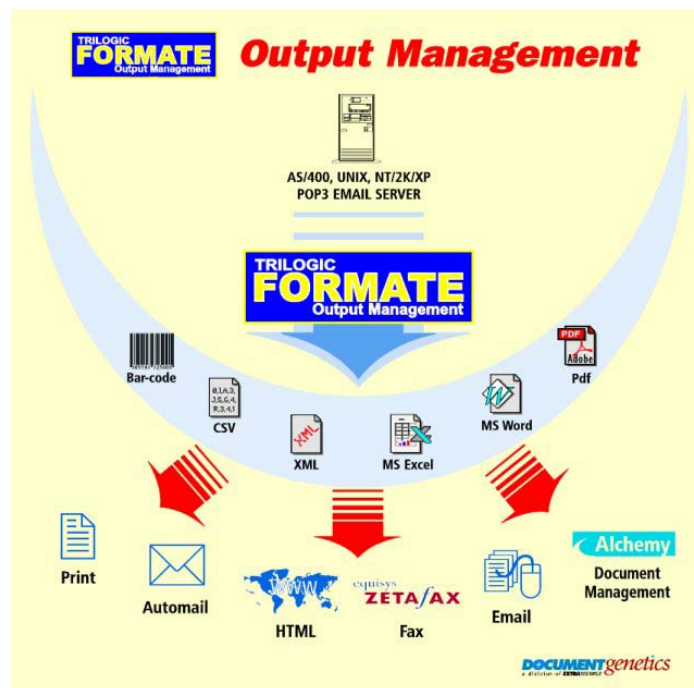

Formate Excel Module

Abstract:

The purpose of this document is to provide an overview of the Formate Excel module, now available within the suite of Formate software. Although primarily written for existing Formate users, it may be useful for companies seeking a better understanding of Formate's ability to interact with MS Excel.



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Introduction

Formate now has the ability to read and create workbooks in the popular Microsoft Excel file format, and to email those workbooks.

Please note that the descriptions of how to work with Excel assume that you have some familiarity with using the program interactively. We don't assume any knowledge of programming with Excel, but if you don't have at least a basic working knowledge of creating and editing workbooks in Excel, some of the terms used may not be clear. In that case, please take a formal course of training, or self study, before attempting to use the Excel Interface in Formate. Most of the Formate Excel functions take arguments that are closely related to the information you would have to supply (e.g. by setting options in a dialog box) to carry out the same task interactively within Excel, so you are likely to struggle to use the functions correctly if you don't already know how to carry out the task in Excel.

Why use Excel?

There are two main reasons why you may want to work with Excel files in Formate. Firstly, incoming data may be in that format, for example a customer may be emailing purchase orders to you as Excel workbooks. Formate could be used to process the incoming email and save the contents as a file, which would effectively act as a Spool File so that the contents could be extracted and processed using the Formate Excel routines.

Secondly, you may want to produce output as an Excel workbook, either for internal or external use. Internally, it may be convenient to use this format to store sales figures, forecasts etc, either for direct access by users or for submission to a Document Management System. Externally, you may have a customer who prefers to receive his invoices or other information in workbook format.

Please note that when creating Excel workbooks for internal use, the files will be available on your file system so it would be possible for users to find them and open them manually within Excel if they knew what the filenames were, but the Formate Viewer program (which is all that non-administrative users would have) does not include any means to search for and retrieve Excel documents. This could make it difficult for users to identify and locate the particular document they need.

This is where an external Document Management System (DMS) comes in, as mentioned above. If the workbooks are imported into a DMS, they should then be simple for users to find and retrieve, so a DMS is highly recommended if you intend to keep Excel documents for future reference.

Formate can produce other output at the same time as Excel documents; for example, it is possible to create a PDF and an Excel workbook from the same job and even to include them both in the same email.

System requirements

To use the Formate Excel Interface, you must have Microsoft Excel 2002 (version 10.0) or later installed on the machine where Formate is running. Microsoft Excel is not supplied as part of Formate, so you are responsible for ensuring that a legally acquired and properly licensed copy of the program is installed.

There may be some variations between different versions of Excel as to how they respond to some of the commands passed to them by Formate, so it is advisable to test your Form Types on a machine that has the same version of Excel on it as will be used for production purposes. In general, later versions than the minimum recommended version should work as expected in most regards. Earlier versions may possibly also work to some extent, but no guarantee is made in this regard and no support will be provided for Excel-related queries if you are using a version of Excel prior to the minimum recommended version.

How MS-Excel interacts with Formate

There is no requirement to start a copy of Excel before using Formate to create or read workbooks. Formate will use the existing copy of Excel if it is already running on the machine, otherwise Formate will automatically start it (in which case it will also automatically close it down when it is no longer needed). It is safe to close down any open copies of Excel manually so long as you are sure that Formate is not currently using them (i.e. no spool file is being processed or just about to start).

There is no harm in having a copy of Excel running before Formate starts to use it, and in fact it will save a small amount of time when Formate accesses the first workbook, but make sure that Excel is not left in the middle of any activity that might interfere with Formate taking control of it. For example, close all manually opened workbooks before Formate starts processing, so as to free as many resources as possible, and don't leave Excel at a dialog such as the "Save As" or "Find" dialog. If you aren't sure whether Excel is ready for Formate to use, just close it down and let Formate restart it automatically, as and when it is needed.

Once there is a chance that Formate could start to process a workbook (e.g. if the Server program is running and waiting for a spool file to arrive), do not use Excel manually. If you do, you may find Formate causing it to switch between workbooks, make selections, set cell values and so on. If you try to use Excel manually at the same time, you will find it difficult to work on your own workbook and you may also interfere with what Formate is doing, resulting in corrupted workbooks or even causing an Excel error which aborts processing of the spool file.

It is possible to start a second copy of Excel and work within that copy so long as you are sure you know that Formate is using the other copy, but it is easy to end up using the wrong copy and interfering with Formate, so it's not recommended. If you really need to work in Excel on a machine which has Formate Server running and accessing Excel documents, it is best to use the "Stop" button in the Server to prevent it processing any more spool files. Once the current spool file has finished being processed (if there is one), you can then work in Excel safely and afterwards use the "Start" button in the Server program to start it processing spool files once more.

While Formate is still working on a spool file, do not manually close any workbooks that Formate has created, or (as mentioned earlier) close Excel itself. Either of these actions will certainly cause errors in Formate.

Using MS-Excel when the Formate Server is running as a service

When Excel is used for the first time by a new user, it pops up a dialog asking you to confirm your initials etc. If this happens interactively (e.g. when you start Excel manually) there is no problem because you can fill in the details. If it happens when Formate Server is running as a service, however, Excel is not allowed to interact with the current user (even if there is one), so it can't complete the dialog and Excel can raise a slightly misleading error that the "Window is too small".

To prevent this, ensure that for any account which is to be used to start the Formate Server service, you first login to that account manually and start Excel at least once. This allows you to enter the initials etc., if necessary, which will prevent Excel asking for them later when the Formate Server service starts working with workbooks.

Typical Excel Tasks

There are two categories of Excel task that you might want to carry out in Formate. The first is where you need to extract data from an existing workbook, e.g. when it contains a purchase order sent in by a customer. The second, is where you need to create a new workbook and populate it with data, e.g. when you are creating a workbook containing an invoice ready to be sent to a customer. Each of these categories is detailed separately in the following sections.

Note, however, that although it is a relatively rare requirement, it is possible to combine some parts of both categories in a single task. For example, you could read the purchase order details from an incoming workbook and use that data to create a purchase order on your system, then update the workbook to include your order number and email it back to the customer as confirmation of order receipt.

For detailed information on all of the Excel scripts available within Formate, and examples of their use, please refer to Formate help.

Contact Information

If you require further information regarding the Excel module, or if you have specific questions, please contact Document Genetics.

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