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## DAWN Sci-tech World

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### DOCUMENT FREEDOM DAY: Open up to the world



***The Open Document Format (ODF) makes the process of document sharing easier and accessible across platforms and applications, writes Seema Javed Amin***

In many countries, governments and businesses have stopped using vendor-locking applications since they digitally lock-in institutional memory. Instead, they have adopted open standards and the OpenDocument Format (ODF). This way, a user's electronic document, created years ago in an old version of a particular software application, can be opened, read and edited using ODF today, making it accessible across platforms and applications, even as technologies change. Talk about freedom!

A little background is in order for those who are unfamiliar with the difference between 'open standards' and 'open source'. The term 'open source' refers to the development model and distribution of software whose source code is available freely, subject to the terms of a licensing agreement. Proprietary software, on the other hand, is available only in binary, or closed, form.

Open standards are standards, or 'blueprints.' They are created and maintained in an open manner, using a democratic approach, where no single individual or company controls the standard. This is an open standard's most

important quality. Open standards are also available to all, generally free-of-cost, with no royalty or fee for creating an implementation conforming to the standard. Vendors can create either open source or proprietary software conforming to an open standard.

In fact, internet is the result of ambitious public-private collaboration, and open standards were critical to its cycle of innovation. Enthusiastic users broadened its scope and usefulness by creating new technologies to send e-mail, collaborate with colleagues and participate in shared group interests. Openness defined the communities that standardised new protocols and adopted procedures to ensure wide access and availability to the internet's specifications and documentation. Collaboration worked by pragmatic decision-making, based on rough consensus and running code. These interrelated systems — based on open standards — enhanced the network's usability and interoperability. Alone, individual technologies were not enough. Participants commingled technologies and created platforms, resulting in a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The ODF is an open standard. It is an open XML-based document file format which saves and exchanges editable office documents, including memos, reports, and books, spreadsheets, charts, and presentations. It was developed by a vendor-neutral standards developing organisation, the Organisation for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards (OASIS). Multiple office application vendors helped in the process. On May 4, 2006, the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) approved ODF as an international standard, the ISO/IEC 26300.

The ODF's global users include governments, companies, organisations and individual users of Information Technology. Countries like Belgium, Brazil, Croatia, Denmark, France, Japan, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Russia and South Africa have national government pro-ODF policies. Extremadura, Spain; Kerala, India; Massachusetts, United States; and Misiones, Argentina have taken regional, state and local ODF policy actions.

Municipalities moving to ODF include Freiburg, Germany, which will adopt ODF in order to become vendor and product independent, and expect to save 0.7million dollars over the next two years on 2000 government desktops in the process. Bristol City Council, UK has gathered a wide range of information in support of its decision, which cuts its software costs for 5,500 desktops by 60 per cent over five years.

There are 50 worldwide government agencies using ODF-supporting office applications. This includes Finland's Ministry of Justice, which has adopted ODF for document exchange as part of a migration to an ODF-supporting application, resulting in an estimated cost savings of 8.3million dollars over five years. India's Election Commission has also adopted ODF nationally.

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Documents record the interaction between modern governments and their citizens. Governments need to use documents in order to capture knowledge, store critical information, coordinate activities, measure results, and communicate across departments and with businesses and citizens.

Many governments, including Pakistan's, have established Electronic Government Departments to move, albeit slowly, from paper to electronic form. It is imperative to adapt to ever-changing technology and business processes, but governments' collective mindsets hesitate because they need to ensure that they can access, retrieve and use critical records, now and in the future.

A cost-effective alternative to expensive, proprietary, vendor-specific, closed file formats lies in the interoperable ODF. It standardises file formats and gives governments' real control over their documents, ensures transparency, and increases accountability in dealing with their citizens. The following popular ODF-supporting applications can increase efficiency, flexibility and promote greater technology choice, leading to governments' enhanced capability to communicate with, and serve, their citizens:

— Google docs. (**<http://documents.google.com/>**)

— IBM's Lotus Symphony (**<http://symphony.lotus.com/software/lotus/symphony/home.jspa>**)

— Koffice (**<http://www.koffice.org/>**)

— OpenOffice.org (**<http://www.openoffice.org/>**)

— Sun's StarOffice (**<http://www.sun.com/software/star/staroffice/index.jsp>**)

The need for open standards is also compelling in the context of emergency preparedness. When the Southeast Asian tsunami struck Thailand on December 26, 2004, its government and responding domestic and international agencies were unable to share and secure access to information essential to the relief effort because each used incompatible proprietary document formats.

The government of Pakistan's different agencies and branches can also formulate laws, executive decisions, interoperability frameworks, or policy statements, and reap the rewards of opening its electronic documents, irrespective of format, if it adopts the ODF. Pakistan can then be better prepared to counter calamities such as the October 8, 2005 South Asian earthquake.

Pakistan's businesses and industries can also implement, innovate and indigenously customise ODF for governments and customers in their products because it provides greater choice due to competition among both proprietary

and open source vendors.

A complete list of popular, end-user-friendly, ODF-supporting applications are available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_applications\\_supporting OpenDocument](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_applications_supporting_OpenDocument).

This includes proprietary, open source, and web-based applications, and a growing number of content management systems. OpenDocument (.odt) is used for document files, .ods for spreadsheet files, .odp for presentation files, .odb for data files, and .odg for graphic information.

Pakistan's Open Source Resource Center (OSRC) project is the first government-owned initiative of its kind in South Asia. The OSRC is a member of the ODF Alliance (<http://odfalliance.org/>), which promotes ODF's use so that the public sector, businesses and end-users can directly control and manage their own records, information and documents.

Launched in 2006 with more than 36 initial members, some of the alliance's nearly 60 current members include Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, China, France, Germany, Greece, India, Iran, Japan, Jordan, Malaysia, Nepal, Qatar, Singapore, South Africa, Switzerland, the United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and the United States. Other members from Pakistan include Emergen Consulting, Free and Open Source Software Foundation of Pakistan, Linux Pakistan and Xnet Solutions.

The OSRC has played a pivotal role in synergising Pakistan's IT industry and the open source community, the academia and various government agencies, to encourage them to move towards adopting open standards. The OSRC has proactively debated and developed an informed national consensus on open standards from PSEB's platform. Stakeholders involved in the process include the Ministry of Information Technology, provincial IT departments, IBM, Microsoft, Computer Society of Pakistan, the Foundation for Advancement of Science and Technology (FAST), Linux Pakistan, National University of Science and Technology (NUST), Pakistan Software Houses Association (PASHA) and Pakistan Standards and Quality Control Authority (PSQCA).

So, closed or open to new ideas and mindsets? You decide.

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