

THE DLM FORUM: A TIGHTROPE BALANCING ACT

Ladies and Gentlemen, roll up, roll up, to read Marc Fresko's views on the entertainment provided by the amazing DLM Forum

In June 2012, the DLM Forum achieved an amazing 'double'. It was amazing because, with only one action, the DLM Forum both enhanced its reputation and made itself a laughing stock, the butt of many jokes. The impact of that one action is still reverberating around the information management community; it will affect you if you have intentions to improve the management of your electronic records and information, or if you have any other interest in electronic records. Let me explain what happened, and how it may affect readers – concluding with advice on how you should respond to the situation.

THE DLM FORUM

The DLM Forum is the group of European archivists and well-meaning others who brought you MoReq. It dreamed up the idea of MoReq and MoReq2, without ever being responsible for them in any meaningful way – credit for the production of both can only go to the European Commission. The situation changed with MoReq2010, as the DLM Forum undertook to produce MoReq2010 on its own, with a little help from the Commission. And so it was that in 2009 the DLM Forum announced it would produce a new version of MoReq, a shorter, simpler, 'refactored' evolutionary development of MoReq2. That was how it announced MoReq2010, so named as it was to be published in 2010.

Deciding to produce MoReq2010 was a bit like setting out to walk along a tightrope. Reaching the end would make everyone happy. But falling off would make everyone laugh if the tightrope is low – or would be disastrous if it is high.

MoReq2010

Sadly, the DLM Forum did not deliver on this promise. MoReq2010 was eventually delivered, but badly late and incomplete. This late and partial delivery was the action that has had such a significant effect.



MoReq is a de facto European standard specification for electronic records management systems. It started out as a 'Model Requirements' specification and has evolved into 'Modular Requirements'. The original MoReq and MoReq2, in 2001 and 2008 respectively were successful around the world. See, for example, <http://moreq2.eu>.

When MoReq2010 was published, it was *not* simpler than MoReq2; it was *not* shorter; it was *not* a 'refactored' version of MoReq2; instead was a revolutionary and different specification with no hint of evolution about it. When published, MoReq2010 was incomplete (and over six months later it still is). Add the fact that MoReq2010 was published half a year after the end of 2010 after which it is named, and you can see why the DLM Forum has become jokeworthy.

THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT MOREQ2010

On the bright side, there is plenty about MoReq2010 that is good. It is technically correct (or at least it seems to be, so far as one can tell). It is rigorous, and internally consistent. It is innovative, and inasmuch as many commentators have commented that it is time Records Management caught up with the computer age, this is 'a good thing'. And MoReq2010's glossary is one of the best, most detailed, accessible and extensive glossaries in its field. Also, software companies like the fact that MoReq2010 ignores unimportant things like email, office suites and scanning (though Records Managers and users are appalled).

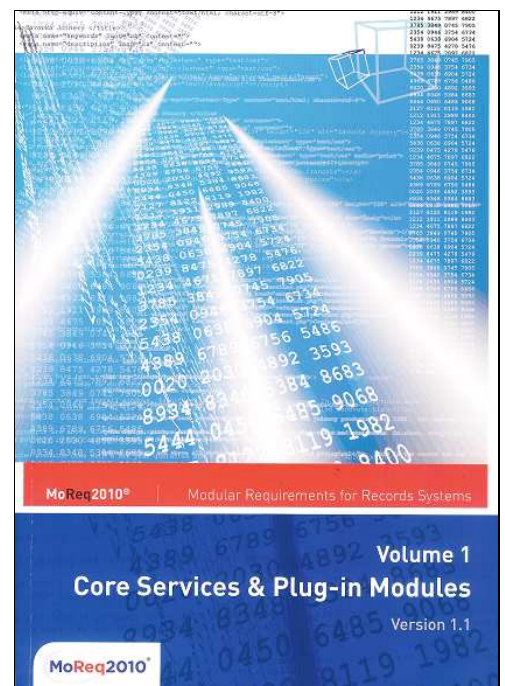
Other good news includes the publication of an XML schema (during 2011), the launch of a testing scheme in beta (December 2011), and publication by the European Commission of a beautifully-produced hard-copy version of MoReq2010. Plus four projects to translate MoReq2010 are being talked about – though they are stalled because the DLM Forum seems unable to agree a translation licensing agreement.

COMPLEXITY...

But the technical brilliance and coherence of this standard comes with a high price: complexity. Both the structure of MoReq2010 and its content are so complex that most readers simply cannot understand them. As a by-product of its consistency and integrity, the specification is written in technical language that makes no concessions to non-IT folk. I've lost count of the number of Records Managers and others who have told me they have not succeeded in reading it. This effectively disenfranchises a key target audience for the specification, leaving it as a marketing tool for technocrats and software suppliers.

MoReq2010 is now available as a download and in hard copy form, both free of charge.

Downloads are available from several sites including <http://moreq2010.eu>, <http://dlmforum.eu> and <http://moreq2.eu>.



The paper copy (pictured above) should be orderable from the EU Bookshop, <http://bookshop.europa.eu>; at the time of writing, it listed, but 'unavailable'. Search for it using the ISBN 978-92-79-18519-9.

COMPLETENESS...

How about the completeness of MoReq2010? The complete package should include requirements covering a range as wide as the range of MoReq2, an XML specification, and a testing framework (test conditions, instructions, and expected results). That is what the DLM Forum contracted for and has paid for; but that is not what exists today. Key components are missing; as a result the requirements specification exists in conceptual vacuum that does not recognise the importance of email, that ignores scanning, document management, desktop office software integration and various other key technologies; and the test framework does not cover even all the published specification, incomplete though that is.

TESTING...

The testing framework and test materials were launched, in beta, in December 2011. I have severe reservations about the test framework. First, it requires software vendors to complete a detailed 915-page questionnaire *before the testing can start*. The questionnaire requires vendors to respond to hundreds of questions. For more than 220 questions, respondents have to paste in one or more screenshots showing how a function is performed. Assuming that in many cases more than one screen shot is required, vendors' responses could easily amount to thousands of pages. Only once this has been prepared, at huge expense, and reviewed meticulously by an 'accredited test centre' can the actual testing start. The potential cost is boggling, and makes it unlikely that many companies will submit their products for testing. Second, it abandons best practice and ISO standards; for tester accreditation it uses instead self-declaration and opaque acceptance criteria – it looks like a case of 'jobs for the boys'. Thank goodness that the DLM Forum has labelled this test framework as 'beta' – the sooner it works out how to replace it, the better.

Testing – the beta version of the MoReq2010 compliance testing programme is described on the MoReq website at
http://dlmforum.eu/index.php?option=com_jotloader&view=categories&cid=42_114_d22273d1dffa39825dde3faedd569&Itemid=139&lang=en.

ACCREDITED TEST CENTRES...

On a related point, the DLM Forum announced that the first accredited test centre would be named by 23 December – but it was not. One month later it still has not. Sadly, this is consistent with the DLM Forum's performance over the past few years. The Forum's paying members have been promised a range of things – training courses, university-level courses, consultant accreditation, a licensing agreement, the new project on interoperability, a glossy quarterly journal (thank goodness that promise was broken!), a new commercial model to raise funds through sponsorship, closer ties to the International Council on Archives, - none of these have appeared.

Is MoReq2010 STILL RELEVANT?

The idea of MoReq is as good, as relevant, as ever it was. About MoReq2010, however, we can be less certain.

At last December's conference, the session on MoReq2010 in depth attracted less than 20 delegates – *twenty!* And not a single member of the DLM Forum Executive attended the entire session. Very few vendors have announced any commitment to MoReq2010. The MoReq2010 consultation website has disappeared from the face of the internet; and the MoReq2010 feedback website, which was an extremely good idea, is now moribund. In its entire history the site collected only a few posts from a handful of devotees, and almost nothing since last Autumn. And as for Wikipedia entries – well, don't even ask.

FUTURE PLANS

This brings me on to the subject of the DLM Forum's intentions, announcements, and promises.

What is the schedule for filling in the gaps in MoReq2010? Nobody is saying. There is no timetable for the release of the missing parts of the specification, or for the management of the test framework beta phase. Worse, there is not even a list of what is to be published, and there is no consultation or governance mechanism for ongoing development.

What will the DLM Forum do next? There is no vision or direction for the Forum. About two years ago, an initiative to develop an interoperability standard was announced. But the initiative has not produced anything, not even a discussion paper. For the December 2011 meeting, members were promised a 'vision' statement would be presented – but this did not happen either.

CONSTITUTION...

Perhaps the DLM Forum's inability to deliver on its promises results from its bizarre and byzantine constitution, which allocates voting rights in a strange and archaic manner. I'm not sure. I am pleased to note that the DLM Forum has started to take steps to reform its constitution, though its steps are miniscule and will take decades to work at this rate of progress. I'm afraid the DLM Forum does not have decades.

SURVIVAL OF THE FORUM...

The DLM Forum is not likely to survive in its present form. The recent conference was well organised, but attendance was much lower than at any of the previous triennial events.

GOVERNANCE...

While the governance of the DLM Forum is edging in a good direction, its MoReq Governance Board continues to flounder. Without effective the leadership and decision-making that is obviously lacking, it cannot suddenly start to succeed where it has failed in the past. The only plan presented at the conference was laughable for its lack of governance and vision. A revolution is needed, with effective management and good governance.

IN SUMMARY...

The DLM Forum has promised much but delivered little. Below is a summary table for easy reference.

The DLM Forum Promised...	What did the DLM Forum deliver?
MoReq2010 (during 2010)	Incomplete Late (mid 2011) No timetable for completion
Testing regime	Late (end 2011) 'Beta' version only No timetable for completion
Testing materials	Late (end 2011) Incomplete No timetable for completion
XML schema	'Beta' version only Delivered with example data
Missing modules	Nothing No timetable for delivery
MoReq translation licences	Nothing
Accredited test centre announcement	Nothing
Training materials	Nothing
Dissemination events	Nothing
Plan for MoReq ongoing development	Nothing
Consultant accreditation	Nothing
Glossy academic-style journal	Nothing

The DLM Forum Promised...	What did the DLM Forum deliver?
Records transfer standard	Nothing
A 'vision' for the Forum's future, to be discussed at the Dec 2011 conference	Nothing

SO WHAT?

Does the DLM Forum's weakness matter? Should we care? Yes, because as long as the current situation continues, the DLM Forum will effectively waste its members' subscriptions. What does this mean, and what should you do?

I believe the DLM Forum can have an important role to play in shaping the future of electronic records and information management. By taking a unified European stance, the Forum can help to promote common ways of working, can make interoperability more efficient – basically this kind of activity can oil Europe's administrative wheels to let it run more smoothly. The economies of scale when this is done at a European level are huge – just ask any software company. But, at the moment, the DLM Forum is clearly unable to do much. What *you* can do depends on which 'user community' you are in.

For the **end user community**: if you need a 'standard' specification for some reason such as procurement, consider MoReq2010. However, consider also MoReq2, ICA-Req, and any national standards that may apply to you. See <http://moreq2.eu/other-specifications> for copies of no less than 23 such standards – probably the most comprehensive collection anywhere. You might choose to adopt MoReq2010 because it is the most theoretically correct. But you do *not* have to adopt MoReq2010 just because it is the newest. The other 'standards' (MoReq2, ICA-Req etc.) remain as meaningful, as helpful, and as correct as they were when they first were published – though of course they still include all their errors and weaknesses too. Whichever you choose, be aware that off-the-shelf software will not comply fully with it unless it has been formally tested – so, no software complies with MoReq2010 yet, and only one product complies fully with MoReq2. This means you must use any standard carefully and selectively – blanket statements such as 'must comply fully with MoReq' are worse than useless.

Second, for the **vendor community**: it is as a direct result of your lobbying that MoReq2010 was developed. So you have a moral responsibility to either adopt MoReq2010, or to say you will not adopt it – and why. If you adopt it, commit to being tested for compliance, and announce your testing timetable. If you won't or can't, then publicly announce why – tell everyone what you see as the weaknesses of MoReq2010, and what needs to be done to remedy it. You owe this to your user base.

For the **DLM Forum Executive**: it is time for you to get real. Be realistic. Learn from the mistakes listed above. You depend on volunteers to do most of the DLM Forum's work, so calculate what can really be delivered, announce it, and deliver it. Stop this repeated announcement of things that do not happen. Start to deliver on your promises.

For **National Archives**: back at the end of the last century, you conceived the DLM Forum, you formed it, and you still dominate it constitutionally. The DLM Forum is your plaything. But you have been strangely silent about MoReq2010 – having spent so much of your Forum members' money to produce MoReq2010, not a single National Archive has adopted it. You have a moral duty to your members, and to the wider records management community who look up to you, to do one of two things: either adopt MoReq2010 (endorse it, make it mandatory, announce it as a national standard, whatever...) or announce that you won't, tell us why and tell everyone what has to be done to fix it.

Lastly, for **DLM Forum Members**: look to the above. But, more than that, play your part in dragging the DLM Forum into the 21st century. Take note of the Executives' promises, and hold Executive members to account. That means standing up at members' meetings and insisting on delivery of promises – or clear accounting for broken promises. It means voting for executive members to be replaced if they don't deliver.

It means scrutinising expenditure to make sure that your subscription money is well-spent. It means asking for, and studying, Executive Committee meeting minutes (you are entitled to see them – just ask the secretariat). And if all that does not work, consider leaving it – **the Forum needs your membership subscriptions more than you need a dysfunctional Forum.**

The next meeting of the DLM Forum will take place in Copenhagen 31 May and 1 June 2012. This will be an Annual General Meeting, and so this will an excellent opportunity for members to hold its Executive to account.

THE TIGHTROPE

The DLM Forum's attempt to cross a chasm by tightrope has been impressive in parts – but the attempt has ended, so far, in a failure to reach the end, and an act that would be funny – if only it had a safety net.

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