



ISO Central Secretariat

International Organization for Standardization (ISO)
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Att: President, Håkan Murby

Oslo, 2007-09-22

Is it time to standardize ISO?

In light of the recent events relating to the standardization process of EOOXML, it seems appropriate to look into possible standardization of the process itself.

The DIS 29500 (EOOXML) process has revealed several shortcomings, both on the national level and on the level of ISO.

The organizations representing each country have very different procedures for determining the nation's vote in ISO. Some countries will vote only if their technical committee is unanimous on the issue. Others will reach consensus defined by a 3/4 majority vote or even 2/3 majority. In some countries there is no vote and the technical committee is only advisory to the national standards organization. Others yet have a two-stage process where the nations vote is determined through two committees. In short there is no standard for standardization.

It seems ISO is not prepared for a politicized process where a big and influential commercial enterprise will use any means possible to push its own standard through to certification.

Committees are flooded by the vendor in support of the standard. Votes are bought and results are hijacked. Several national bodies have flawed and skewed procedures open for corruption.

The list is much longer, but a few examples should suffice:

- Norway - originally a process decided by unanimity but altered on the fly;
- Sweden - voting seats bought and the result thus hijacked. Sweden saved face by annulling the result and abstained from voting;
- Switzerland - process rigged in favor of the vendor, the chairman excluded the option of voting "reject" or "reject, with comments";
- Portugal - process skewed by blaming on lack of available chairs;
- Malaysia - two committees voted unanimously "rejection with comments" and mysteriously overturned by the government to "abstain".

Even if this is the tip of an ice berg, the examples should warrant a thorough examination of the national processes.

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The fact that ISO enforces no standard for national bodies opens the standardization process for manipulation or corruption. I strongly urge ISO to adopt a strict policy for its members detailing the rules for how a national body shall determine its vote in ISO and that it enforces such policy vigorously.

On the level of ISO, criticism has been raised against the fast track process. An investigation should be called to see if EOOXML was unduly put on the ISO Fast Track.

During the Fast Track, many new countries have joined as P-Members (Participating members) in the technical committee, the JTC1. Several of the countries have no credible track on standardization work, have joined very late in the process only to vote an unconditional “Yes” to a standard that has obvious room for improvement.

I urge ISO to adopt a policy that a country may not become a P-member before it has a proven interest as an O-member in that technical committee's work. The country should have attended a certain number of TC meetings. To maintain its P-membership status, the country must also maintain a minimum of activity – meeting attendance and voting.

It may be time also to reevaluate the one country one vote principle. In ISO, the Chinese vote carries the same weight as that of Cyprus. In the JTC1/SC34 the late-comers includes Trinidad and Tobago, Côte-d'Ivoire, Cyprus, Hong Kong, Lebanon and Malta. Countries could be grouped into three categories based on population size. A vote from a category three country would carry the same weight as three countries from category one.

As for approving standards within the field of IT, ISO would greatly benefit from adopting the IETF requirement of two independent reference implementations for passing a standard. This should increase the quality of ISO's IT standards.

The strength, integrity and scalability of ISO have been tested. The organizations agility and adaptability will now be measured. May ISO move quickly to fix its own PR and more importantly its own standardization process.

The publicity that ISO has been given through the DIS 29500 process is phenomenal. ISO and standardization in general has reached a peak in public awareness. I hope the organization will use this publicity to show strong integrity and potential.

Transparency is the key to safeguard the reputation of ISO.

The intent of this open letter is to improve future standardization and to ensure that the processes scale in the face of increased pressure from large commercial interests.

Sincerely yours,

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CEO FreeCode International

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