

JASON BROOKS

OOXML: Dead format walking

Microsoft's creation could die before Office ever supports it

WHEN MICROSOFT, some time in the first half of 2009, makes good on its recent pledge to roll full support for the OpenDocument format into a second service pack for Office 2007, my reaction will be, "It's about time."

In the meantime, we're left to ponder why Microsoft has changed its mind about embracing ODF, and what the change will mean for the organizations and individuals that create and consume office productivity documents.

Microsoft is citing customer demand to explain its change of heart. While I doubt that many customers asked for ODF in particular, it's clear that there's sufficient demand for better document format standards in general. Microsoft believed that it could satisfy these demands by crafting its own format, and by pushing it through the ISO standards process.

It seems, however, that Microsoft has underestimated not only the amount of work required to forge its own alternative to ODF, but the relatively small return on investment that the Redmond giant has managed to enjoy for its Office Open XML efforts so far. By shipping

an Office 2007 product that defaults to a brand-new XML-based format, Microsoft has managed to annoy a broad swath of its customers without appeasing the subset that is calling for open formats.

For the majority of customers, who don't particularly care about the new format, the switch to OOXML means jumping through hoops either to reconfigure its Office 2007 installations to default

probably cannot—fit the bill. The version of OOXML that ships with Office 2007 is not even the same version of the format that's managed (through much controversy) to earn ISO's stamp of approval. Indeed, the differences between the on-paper OOXML and the one that lives in Office are great enough that Microsoft has stated that Office won't support the standardized version of OOXML



It seems Microsoft underestimated the amount of work and ROI.

to Microsoft's binary Office formats, or to install add-on software to OOXML-enable previous Office versions.

Here I'm reminded of Office 2007's other major feature, the Ribbon interface, which requires users to change the way they work in order to push more Office features to the surface and make it clearer to everyone what great value they're getting out of running a fat-client productivity suite.

For the customers who do care about open formats, OOXML does not—and

until the next iteration of Office ships, at a date to be determined.

Since most Office users would be happy to continue using Microsoft's old binary formats, and since those for whom open standards are important would probably prefer ODFs or PDFs anyhow, I won't be surprised if OOXML quietly dies before that future Office iteration ever sees the light of day. ☺

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serve as interference buffer zones between the channels. For broadcasters, the spectrum is sacrosanct; for the technology industry, it's an exploitable resource.

Google, Microsoft, Motorola and a host of other A-list tech empires want the spectrum as an alternative to deliver or enhance broadband and other wireless services to the home. With that eerie calm tone that engineers always employ when talking about technology that has never been used, Page insists it will work without interfering with television signals.

The broadcasters claim tech's designs on the spectrum will lead to the end of the world as we know it, at least for the 15 percent of Americans who still rely solely on over-the-air broadcasts. On the other hand, a little interference might be a welcome alternative to the dreary tripe served up by the networks these days. There's a reason why 85 percent of Americans subscribe to cable.

Page, though, sees it in much simpler terms: "If we have 10 percent better connectivity in the U.S., we get 10 percent more revenue in the U.S."

Speaking before an extremely friendly crowd at the New America Foundation, broadcasters were lambasted by Page for not "dealing with reality" by creating a "fiction" about interference. "Just because they

say it, it doesn't make it so," he opined.

Of course, just because Page says it's so, also doesn't make it so. There are, for instance, those embarrassing white spaces testing results at the Federal Communications Commission.

Last year, the FCC put a damper on the white spaces idea when it said testing on equipment sup-



plied by Microsoft failed to consistently sense or detect TV broadcast or wireless microphone signals. The agency began a second round of testing that resulted in a second Microsoft device losing power. As one member of the Wireless Innovation Alliance told me recently, "I guess that's what happens when you let Microsoft build the black box."

Testing continues at the FCC, and you can be sure the rhetoric between tech and broadcasters will simply get testier. That's what happens when it's all about money.

—Roy Mark

Um, Madam Secretary, why did you visit Google?

The invitation looked interesting enough: Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was bringing a guest, U.K. Foreign Minister David Miliband, to Silicon Valley to visit Bloom Energy in the morning and the Google headquarters in the afternoon.

So I packed up laptop, camera, videocam, notebook and voice recorder and took the short drive down the Bayshore Freeway to find out what this was all about.

Are the Brits planning to build their own search engine company in Trafalgar Square? Is Google looking to buy Wales? Nobody seemed to know. The event came and went, and I still don't know what it was about.

Rice and Miliband visited for an hour or so with Google employees inside the big auditorium in Building 40, then came out to meet our little gang of press people, which had been penned up in a small grassy area between two buildings for more than an hour. Once we were in the pen, they wouldn't let us out—not even to visit the restroom. We were sniffed by a dog to make sure we had no drugs or explosives, had our personal bags rifled through and scrutinized by a security guard, and were

stared at unblinkingly (for suspicious body language, perhaps?) by sober-faced law-enforcement officers for an hour. Strangely, there were no metal detectors.

Finally, Rice and Miliband left the auditorium and walked to the microphones at the edge of our grassy pen. Then the political reporters took over, asking questions about Iran and the Guantanamo Bay prison camp. A Stanford Daily reporter asked Rice if she will return to Stanford when her term as secretary of state is up, even if she might not be exactly welcomed back due to her affiliation with the Bush administration. Rice—with occasional help from Miliband—answered them all dutifully.

Finally, a CNN reporter got a question in: "We should have at least one technology question. What's the purpose for visiting Google today?"

Rice handled that with aplomb. "We applaud Google and its employees for the innovation they bring to the IT industry, and we look forward to future innovation," she said.

Fifteen minutes into this hoo-haw, before I could get a question in, it was over. A waste of my time? You be the judge. I'm just glad I'm not covering the Bush administration on a daily basis.

—Chris Preimesberger

Taking aim at consumer social networks

Matt Greeley, CEO and founder of San

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Francisco idea management startup Bright-Idea.com, is having a hard time taking consumer social networks seriously these days.

Greeley, whose company competes with Salesforce.com, Spigit and others in helping groups of people formulate, share and build out ideas, said deploying social networks without a specific business function is inadvisable.

"Putting up social networks is like putting up playgrounds at the office," Greeley told eWEEK.

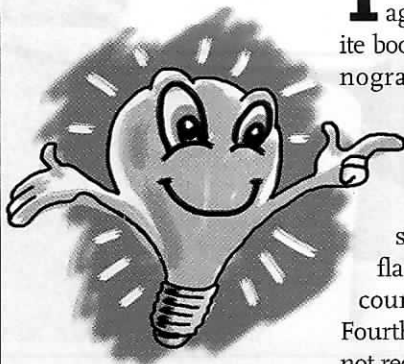
What companies did he have in mind? Greeley, whose company just added the ability for users to build personal profiles and create or join networks to the latest version of his company's WebStorm platform, questioned the future of companies such as Ning, which let users build any social network they want.

He said BrightIdea.com's raison d'être is not to build some generic tool, but to be specialized in the niche of innovation management, providing specialized reporting and features such as idea duplicate finders that will cultivate real business value.

His concern is understandable. Misplaced social tools and networks in an enterprise environment can spoil the business opportunity for companies such as Bright-Idea.com, which have very specific tools for fostering social idea management.

Greeley was particularly vexed by a recent visit with Ning in which the company's officials told him they don't have a corporate strategy. He also might have a case of sour grapes in the wake of Ning's recent \$60 million round of funding. Ning currently has a valuation of \$500 million, which almost feels sacrilegious at a time when the United States is slip-sliding into a recession.

"I think they raised a lot of money and got a lot of buzz from the guy from Netscape [Ning co-founder Marc Andreessen], but this is Silicon Valley, and just because someone is raising a lot of money it doesn't mean it's the right thing to do," Greeley



said. "Now, if they're making a lot of money, it's the right thing to do."

Interestingly, we don't know what kind of money Ning is making, and we may never know. Rare is the Web 2.0 company that goes public, and no social network has gone down that road. Will MySpace or Facebook set the precedent for Ning and the rest of the long tail?

Probably not, unless these vendors can generate some more enterprise-oriented value beyond the current climate of fun, frivolous con-

sumer apps. Consumers are fickle. When they were done with MySpace, they moved to Facebook. When they were done with Facebook, they moved to Twitter. Users looking for the hot Web site are already fishing for the next new thing.

In the meantime, niche vendors such as Bright-Idea.com will chug along, catering to businesses that are serious about using social collaboration tools to make work easier.

—Clint Boulton

The pornography of laptop searches

The government is again using its favorite boogeyman—child pornography—to push the limits of the Constitution's proscription against unreasonable search and seizures. The latest flash point is an April court decision that the Fourth Amendment does not require customs agents to have reasonable suspicion before searching laptops and other digital devices.

You read that correctly: Customs agents can search your laptop on what amounts to nothing more than a whim. They can then copy the entire contents of your laptop, including proprietary business information, trade secrets and other privileged information. Or, perhaps, they will just grab your iPod and check it to make sure all your portable music is legal.

As the feds see it, your

laptop is no different from a suitcase or a bag, which are routinely searched at international borders. And just how does a customs agent determine if a laptop may contain suspicious material? No one is sure and no one at customs is talking. The courts, however, are.

Which brings us to Michael Timothy Arnold, a 43-year-old California resident facing charges of transporting child pornography after customs officials seized his laptop at LAX as Arnold was returning from a trip to the Philippines. The only probable cause was that the Philippines is renowned for its child porno (so I'm told).

A Los Angeles district court booted the case on the grounds that the examination of laptop files was unreasonable, overly invasive and a violation of Arnold's Fourth Amendment rights. The court ruled that customs failed to articulate a reasonable reason for searching the laptop in the first place.

The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, though, reversed that decision, ruling that customs needs no particular reason to search laptop contents. The higher court said laptop searches are no different from searches of luggage. The court gave no consideration at all to a laptop, containing vast stores of information both personal and professional, as opposed to a suitcase.

For a case like this, probable cause is the only thing that helps.

—Roy Mark