

Software Gets Tagged

Why Do We Need Software Tags?

What is a Software Tag?

Although Asset Tags are commonly used, Software Tag (ST) is a relatively new term. Asset Tag is an identification code of a physical item. It is usually stored on a label and in an Asset Management system. Since Software is not a physical item it is more difficult to define what a Software Tag is. It is not possible to put a physical label on software. A solution to this problem had to be found.

The most common usage of Asset Tags is detection and identification of tagged items. This activity becomes challenging when working with Software, as it is immaterial. Software detection is therefore based on symptoms of software existence. Since different software products have different footprints, all of them have to be considered during the detection process. Only the top level industry tools are able to properly deal with this. This job would be much easier if all software was tagged.

The pressing need for ease of software detection forced a group of industry experts to start working on the Software Tag concept. The emerging ISO/IEC 19770-2 standard will define the Software Tag; describe how to create it and how to use it. The team working on it intensified its efforts at the turn of the year. The result was a draft available for public review.

Some software publishers already started to work on their own solutions in the domain of ST. Had they worked separately, it would have left the problem as it was, as every piece of software would have had a different way of dealing with it. The mentioned group of experts noticed this threat and started working on consolidating these ideas. The goal was to create a unified Software Tag that would be suitable for all publishers as well as SAM tools vendors, re-sellers and software asset managers. The group invited representatives from all three types of stakeholders to offer their input.

What Does the Software Asset Tag Look Like?

The Software Tag is an XML file describing an installed software entity. This file contains information about its publisher, name, version and unique identification. There is also an optional component to provide information about software components linkage, release approval data, alternative names, supported languages and many others. The third part of the document is left for free usage for everybody who is given editing permission. This is the place where any customizations of the tag may be added. The division of the ST into three parts combined the flexibility with readability of the XML document.

The standard contains XML Schema Definition to provide its users with a tool for document validation. The document structure has been designed by practitioners for practitioners. Therefore the usability of the standard is guaranteed. This is also why the XML type of document has been chosen to store Software Asset Tag data. This type of document is commonly used and globally accepted as a good way to structure data.

There is one important difference between Hardware and Software Tags. Every machine is labeled with a separate Asset Tag. A single Software entity is not the one installed on a machine, but the one it is installed from. It means that if we deploy 10K copies to 10K machines from one copy, they will be treated as the same item with the same ID. However, it is not the only way to use the ST. Since the Software Tag structure allows the extended information, it is possible to add identification for every single installation, if needed. This identification would need to be defined by the user.

How do you use the Software Asset Tag?

ISO/IEC 19770-2 standard does not leave users with the XML document definition alone. It provides guidelines on how to use it. The processes related to the Software Asset Tag are described in the main part of the standard. Appendices contain possible scenarios and use cases to show the usage of the ST in real life. The appendices also contain examples of well designed asset tags.

The guidelines for usage contain examples for different types of stakeholders:

Software Publishers:

The Software Tag should be created as early as possible in the software development lifecycle. It can be part of the development documentation. It should be used and modified during the development by professionals involved in it. Different roles engaged with it use the Software Tag differently. The following roles are identified by the standard:

- Product Manager – Some information from Software Tags are needed for product specification
- Development Manager/Engineer – ST defines the environment in which the product will be used. It can serve as a basis for selecting the appropriate technology for product development and deployment.
- Software Licensing/Product Release specialist – During licensing and product release activities it is important to accurately identify which software entity this person is working with.

Tools Vendors:

The Standard describes use cases for two types of tools vendors:

Discovery tools vendors – besides the obvious task of reading and reporting on installed software with all additional information, discovery tools should also use the Software Tags to reconcile installed software with appropriate entitlements. It is also possible for tools to modify the tags to store some additional information such as usage info.

Distribution tools vendors – The process of software distribution should append Software Tags with information related to their distribution. The tools should fill the tags with missing data and even create missing tags if needed.

End Users

Many end users will benefit from standardized Software Asset Management. The basic, obligatory elements of the Software Tag will have significant impact on software identification which underpins most of Software Asset Management processes. Additional elements provide much more information that can be used directly in SAM and SAM-related processes such as Licensing Management and Security Management. End users may also modify tags. This makes software information consistent as any additional information is stored together with the identification data.

Further Development

ISO/IEC 19770-2 standard is now in the public revision phase. It is available for comments until May 2008. It is important to take part in the development of this standard as it

has important impact on the future of SAM processes. It is not difficult to get it and add feedback. Multiple web sites provide download access. This includes Eracent Web site: www.eracent.com/isoiecdraft_19770-2.html. On 15. May the draft moves for further review to be made internally by ISO/IEC structures and then it will be voted by national standardization bodies.

New Quality

The Software Tag which provides important identification information will make a breakthrough in Software Asset Management. This prediction is based on the fact that the base for every process is the information flow. The Software Tag is a powerful media for such information.

The common use of Software Tags is not in our near future. Additional effort in software development is needed to build them correctly. Strong discipline is also needed. Many software manufacturers will not want to make the required investment. However, the benefits end users will reap from using this tool will eventually make them a standard part of every software product.

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Where do your IT assets go when you dispose of them?

- Landfills in third world nations
- Evidence rooms awaiting litigation
- The grateful hands of identity thieves
- The water supply you drink from

Where should they go?

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