Memorandum of Understanding on
Intensifying the collaboration between CEN/TC 251 and HL7

This document

This document is a proposal for an agreement between CEN/TC251 and HL7 drawn up by Gunnar Klein and George Beeler for approval by the CEN/TC 251 and the HL7 Board of Directors.

It is based on the discussions initiated in November 1999 formulated in the joint document entitled "Considerations for a Memorandum of Understanding ... 1999-11-19. This initiative was welcomed by both CEN and HL7 and further discussions took place during the HL7 meeting in San Diego in January and the CEN joint WG meeting in Stockholm in early February.

Background

CEN/TC 251 in Europe has, since 1990, and HL7 in the US has, since 1987, developed a series of standards for healthcare communication that are clearly the world leaders in terms of richness and technical sophistication. Together the US and European markets today constitute around 80 % of the global health informatics market. There has been a number of fruitful exchanges between experts of the two organisations in the past years, with e.g. US experts participating in CEN project teams, European experts participating in HL7 meetings and the CEN principles for message development were adopted and further developed by HL7 in its work on version 3.0.

The organisations have fundamental common goals and many similarities in their solutions, and it is clear that the present incompatibility between the major European and US set of standards is neither beneficial nor desirable from a long term and global perspective. The need for a global family of standards has been apparent for some time and both CEN TC251 and HL7 agree that collaboration and co-operation is the most effective way to approach this goal.

Overall objective of the collaboration

CEN/TC 251 and HL7 agree to collaborate in the spirit of mutual appreciation, respect and openness to seek pragmatic solutions to obtain unification of their set of standards for healthcare communication and to make the results globally available to ISO.

Principles

- A formal merger of the two organisations is not considered a practical option.
- The boards of the two organisations will encourage both formal and informal co-operation and collaboration between the groups and individual experts who work with the organisations.
- There should be a complete openness between the organisations with sharing of technical documents even in areas where there is not yet direct collaboration.
- The organisations will find ways to allow each other to freely use their proposed and published technical solutions in their own efforts to develop standards.
- Standards (that hopefully in more and more cases can be technically identical) will be formally approved separately by both organisations, but comments should be invited from both organisations and resolved together in the spirit of achieving consensus

- Copyright to finalised standards issued by CEN or HL7 will remain unchanged, as will current distribution arrangements.

Challenges

It is recognised that there are factors that could make quick harmonisation difficult. Some of these are:

- The need of both organisations to consider their responsibilities for the installed base and investments by both suppliers and healthcare organisations.
- The formalities of the different organisations with CEN operating with 19 member states and being to some extent controlled by both European and National legislation, and HL7 being a voluntary member-driven organisation working under US ANSI rules.
- Although widening the circle of experts who directly interact is a major benefit of this collaboration, the concomitant need for transatlantic travel poses a challenge to be addressed.

Goals for immediate action

Model Harmonisation

In the near term, the collaboration will aim for a harmonisation of the HL7 Reference Information Model (RIM), and the CEN object oriented information models for the CEN message standards to be revised.

Education

As a first objective for the collaboration, the two organisations shall facilitate the necessary learning process of experts from both organisations that is needed before any real harmonisation can start.

The education process started with the Tutorials given by HL7 in San Diego and especially for the CEN group during the Stockholm meeting. This needs to be continued with various targeted actions. It is planned to have a full day tutorial on the RIM in Sweden in March for CEN members and CEN will be presenting a tutorial at the HL7 meeting in Cleveland in May.

Task Forces

Joint task forces will be created to investigate the differences and feasibility of complete harmonisation in different areas.

For example, one task force will take as its basis the European prestandard ENV 13606-4 "Electronic Healthcare Record Communication - Messages for the Exchange of Information" and compare its object models with the HL7 RIM and the work of the PRA group. Another task will be to look at the harmonisation possibilities of many of the "common core components" needed by virtually all messages such as "Identifying objects" (called "Healthcare parties" in CEN and "Stakeholders" in HL7), "Units of measurement" and "Data types".

Additionally, it is desirable to start parallel and/or joint efforts evaluating the feasibility of mapping the current RIM with the CEN object models in messages that are specific for various usage domains, such as Laboratory Requests and Results, Medication prescription, Referral and Discharge.

Methodology

Other important areas for collaboration include the rules for XML mapping where parallel ISO and CEN work is going on, and the structure of a complete Healthcare Record Architecture where CEN has a published standard and HL7 is working (the PRA project).

In the area of development methodology, there is a need to be able to handle profiles for National and/or other user groups. Profiles allow such groups to select among options and specify the appropriate content for those options. One area where this is important relates to the various practises regarding administrative information relating to reimbursement. In concert with the methodology being discussed in ISO TC215, WG2, CEN and HL7 should look for opportunities to include profiling in their own methodologies.

Future strategies

Each of the organizations currently has a different strategy for structuring the total set of information objects into approvable and publishable documents. The European process is to publish a set of separate standards for common components and for generic message building. These are then followed by an increasing set of business specific message additions. The HL7 model for version 3 has targeted a total RIM and approval of standards as a single large document undergoing continual revisions. In coming discussions the organisations will consider whether alternative publishing strategies by either organisation might facilitate unification.

Gothenburg 2000-03-19

Salt Lake City 2000-03-24

ADDENDUM to
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In order to keep their own members and other interested parties informed, the two organisations undertake to periodically prepare a joint report that assesses the status of this collaboration and the results that have been accomplished.