

## Dear Cabinet Office... about your Open Standards Board

At the end of a long second round table meeting to discuss the government's open standards consultation one of your officials took the opportunity to "sell-in" the shiny new open standards board. She seemed surprised when I pointed out that this initiative cut across the consultation. So, as promised, here's my explanation.

The problem is one of asymmetric information and signalling or as I wrote in Computer Weekly recently, the problem of "who and whom".

We can look at it by asking three questions:

- How much resource should the sender devote to sending the signal?
- How can the receiver trust the signal to be an honest declaration of information?
- Under what circumstances will the process break down?

You might want to rely on "plausible deniability" that a problem exists but you cannot force anyone to believe you. It's not what you say you're going to do and to quote the old truism – actions speak louder than words.

So, what have you been signalling to date?

Open standards appeared in the 2002 action plan for OSS (pdf). In 2004 the next version of the action plan (pdf) was published, which was itself updated in 2009 and replaced by proposals formulated in 2010.

That already feels like a lot of planning and not much action.

It was not until 2011, nine years after a need was identified, that we got a government definition of an open standard (which as we have said already all hinges on what you mean by "whenever possible" not forgetting that "wherever possible" includes "nowhere").

No doubt someone might signal that this time it is different. As, no doubt, was signalled in the past.

To be honest, it's unclear why you are doing this at all (and please don't repeat what you've said already because we've been listening carefully for a long time now and it doesn't get any clearer).

We all know that the 2011 definition wasn't going to change the world because of the accompanying heavy qualifications (repeated in the current consultation). Then there's that botched survey.

There's no need to take our word for that, as others put it:

Too much of the [ICT-SIP] is given over to what has been achieved, such as the boast that “an informal consultation to crowd source feedback on Open Standards has taken place... [who cares?] (sic)”

The current consultation has proved to be a bit tricky. And in yet another strange coincidence while we're all getting excited about who's funding the convenor of the first round table meeting, Cabinet Office was cutting a new three year deal with Microsoft (which avoids a 29% average increase):

Microsoft has told us that the PSA 12 will be heavily discounted and the net affect is that the public sector will not see an impact from EU price alignment, it will be entirely offset.

Just like last November, when another Cabinet Office official reported that he:

"encouraged a department to pilot open source LibreOffice as an alternative to upgrading its Microsoft software. This led to Microsoft providing the new software for free"

(Hence our confusion about what the current consultation is really all about).

What about the need to promote the Open Standards Board?

The big clue in the rush to get it up and running is to be found in the targets contained in the current action plan:

- A set of open standards for data adoption established and progressed by government departments, driven by the Open Standards Board (June 2012).

AKA: never mind the quality meet the deadline

The current consultation was never going to adequately inform the OSB in time for June 2012 and a delay of a month just makes things worse. So let me identify the ways in which the signals you are sending about the OSB cuts across the consultation:

- While consulting on the definition of an open standard you are already announcing implementation plans
- While consulting on how an open standard is created the OSB has no published terms of reference, no published governance but the recruitment for four volunteers has already occurred.
- While consulting on the principle of mandation you do not define what mandation means.
- While consulting on the pros and cons of mandation you are announcing that the OSB will using mandation.

And of course as I said in the Computer Weekly article does any of this pass the “So What?” test (again I'm not alone).

Against the background of what looks like same-old same-old if this time your proposals for open standards are anything more than gesture politics then I suggest that you need to try doing something different.

PS: here's yet another set of reasons why open standards are really important.

-- Gerry Gavigan, Chair, 4 May 2012

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