

Open Sesame!

By Ken Dafoe



Proprietary is a funny word. In technology, we have come to accept it as a matter of course. Sure, we talk about Open Systems, and we accept that no matter what words are thrown together to confuse the question, in the end my PC application saves its data in a format that is not completely transferable to your PC Application. This is why IS wants standards. If everyone is using MS-Excel then everyone will be able to share documents with everyone else. Everyone. The idea is sound. It is just that, well, I'm used to Lotus 1-2-3, and find its interface a little easier to use. How is it that a corporation's market share has been made the deciding factor in determining which software is best? That's a question for another time. And we still don't have an answer for how to exchange documents when file types are proprietary by application.

Well, a couple of solutions to this problem are making headway. Open Database Connectivity (ODBC) allows us to import data from one application directly into another. ODBC is a Microsoft protocol, but it is not restricted to Microsoft applications. Using ODBC I can be working inside 1-2-3, and import


the data from an Excel workbook directly into my 1-2-3 worksheet. Then I can get new data by simply clicking the refresh button. ODBC works great in instances where the data we want is the data we get. Just don't expect formatting, and don't expect formulas to come over without a hitch.

Another solution extends from the Internet. Well, the Web more specifically. Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML) is fast becoming a standard file type across applications. This means that applications can save a file in HTML, and can import a file in HTML. The benefit here is that HTML is not a Microsoft file type. Nor is it an IBM file type. But to save a file as HTML means both have to adhere to accepted standards. This means my Excel workbook saved as HTML will open as HTML in my 1-2-3 worksheet. And vice versa. Now this doesn't mean that everything carries over without a hitch. Macros, some application specific formatting, and a couple other things do not convert clearly into HTML yet. But things are changing. And it is a start towards that spoken but not realized wish to be able to open up a PC document in an application, regardless of which application created it.

But there is still more. Our Web Browsers are starting to do much more than simply browse. In some cases, they can now edit. Using MS-Office 97 and Internet Explorer 4 or 5, I can open an Excel or Word document directly in my browser, and make the



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changes to the original document without calling Word or Excel – or even having them installed on my hard drive. This means that my Intranet could contain both HTML pages, and full blown XLS applications – my browser will do the adaptation depending upon which file type is being opened. ActiveX is responsible for this neat little feat – and this is why our examples right now are based upon Microsoft products. A limitation? You bet. But look to the implications not the developer. If our browsers are able to adapt to an application by the file type of the web document – then we start to have a universal editor. It changes the focus from the importance of file type to the importance of browser. So rather than bicker over a standard file format for exchanging information, how about a standard application for accessing that information? No magic words. No rock to move. Click the link in your browser, and the file opens. Not eventful on its own, until you think beyond the click. Then things open. 



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