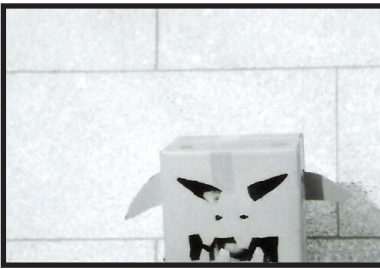


news to us



FROM BOTTOM TO TOP: NATE MARSH, ALEXANDER DRUM, JOHNNY STEVENS, CHRIS ROCHON; GOT SOME RANDOM PHOTOS? SUBMIT THEM TO DESIGN@WEEKLYDIG.COM AND THEY JUST MIGHT END UP HERE.

ODF: WTF?

How an innocent technology proposal became the state's biggest headache

BY PAUL MCMORROW | PAUL@WEEKLYDIG.COM

Not too long ago, this very publication brought its readers a news piece about a hippie-ish technology initiative being pushed by the Romney administration. Romney's director of the state's Information Technology Division (ITD), Peter Quinn, was leading Massachusetts's executive branch into a landmark data-storage conversion: By January, 2007, Quinn and Romney would ditch Microsoft's proprietary Office software in favor of the OpenDocument file format (ODF).

OpenDocument's format is non-proprietary, so the government would be able to access documents for free, in perpetuity, as the state would not have to buy future releases of software to maintain document access. OpenDocument also opens Microsoft's Office suite to competition from IBM and Sun, which should drive down the cost of software. IT officials worldwide are watching Massachusetts as a test case for government use of open-source software.

Now, just a few months after making his OpenDocument pitch, Quinn is history, Massachusetts's conversion to ODF is being held up by some nasty political infighting and the futures of three giant corporations—not to mention the rest of the country's IT policy—hang in the wind.

And the entire mess could have been avoided, had some of the players displayed a bit more tact.

As governor, Romney has discretion over how departments under his command create and store documents; if he ordered the education department to do business in cuneiform, that's what they'd do. But eventually, all those records become the domain of Secretary of State Bill Galvin's archiving armies. If, with no prior warning, Romney decides to hand Public Records a stack of education records on cuneiform tablets, Galvin's people are going to be pissed.

Instead of anticipating this conflict,

Quinn and ITD believed that their position would shield them from legislative blowback, and they pushed ahead without first alleviating the legislature and Galvin's concerns, showing little understanding of, or deference to, State House culture.

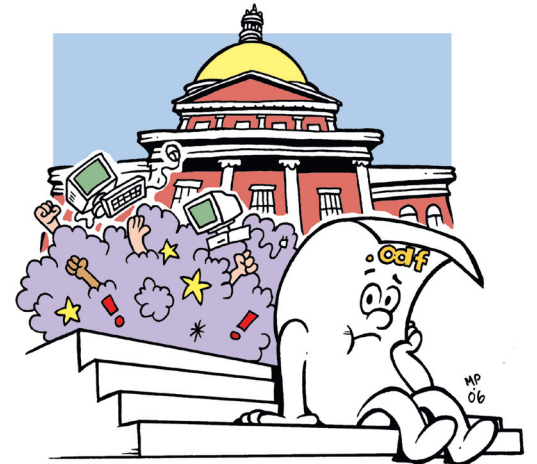
"With better communication, we probably wouldn't have as much of a problem," argues Taunton State Senator Marc Pacheco. "The policy was crafted and put into motion at a rapid pace with an attitude of, quite frankly, arrogance. The administration knew better than anybody else what should be done."

Galvin disputes ITD's legal authority to switch to ODF, and an amendment Quincy State Senator Michael Morrissey has tacked onto the Senate's economic stimulus bill would formally strip ITD of its decision-making powers, vesting them instead in a collaborative IT task force. IT power would be split between the governor and Galvin, and "no agency, department or municipality" would be allowed to implement IT policies or standards without the task force's approval.

OpenDocument supporters howled that Morrissey's task force would essentially block the planned ODF conversion. Peter Brown, president of the Free Software Foundation, labeled the amendment as being "very political," adding: "To neuter such a big department is an amazing proposition."

Pacheco, who chaired held hearings on OpenDocument last fall, has taken the brunt of bloggers' criticism in the ODF fight; he's been accused acting as Microsoft's puppet. He denies this, instead pinning his committee's scrutiny of ODF on the legal dispute Galvin has raised.

"It's not about the technology; it's about meeting existing public records law and disabilities law," he argues, adding that ITD's pitch was ham-fisted: They failed



MARK POUTENIS

to consult with Romney's own disabilities office, and presented Pacheco's committee with a deeply flawed cost analysis.

Even ODF supporters admit that mistakes may have been made. "The fight probably started with people having their nose out of joint," says Andy Updegrove, who has chronicled the state's OpenDocument fight extensively on his blog at Consortiuminfo.org. "Peter is not the most skilled politician. He was doing what needed to be done, and doing what he had the right to do. But he probably didn't spend as much time on the politics as he should have."

The result: a political clusterfuck that brought the project to a virtual halt and eventually provoked Quinn's resignation.

"Every decision was being held up for political reasons," says Brown. "All the other ITDs are watching what happens here, and Quinn's resignation definitely sends a chill."

"We're literally being watched by the entire world. And what do we do? We take a visionary and cut his legs out from under him," adds Updegrove.

Quinn may be gone, but the ODF initiative is still at loggerheads. Rightly or wrongly, the legislature and the secretary of state have been wound up, and ODF's future is the subject of a State House game of chicken.

For their part, the governor's office says it won't be the first to blink. "There are no changes in the administration's planned conversion to an open, non-proprietary system," says Eric Fehrstrom, Romney's communications director. "We will consult with Galvin's office, but this is an executive initiative. The governor is responsible for IT decision-making." ⊗