

Standardization in research and innovation projects

Success story: **information technology**

ESTRELLA

The European project for **Standardized Transparent Representations in order to Extend Legal Accessibility (ESTRELLA)** was an 18-month FP6 (6th European Research Framework Programme) project. It brought together European companies and experts in legal knowledge systems to collaborate on the development, demonstration and dissemination of an innovative and open platform for sources of law.

The project developed a European pre-standard for an open XML interchange format for legal and legislative resources. CEN MetaLex provides a generic framework that standardizes the manner in which sources and references are represented in XML. It opens up new markets for legal texts.

www.metalex.eu

THE PROJECT

Representing legal sources and linking them to a knowledge base is not a trivial task. Legal sources come in many forms and formats, from various jurisdictions using different legal systems, in different languages, with different internal structures.


ICT has the potential to support government and citizens in dealing with the increasing body of law, but a necessary precondition is the electronic availability of legal sources in a structured and standard format. ESTRELLA responded to this need by bringing together leading European experts and companies to collaborate on the development, demonstration and dissemination of an innovative and open platform for legal knowledge systems.

STANDARDS: A SOLUTION FOR MARKET UPTAKE

Over the last decade, legislators have begun to adopt XML* standards for formal sources of law they manage. However, different jurisdictions have developed different ways of publishing legislation, as well as different tools for searching and working with legal sources. One potential solution would be to develop an open 'interchange standard' that could be used for exchanging legal texts, and also as a platform for development of manipulation and search tools.

This has been the aim of the MetaLex initiative, which received essential support and inputs from the ESTRELLA project and members of the ESTRELLA consortium. As a direct result of this initiative, a new XML document schema for legislation - CEN MetaLex - has been developed and published at European level as a CEN Workshop Agreement (CWA). This pre-standard complements and integrates national XML standards for legislation and supports the searching, exchange and association of legal texts.

* eXtensive Markup Language. A modern system for annotating documents with structural markers that instruct the software displaying the text to carry out appropriate actions, while omitting the XML from the version of the text that is displayed to users.

 We think MetaLex has worked well [...] for relating the different types of resource that we are making available. 

John Sheridan, UK National Archives

HOW WAS THE STANDARD DEVELOPED?

Starting in 2006, a two-phase CEN workshop* agreed and developed the new MetaLex standard. The workshop ran in parallel to the ESTRELLA project, and the consortium contributed significantly to the standardization work. A first document was published in 2007, but it did not yet constitute a complete workable standard. The ESTRELLA consortium then proposed specific additions and clarifications. The updated version of the CWA would also draw on the emerging results of the ESTRELLA project.

*A CEN Workshop Agreement (CWA) is a type of European pre-standard.

IMMEDIATE BENEFIT

The workshop process enabled the ESTRELLA consortium to work with the wider industry. More than 20 organizations participated in the development of the standard, including legal publishers, public administrations, academia, research groups, and businesses. This cooperation was important to involve future customers in the development of the standard and therefore to ensure that the future standard will correspond to industry needs. During the elaboration of the standard, industry participation was vital in ensuring that good design practices from other initiatives in the area were taken into account.

As the project and workshop process ran in parallel, the early outputs of the CWA process also provided valuable inputs to the on-going work of ESTRELLA.

LONG-TERM IMPACT

For developers and providers of legal software the CWA opens up new markets, and for institutional consumers of legislation it addresses the crucial issue of interoperability, as it helps to handle very different document formats within the same IT infrastructure.

As a result, the CEN Metalex standard is already in use by the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration, BeValue - the Belgian Public Centers for Welfare, and others. For example, a MetaLex Document Server now posts all Dutch regulations as CEN MetaLex linked data, hosting several tens of thousands of regulations as CEN MetaLex documents.

The standard is also being used in the UK as part of a new website that provides access to legal sources from across the country. Beneath the surface is a native XML database that distinguishes the bibliographic identifiers established by the CEN MetaLex standard, and uses MetaLex vocabulary to relate different types of resources.



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Every project is different. The CEN-CENELEC Research Helpdesk can provide you with advice on how to include standardization in your project. Please feel free to contact us!

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