



ROUND TABLE REPORT

ONE FRAMEWORK
TO RULE THEM ALL?

8th of June 2016, Brussels

Report

Round Table

One Framework to rule them all?

Brussels, 8th of June, 2016

Silken Berlaymont, Boulevard Charlemagne 11, 1000, Brussels, Belgium

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Speakers

Margarida Abecasis

Head of Unit, DG DIGIT, European Commission

Eric Brouwer

NORA architecture, Stichting ICTU, The Netherlands

Nicky Stewart

Skyscape Cloud Services, UK

Karel de Vriendt

Adviser, OpenForum Europe

Complete recordings of the various speakers' introductory speeches are available online, on OpenForum Europe's [Youtube channel](#).

Moderator Karel de Vriendt, Adviser, OpenForum Europe

Rapporteur Graham Taylor, Chief Executive Officer, OpenForum Europe

Other details of the event, and the speakers' presentations, are available [here](#).

Credits

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Introduction

The focus of this Round Table was the revision of the European Interoperability Framework (EIF).

Karel De Vriendt (KDV) opened the session by apologising for the absence of Graham Taylor (CEO of OpenForum Europe (OFE)), who had planned to be moderating this Round Table, but was stranded in southern France by the SNCF rail strike. KDV would therefore be doubling up as speaker and moderator.

The timing of the event (two weeks prior to the end of the consultation on the EIF) was deliberate, so that participants could share their thinking, particularly with the Member State representatives in the room.

The Round Table followed a common format, with a number of short interventions, and then a moderated discussion. The discussion itself (but not the introductory talks) was held under the Chatham House Rule, and this is reflected in these notes.

In his introduction, KDV explained his previous role as Head of Unit responsible for the predecessor to ISA2, including the development of the EIF, CAMSS, and what is now known as JoinUp. Key to the work of his team at that time were the concepts of openness, sharing and collaboration.

A first version of the EIF was released in 2004 as a result of coediting work between the Commission and Member State experts. Whilst this had no official status, it did reflect best thinking on interoperability at that time, the purpose being to help Member States on interoperability, open standards choices, competition, and freedom in their administrations. Despite its lack of formal status, the document quickly became referenced worldwide. Most frequently quoted was its definition of an “open standard”: (summarising) *a standard that is adopted and maintained by a not-for-profit organisation and its ongoing development occurs on the basis of an open, ongoing decision making process available to all interested parties. Nobody should own the standard. The standard is published in a specification document that is available freely or for a nominal charge. It must be permissible to use for free. Regarding IPR, any standards present must be irrevocably available on a royalty-free basis (so as to ensure that Open Source implementations could be made).*

The idea was that Open Standards would ensure choice for consumers, real competition between providers and a level playing field for IT solutions based on open source software with those based on proprietary products.

After some time, Member States pushed for the EIF to be given some official status, and this required its link to a Communication and consensus between all Commission services on its content. It did not seek to mandate, but made an important statement on interoperability.

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The second version of the EIF was published in 2010, after long Commission internal discussions and after a period of heavy lobbying and significant external comment. Of particular focus was again the definition of an open standard (now termed an ‘open specification’, because the term “standard” has a very specific meaning in EU legal language. The revised form attracted substantial comment, and many Member States have preferred to remain with a definition more closely aligned with Version 1.

Looking forward, we need to focus on how the recommendations of the EIF can be translated into real action, and whether the EIF can help real sharing and collaboration in and between the Member States. What is the role of the Member States and how can they, with their buying power, directly influence the market – making it more open, more competitive and leading to better services? And is the EIF still relevant in a Cloud-dominated world? In the future, what will be the meaning - and the importance - of “interoperability”?

Speakers presentations

Margarida Abecasis assumed responsibility in 2011 (as Head of Unit within DG DIGIT) for the ISA programme, including the EIF. In her presentation (slides available here) she explained both the status to date of the EIF (and related national programmes), and the priorities for this revision of the EIF.

The delivery of Digital Public Services across all Member States has not only illustrated variations, but also identified particular areas where closer attention is necessary.



The need for cross-border public services has been emphasised from reviews of stakeholders, whether they be businesses, citizens or politicians. However, the delivery of Digital Public Services across all Member States has not only illustrated variations, but also identified particular areas where closer attention is necessary. Delivery of public services, cross border mobility and user authentication services were of particular concern. The studies observed a direct correlation between success at a national level and the degree to which interoperability has been achieved through the implementation of National Interoperability Frameworks (NIFs) - in particular, how far the NIF elements have been implemented into executed projects. This ranges from identification of some project examples, to evidence of systematic and large scale implementation. Focus was needed on structural and cross-cutting measures, in particular: Base registers and Data management, eID, eDocuments, Service delivery, Governance and organisation. Interoperability underpinned all of these.

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The revision of the EIF has carried this thinking forward, maintaining the focus guidance, support and best practice, whilst seeking to avoid the creation of new electronic barriers or silos, facilitating the interconnection of public services for citizens and businesses at national and EU level, improving quality of public services and transparency, and maximising the coherence of open data from various sectors and countries.

The talk identified four main areas where the proposed EIF revision makes important changes:

- interoperability governance;
- information interoperability;
- public service governance; and
- the use of base registers within information sources.

Interoperability Governance has been retained in the model, now with a bigger scope, with a clearer definition and with new recommendations. In the previous EIF, it had neither enough content nor enough weight. In the new model, the following have been added: new recommendations on the establishment of the governance of interoperability across administrative levels, alignment of the NIFs with the EIF, and establishment of organisational structures for the governance and monitoring of the interoperability activities.

Information Interoperability – this term replaces the former ‘Semantic Interoperability’, with specific new recommendations that Public Administrations should perceive public data as a public asset which should appropriately be generated/collected, managed, shared, protected and preserved. Furthermore, Public Administrations should put an information management strategy in place at the highest possible level, so as to avoid fragmentation and duplication. Metadata, master data, and reference data management should be prioritised.

Public Service Governance is the new cross cutting Layer added to the model, which includes organisational structures and roles & responsibilities in governance, interoperability agreements, and IT processes for service management.

Finally the focus on *Information sources* highlighted the need to widen the availability of authoritative sources with the area of Base Registers gaining particular attention. This type of information constitutes the master data for Public Administration and European Public Service delivery.

Eric Brouwer is Head of Architecture for NORA (the Netherlands Government Reference Architecture) in the Netherlands Government; he focused his presentation on the approach taken by the Government, regarded by many as a leading proponent for Open Standards and Interoperability.

In his introduction, he emphasised that it had taken 15 years to get to the point they were now at, such that by 2017 business and citizens can interact entirely digitally. Digital by default, once only for businesses, all governmental bodies acting like one, and user-centricity were the fundamental approaches being followed. And for sake of interoperability and avoidance of vendor lock-in, the Dutch government acknowledges the vital importance of open standards. However, standards are never a goal, but always a means towards the goal of providing good public services to our citizens.

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The NORA (i.e, the Dutch National Interoperability Framework or NIF) supports all the domain (reference) architectures at both strategic and operational levels. In particular, to stimulate and secure use and re-use of existing solutions, building blocks and standards; but also to pass on knowledge of and insight into issues at a national level on topics such as semantics, security, archiving information and ‘mobility’. Alignment with the requirements from the domains is done through regular consultation (5 times a year) and through surveys and thematic meetings. Regular monitoring and feedback from all stakeholders was a key point made in this talk. Recognition of initial lack of awareness, no standard processes, and lack of expertise has gradually been replaced with the aid of a sharing culture. Some of the observed success factors included:

- Goal: not open standards as such, but interoperability (and reducing vendor lock in)
- Awareness, monitoring, information, formats, decision tree, help desk
- Incremental change (standards mandatory for new investments only, not installed base)
- Keep it simple, emphasise the benefits
- Interoperability is a key requirement to tackle chain issues
- Incorporate standards policy in architectural frameworks

Finally, the need for global awareness and collaboration was emphasised - not just across Europe, not only because of the necessity of globally defined standards, but in the increased interaction at public services level.

Karel De Vriendt, Government Advisor to OFE, gave his views on the revised EIF. Overall he gave qualified support, recognising in particular its improved clarity, making it much easier to read. He identified four areas of concern, where he saw the need for the Commission to be more ambitious in its thinking:

- Its *status* was still confusing: being an annex to a Communication still gave it no binding power, and KDV doubted the ability for it to be transposed into NIFs. The consistency of the vocabulary should be common, but would the long list of recommendations be adopted? Was it ambitious enough, would not something like a Ministerial Declaration have been more appropriate? Or else, an equivalent to the signing ceremony associated with the Joint Initiative on standardisation the previous week?
- It was very disappointing for KDV that *openness* had been reduced to transparency, which he saw as a major reversal from previous versions. What has been completely lost as a result is that when we speak about understanding of Open (as exemplified in Open Standards, the Open Internet, or Open Access to research), we do not just speak about transparency. Where is the freedom of choice? Where is the competition? Where is the idea that openness leads to flexibility, and sustainability? Where is the idea that openness leads to community building and collaboration building, not only between administrations but between administrations, solutions builders and citizens? KDV noted that in the eGovernment Action Plan, openness had been fully recognised, but that it was missing here. Also missing was some of the subtlety of sharing, re-use and collaboration that is inferred in the use of building blocks and the potential use of open standards. The result being that it would be difficult to launch real collaboration between administrations.
- The relevance of the EIF in the context of a *Cloud-dominated future* was also raised. Is the underlying model still valid? How do we ensure application and information portability?

- Finally, JKDV questioned why the Commission continues to struggle with the definition of an ‘Open Standard’. We have seen similar wording in the Standardisation Communication, yet we have heard Commissioner Oettinger give a different interpretation. More recently we see the Commission expressing a view that Royalty Free is just a form of FRAND, justifying that FRAND is compatible with Open Source – a position challenged by many as not being the case.

Finally, we heard from **Nicky Stewart**, Commercial Director at Skyscape Cloud Services, a UK based company that was one of the first companies to offer G-Cloud services and has worked closely with the UK Government and the EC on Cloud adoption in Public Services. Her particular challenge for this Round Table was to discuss the relevance of the EIF in a Cloud-dominated world, and the impact this might have on Cloud Service Providers (CSPs).

Not all clouds are interoperable, so the relationship between EIF and Cloud is obvious, and very interesting. Interoperability across Europe means scale, accessibility and sharing. Cloud does all of this, and some more. So in the same way that we know that DSM, big data driven initiatives and pretty much anything else in our digital world will be underpinned by Cloud, it is hard to see how EIF would not be underpinned by Cloud. The real exam question is how we make EIF and Cloud more relevant to each other.

Cloud is an established but very dynamic market, even over the last five years technology has come on in leaps and bounds. Where we once spoke of CPUs and VMs, we now speak of Containers, and PaaS. If some CSPs are to be believed, soon we may speak of data centres under the sea.

This dynamism is desirable and necessary. But it doesn’t easily accommodate localism, regulation, or the rigid application of standards. As EIF is integrated with DSM, like the DSM, EIF needs to understand what Cloud really is if it is to really reap Cloud’s benefits.

And that begins with fundamental differences in current perceptions of what Cloud is. As an example, the UK government is undergoing fundamental digital transformation, seeking to improve citizen experience, reduce transaction costs,

speed up policy deployment, build things once and then share. It is “Government as a Platform”, and it goes without saying that it’s all predicated on Cloud. It won’t be without its challenges, but it’s certainly not being delivered in a random, ungoverned way. The standards are very clear. They are also very appropriate.

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In the UK there is a Digital Service Standard, which provides guidance for architects, developers, designers, service managers and more. It covers a multitude of topics, from how to determine whether to build or buy, use of open standards (which are mandatory, unless an exemption has been granted) through to security standards and how to make decisions about how a service is hosted. And there are clear, fair and transparent routes to buy these services, such as G-Cloud, and the Digital Outcomes Framework.

Fundamentally, the Digital Service Standard is about choice. It enables technologists and buyers to make the right choices for their needs, in compliance with Government’s digital strategy.

Even more importantly, from Skyscape’s perspective, it gives CSPs the choice to comply with the requirements of the standard (which might require significant investment) or not, as the case may be.

In summary some EIF requirements from an SME CSP’s perspective (a precis):

clarity on what is expected from Cloud providers – particularly in terms of interoperability;

engage with CSPs, and gain a really thorough understanding of Cloud in all its guises, and what Cloud can bring to the EIF party;

don’t try and invent a cloud especially for EIF; it won’t be Cloud, and it will be an antiquity before you’ve even put your pen down;

for the same reasons, do NOT attempt to build an EIF Cloud; if you do, expect

to spend billions of euros, waste man year after man year of entirely nugatory effort: it's all out there in the market today;

Open Standards are preferable to blanket, “one size fits all” regulation, and need to be based on the needs of the consumer:

- For any new standards that are created, there needs to be a careful assessment and mapping of existing standards to the EIF requirements – this will speed up delivery, and keep down compliance costs for CSPs – in particular SMEs

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if Europe must regulate, it must think carefully about what it regulates, how it regulates, and what the unintended consequences might be. Any CSP operating in Europe must already, and quite rightly, comply with data protection regulation, consumer regulation, competition law, and so on. Many would argue that the existing regulation is already fit for purpose, but simply isn't being properly applied – or may be in need of an overhaul to drag it kicking and screaming into the 21st century;

think very, very carefully about how all of this stuff gets bought:

- Competition and iteration is better than massive aggregation onto a few suppliers. UK public sector learnt that the hard way
- By all means, stipulate the terms and conditions of any EIF engagement, but make sure they are proportionate and relevant to Cloud.
- Make sure buyers understand what they are buying – buying Cloud is a million miles from buying tin – or even a managed service. Informed buyers will make the right decisions and accelerate the EIF. Some work under way under Horizon 2020 to do just this – don't underestimate the importance of these activities, and give them appropriate profile and air-time;

but above all, making the big picture more generally available will motivate CSPs and their investors to do the right thing for EIF. They just need to know what the right thing is.

Create the right market conditions for Cloud, and EIF will become reality.

Response to Interventions

In replying to the interventions, Margarida Abecasis responded to the comment in respect of lack of ambition. She reflected that indeed the Commission still had the opportunity to adopt the route of Ministerial Declaration if required, but in terms of the transposition to NIFs, she pointed to the success of Estonia, Denmark, Netherlands and Spain, countries that are aligned with the EIF and where high delivery of Digital Services was being achieved. She recognised the difference of views between implied meanings of openness and transparency and said this was an area which might be reconsidered. Collaboration was always difficult to achieve and she shared the concerns. On a positive note, she referenced a new framework intended to encourage sharing and re-use. In terms of relevance within Cloud, she was in direct contact with the Cloud unit in DG Connect, but little was available now that could be directly referenced in the EIF revision, although she recognised the importance of data portability in this context. The comments and suggestions from this discussion would provide valuable input but the current view was that the list of recommendations were equally valid in a Cloud environment. On Open Standards, this was not an area for them as it was being looked at a central level within the Commission as a result of the OFE letter to VP Ansip. A coordinated position was being worked on.

Discussion

In the discussion, the view that RF was a special subset of FRAND was directly challenged by a Member State participant who pointed out the difference between zero cost (an option within FRAND) and Royalty Free, and suggested the definition within W3C clarifying this point. KDV pointed out other sources of information on this point, citing a recent blog by Simon Phipps (another OFA Fellow).

The need for clearer demarcation between ‘principle’ and ‘practice’ was emphasised. Open Standards as identified was an important method to bring the two together. This point was reinforced by another Member State representative, who strongly suggested that the time for debate over words and whether it should be published as a Regulation or Directive for example was over, and the focus now needs to be on delivery. A challenge was expressed concerning what the Commission should be doing differently (pointing to ISA, CEF, etc.); the response was that, within the DSM and H2020, the prime need is to move from tested pilots to roll-out. In support, it was pointed out that some Member States had already implemented such services, and the opportunity exists for others not only to build on those experiences, but also now to move forwards on those cross-border services that had been piloted.

A further view was that there was no need for more paper, no need for mandation, what was available was sufficient. What works now is that it allows real delivery of services to continue.

Cross-border services gained a lot of attention in the discussion, and outside the trade area, the best examples are where there are strong public service (user) needs. The building blocks may be there, however the identification of domains where there are actual needs may not be visible. Building bridges is key. The position on ‘mandatory’ was challenged, pointing out that in many areas this was a necessary prerequisite. Cooperation between Member States will also be based on mutual agreement. This is equally true for the adoption of the EIF.

The role of the Commission in facilitating debate between Member States, and the differing roles and programmes, were also debated – but without agreement.

Conclusions

The goal of this Round Table was certainly not to come to any definite statement about what should, and what should not, be included in the next version of the EIF. However, listening to the presentations and to the debate, one could see that:

- the real work is done mostly within and/or between Member States. The Commission should, via the publication of the EIF, support this work and

encourage administrations to work to-gether to provide better (digital) public services to businesses and citizens;

- the exact status of the EIF is not important, provided that the EIF is widely accepted as relevant by Member State administrations, as well as the relevant parts of industry and civil society - Member States that believe in interoperability and openness have been able to achieve results despite the limitations of the existing version of the EIF;

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- the Commission should continue to work with Member States and with all relevant players to ensure that sharing, re-use and collaboration become the norm in the development of digital public services, and that interoperability requirements are drivers for choice, freedom, competition and innovation;
- the Commission's services keep struggling with the relationship between different methods of collaboration/competition (collaboration/competition via open source developments vs. collaboration/competition via standards developments), and how incorrect handling of intellectual property rights embedded in standards may make implementations of these standards in open source code difficult (if not impossible). More work is needed to inform key Commission staff about these issues and to help them to find a good policy balance between supporting innovation and competition, and protecting investments made in research; and
- it is not at all clear what interoperability requirements public administrations should impose upon their Cloud providers to ensure that they keep the ability to switch providers in the future, and so retain control over their services - and the information embedded in those services - in a rapidly evolving world. This could well constitute the topic for another OFE Round Table in the future.

Speakers' biographies

Margarida ABECASIS,
Head of Unit, DG DIGIT, European Commission



Margarida Abecasis is an ICT engineer specialised in telecommunications, with a master's degree in electrotechnical engineering and computers. As an administrator at the European Commission since 1993, she defined the first service level agreements for data transmission services and managed IT projects supporting the modernisation of the decision-making procedures of the Commission and inter-institutional exchanges. In 2006, she was appointed Head of Unit in DG Informatics, responsible for ICT infrastructure services. She also chaired the inter-institutional sub-committee on telecommunications and networks (CII-TN). In 2011, she took over the responsibility of the unit in charge of the ISA programme. Ms Abecasis was also in charge of preparing the legal basis for the ISA2 programme, the follow-up programme of ISA. The new EUR 131 million programme, approved by the Council and European Parliament in autumn 2015, started on 1 January 2016 and will run until December 2020.

Eric BROUWER,
NORA architecture, Stichting ICTU, The Netherlands



Eric Brouwer is head of department Architectuur at ICTU, the Dutch governmental organization to perform ICT-projects in order to maximize the government's IT objectives through collaborating with authorities. In earlier years, he has improved the e-collaboration within the Dutch ministries by introducing Identity Management and the deployment of a secure smartcard for physical access control as well as logical access control. As from 2010 he has further developed the Dutch Interoperability Framework www.NORAonline.nl in order to improve the design and implementation of governmental services towards civilians and business. Eric Brouwer graduated at the Technical University of Delft and has over 30 years of experience in improving the business processes by introducing ICT-solutions at AT&T and Philips Telecommunications, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Shipping Inspectorate (Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Watermanagement), PragmavisIO partners BV (own company), the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports and ICTU.

Nicky STEWART,
Skyscape Cloud Services, UK



Nicky is Commercial Director for Skyscape Cloud Services Ltd. Skyscape was one of the first cloud service providers to join the G-Cloud framework, and to secure Pan Government Accreditation to IL3 for its cloud services. Skyscape has won a large number of high-profile contracts via the UK government G-Cloud Framework, has been named a “Cool Vendor” by analyst firm, Gartner, and won the Communications category in Deloitte’s Global 2015 Technology Fast 500 EMEA programme. Prior to 2011, Nicky worked with government and industry to enable the UK government to adopt and reap the benefits of cloud computing, as part of the Cabinet Office G-Cloud programme team, leading the multi-disciplinary government/industry Commercial Work Strand. Nicky is a EuroCloud UK board member, and a member of the European Commission’s Expert Group on Cloud Computing Contracts.

Karel DE VRIENDT,
OpenForum Europe, Adviser



Karel De Vriendt worked twenty five years (1987-2012) as an IT expert for the European Commission. From 2005 to 2011, he was leading the team responsible for the implementation of the IDABC programme and for the definition and implementation of the ISA programme. He was actively involved in initiatives such as the transeuropean network TESTA, the Open Source Observatory and Repository (OSOR) and the Semantic Interoperability Centre Europe (SEMIC) now both merged into Joinup and in the elaboration of the European Interoperability Strategy and the European Interoperability Framework. During his career, he also acquired a good practical experience in the public procurement of IT goods and services. Karel De Vriendt is now retired but has kept his interest in improving (computer based) public services via the collaboration between public and private partners and via the sharing and re-use of software based service components.

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