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## XML In Government: Promise And Politics

Open standards appeal to cash-strapped state and federal agencies because they're cheap, easy to manage, and nonproprietary

By Eileen Colkin Cuneo  
InformationWeek

Mar 20, 2006 12:00 AM

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In an effort to further develop the use of XML in the public sector, the Center for Technology in Government, a research organization at the State University of New York at Albany, walked the walk: It converted its Web maintenance process to XML.

The center last year shifted from static documents, which needed to be reformatted each time they were updated by writers, layout designers, or programmers, to open standards that let one version of each Web page be automatically repurposed to any format. "Before we converted to this technology, we had one full-time person managing a site that was 1,500 pages, and that was all this person was able to do," says Derek Werthmuller, the center's director of technology services. With XML, the site is 10 times larger, and the center only spends one day a week managing it. "That means content is coming into the site more quickly, we can write more reports, and we can run more projects at the same time."

The center's extensive return-on-investment analysis of the project revealed that using XML cut in half the personnel costs of running its Web site. "Instead of struggling under the weight of our Web site, we have this opportunity to branch out and do projects we otherwise wouldn't have time to do," program manager Donna Canestraro says. "We're using our experience to help agencies look at the benefits of using XML in government."

No doubt, XML is an appealing option for cash-strapped states and federal agencies because it's cheap, easy to manage, and provides a bridge between incongruous data sources to foster open communication both within and among agencies. And it's taking off on many levels. Most government bodies have interspersed XML into their overall technology enterprise to some degree. At the Library of Congress and National Archives, for example, XML is the standard for digitally storing records. What's more, it offers freedom. "XML gives us the best chance to own our own data, because it's not in a proprietary format so we're not beholden to a vendor," says Mike Short, chief of enterprise development at the New York State Department of Civil Service.

But such liberty doesn't always come easy. Just ask Peter Quinn, the former CIO of Massachusetts. In 2005, Quinn and his team were tasked with solving Massachusetts' data incompatibility problem and its inability to share data stemming from years of technology being deployed in silos across the state's executive branch. Quinn also wanted to ensure that technology never separated public from government information. Quinn's solution: OpenDocument format, an XML-based file format for office applications sponsored by vendors such as IBM and Sun. The format was standardized last year by the Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards.

"OpenDocument format, and applications that read it, are far more likely to be available in 300 years when our great-grandchildren want to read the electronic records we create today," Quinn said in testimony to the Massachusetts Senate Post Audit and Oversight Committee in October. "Furthermore, multiple office applications support ODF even today, so citizens making public records requests will have a choice of office applications when they read electronic public records created in that format."

Quinn's team mandated that all executive branch documents be created and stored in OpenDocument format by 2007. That decision wasn't well received by Microsoft, which stands to lose millions of dollars in sales of its proprietary Office licenses. Though Microsoft is working on its own open-file format called Open XML for the 2007 version of Office, it won't be ready in time for Massachusetts' adoption plan. What's more, Microsoft will be the sole proprietor and developer of this format, whereas the OpenDocument format is a collaborative work by vendors.

The firestorm flared in the political arena as politicians aligned with either Quinn or Microsoft. While the OpenDocument format mandate is still in force today, the controversy led to Quinn's resignation at the end of last year (see story, *Mass. IT Chief, Supporter Of Controversial Open Software Format, Quits*). Speculation remains that Louis Gutierrez, Quinn's replacement appointed last month, will continue the initiative.

Other CIOs are paying attention. While he has no intentions of issuing a similar open-standards mandate for California anytime soon, state CIO Clark Kelso has a workgroup following the progress in Massachusetts to evaluate the rollout and its consequences. "If it starts to look like the experiment in Massachusetts is successful, we'll look at the solution here," he says. "That's the benefit of having 50 states. We can learn from each other."

Kelso admits the political saga behind the Massachusetts initiative has entered his mind. "It makes all of us pause for a minute and pull back a little



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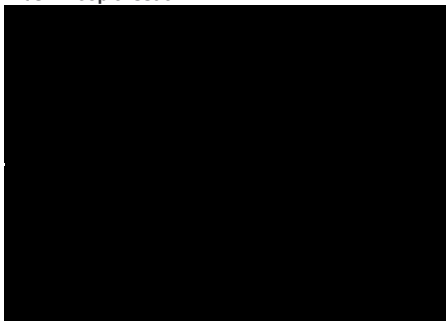
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bit, and that's not a good thing," he says. But he refuses to allow politics to outweigh his IT decisions that are based on comprehensive analysis of what technology best meets a business need. "We're in the public sector and we live in both choppy and, at times, shark-infested waters. I'm not going to let IT issues be framed in a political context," Kelso says.

Kelso uses open standards where they most make sense, such as adopting a service-oriented architecture that embraces XML. But for the most part, adopting one standard doesn't make sense for California, where state agencies are large and tend to make their own IT decisions.



**Politics and IT just don't mix well for California CIO Clark Kelso.**

Photo by Jeffery Newbury

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## Open Source Struggles To Win Critical Mass

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Such of the political controversy around the open standards movement in government, generated by vendors angry with governments for moving away from their proprietary technologies, is mirrored in the open source movement.

Consider the 2005 California Performance Report, ordered by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to find ways to create a more efficient state government. While the report served up many recommendations on cost cutting, the vendor community was most worked up over the suggestion that state IT organizations consider open source as an option before making an IT purchase.

A public hearing on the recommendation was dominated by outcries of injustice from the California vendor community, which believed the recommendation would stifle competition, says Bill Weinberg, an analyst at Open Source Development Labs, who attended the hearings. "People were misconstruing and overstating open source 'consideration' as an adoption mandate, and they were outraged," Weinberg says.

California CIO Clark Kelso stands behind the recommendation he helped create, though he has no intention of making an open source mandate. "What's attractive about open source is that it's now a mainstream product offering, and we know in certain cases open source offers good reliability at good cost," he says.

For instance, the state's Air Resources Board, which is responsible for air quality management, does up to 85% of its work in an open source environment. But that may not be the appropriate solution in other agencies, Kelso says. "We're making sure everyone is trained in open source as an IT alternative that should be subjected to the same rigorous analysis as any other IT alternative."

Open source is proving its worth, albeit at the agency level. "The government IT ecosystem has so many different branches and divisions that there are many avenues for injection of Linux and open source," Weinberg says. "But it's not from the top down, and it's not because it's mandated."

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