

PDF on the Road to Open Code

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The PDF format is now the ISO 32000-1 standard and has thus been formalized following years as the actual but non-official standard. Adobe, the original inventor of this document exchange format, is now no longer in charge of its development, relinquishing this responsibility to the international standardization organization based in Geneva.

This decision definitively completes the conversion of this standard from private to public. Some governments, especially that of the US, wanted to instate it as their own document exchange format but were reluctant to rely on a sole supplier. Eventually, in 1994, Adobe made the PDF available to the public by beginning to distribute Acrobat Reader software free of charge, thus enabling mass-usage by the administration of numerous countries. In the wake of this boom in demand, an industry was born which now includes around 2,000 PDF based tool suppliers, with products ranging from document creation to digital signature tools. As a result, the growth in opportunities has been exponential, as has that of competitor products.

Up until now, Adobe has taken full advantage of its experience as the parent of this technology in order to remain at the cutting edge of this market segment. Adobe Reader, the free PDF document reader, is currently installed on over 80% of PC's worldwide, with the remainder divided amongst various competitors. The second component, the Adobe Acrobat document creation tool, has witness the emergence of competitors specializing in various niches of the industry (such as servers for the mass handling of PDF documents) and cheaper desktop products, not to mention the offer of free solutions and open code.

Adobe's response has consisted in the addition of increasingly sophisticated functions, especially in terms of security, privacy, the integration of multimedia resources, collaborative work and workflow.

This process is about to be radicalized, with Adobe benefiting from the foreseeable expansion of the PDF, but seeing its competitive edge diminished due to the need to work closely with the rest of ISO member companies, competitors included. So, how does Adobe benefit from relinquishing the property of its document exchange format? Although the outcome remains uncertain, this is a necessary measure as, according to sources within the company, nowadays "you either have to work with open and public standards, or you don't have a future". Certainly, achieving free file exchange standards is now a common trend which is mainly management-driven due to the wish to avoid any dependence entailed by public document format copyrights, for example when translation into various languages is required. This pressure provides an explanation as to why Microsoft saw itself forced to open up its formats and why Adobe adopted this measure

as a preliminary step in order to allow PDF to be the world standard in terms of formatted documents.

Adobe must now continue to place itself at the forefront of innovation, adding functionalities that are useful to consumers. There is plenty of room to play; document exchange technology still has a lot to offer, especially in terms of integration into management systems and supporting more interactive, multimedia capacities in documents.