

PRESS RELEASE

December 16th 2010

European Interoperability Framework – a bold move to spread the benefits of open standards and interoperability

After over two years of controversial debate and under intense scrutiny from the information and communication technology (ICT) industry, the European Commission has shown courage by adopting a bold set of guidelines to help national, regional and local governments throughout the European Union make their computer systems all work properly together.

The European Interoperability Framework (EIF) adopted by the Commission on Thursday is a landmark policy document because it attempts to draw a line under the accepted practices of the past and the present, and it ushers in a new era where governments can be contacted by their citizens and by each other without having to buy the same brand of software.

The EIF looks at interoperability on four levels: legal, organizational, semantic and technical. But it is the technical issues that have caused most of the problems in reaching an agreed text. The reason for this is because some parts of the ICT industry have been resisting any attempt to make public sector computer systems interoperable.

"EIF will help public authorities escape from the sort of technology lock-in into one single vendor that until now has been the norm across Europe," said Openforum Europe chief executive, Graham Taylor.

"We are broadly happy with the compromise text adopted today and we congratulate the Commission," Taylor said but he added one concern: "While the intentions are good, we feel that the document lacks some of the practical guidance that we saw in earlier drafts of the EIF. This may make it too easy for government agencies to dodge making the sort of interoperable systems the Commission wants to see."

The EIF was adopted along with a related document called the European Interoperability Strategy (EIS), which covers similar ground but at a broader, strategic level, and it follows the adoption this week of two other European policy initiatives that also stress the need for interoperability and open standards.

On Tuesday the Commission agreed on a set of rules, dubbed the Horizontal Guidelines, which govern how competitors in an industry can co-operate without falling foul of competition rules. And on Wednesday it launched its eGovernment Action Plan, which aims to connect governments around Europe with their citizens and businesses using open, flexible, cost-effective and collaborative IT technologies.

"The concept of interoperability has really come of age in Europe this week," Taylor said.

EIF highlights:

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It reconfirms that the Digital Agenda - the Commission's broad strategy for ICT over the next ten years - "can only take off if interoperability based on standards and open platforms is ensured" and it confirms that "The positive effect of open specifications is also demonstrated by the Internet ecosystem."

It takes a productive and pragmatic stance on openness:

"In the context of the EIF, **openness is the willingness of persons, organisations or other members of a community of interest to share knowledge and stimulate debate within that community**, the ultimate goal being to advance knowledge and the use of this knowledge to solve problems".

"If the openness principle is applied in full: - All stakeholders have the same possibility of contributing to the development of the specification and public review is part of the decision-making process; - The specification is available for everybody to study; - Intellectual property rights related to the specification are licensed on FRAND terms or on a royalty-free basis in a way that allows implementation in both proprietary and open source software".

It tackles interoperability head-on and takes a clear stance: "Recommendation 22. **When establishing European public services, public administrations should prefer open specifications**, taking due account of the coverage of functional needs, maturity and market support."

EIF, together with EIS, "**provide guidance on the link between ICT standardization and public procurement to help public authorities to use standards to promote efficiency and reduce lock-in.**"

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