office,” and the Sun Plug-In 3.0 is also available to MS Office users. While these plug-ins meet or exceed the performance of Microsoft's support in MS Office 2007 SP2, they are no long-term substitute for full, native, interoperable support.

Commitment to Support Future Versions of ODF

Microsoft's announcement concerning the release of Service Pack 2 contains no promise that it will keep its “support” for ODF up to date with the latest version.

- Microsoft has dragged its feet for over 3 years (ODF 1.0 was approved as an OASIS standard in May 2005 and as an ISO standard in May 2006; ODF 1.1 by OASIS in Feb. 2007), despite repeated calls by governments throughout Europe and elsewhere to implement support for ODF.
- Implementing incompatible, down-level versions of open standards will break interoperability on the desktop, especially considering Microsoft's potentially large ODF installed user base.
- Microsoft has a rich history of implementing down-level versions of open standards; e.g., Java in Internet Explorer, where Microsoft pre-installed an incompatible version with proprietary extensions and then to let it languish, failing to update it as the Java technology evolved.
- ODF 1.2, which comes with spreadsheet formula, metadata and digital-signature support, will be considered for approval as an OASIS standard soon and has been publicly available on the OASIS OpenDocument Technical Committee (in which Microsoft participates) web site.
- Microsoft and other ODF-supporting vendors should publicly commit to keeping their implementation up to date with the latest version of ODF. A new version of ODF should be required to be supported in any MS Office version or service pack released after the new version of an ODF standard is released.