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Geneva

Fifty years of trade facilitation and 20 years of United Nations Electronic Data Interchange standards have provided the backbone for electronic business in today's international trade.

In her welcome address at the autumn 2007 Forum of the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and electronic Business (UN/CEFACT) in Stockholm, Ms. Ewa Björling, Minister for Foreign Trade stressed that for the past fifty years Swedish Governments have put simplification for companies, agencies, local authorities and regions high on their agenda.

Back in 1957, Sweden realized the value of standardizing trade documents. Supported by the other Nordic countries, it brought the matter before the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), which promptly set up a working group on trade facilitation. The successor to this group is today's UN/CEFACT, the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business.

Jointly with ISO Technical Committee 154 (International Organization for Standardization), UNECE drew up some basic standards for trade documents, all of which are still being used in international trade. They include the: Forms Design Sheet and Layout Chart; Layout Key for Trade Documents; United Nations Trade Data Element Directory; Country codes; Currency codes; Dates and Times[1].

Already twenty years ago, UNECE saw that the universal acceptance of the United Nations Layout Key for paper-based trade documents and data had created a sound basis for standardizing EDI (electronic data interchange)[2]. In 1987, ISO approved the UN/EDIFACT syntax rules for EDI (ISO standard 9735); and two years later, UN/CEFACT published the invoice and order UN/EDIFACT messages.

According to a recent Forrester research report,[3] EDI transactions represent around 90 per cent of all electronic transactions. They continue to dominate business-to-business electronic communications worldwide, with an estimated 20 million messages exchanged every day.

Between 1989 and the present, 208 UN/EDIFACT messages have been published. These messages facilitate the exchange of information in many areas including: transport; Customs; government and business tendering; just-in-time manufacturing; and finance.

Today, UN/CEFACT and its network of around 1,000 technical experts, continues to build on its experience in order to support ever more simplified trade processes and the global standardization of trade and business information. New areas of work include the development of data libraries that can be used across different, evolving hardware and software technologies as well as projects to facilitate the transition from paper to electronic documents for small and medium-sized companies.

In concluding, Minister Björling stated, "I am pleased that we have come a long way in Swedish Customs procedures. Who could have imagined that, in certain cases, lorry drivers today would only need to send an SMS message via a mobile telephone for customs clearance?"

For further information on the Forum, see www.unece.org/cefact or contact:

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[1] Also published as ISO standards 3535, 6422, 7372, 3166, 4217 and 8601. These are downloadable free of charge from the UNECE website at: www.unece.org/cefact/recommendations/rec_index.htm

[2] A detailed explanation of EDI can be found at the following address: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electronic_Data_Interchange

[3]Forrester Research, Inc. Ken Vollmer “B2B Integration Trends: Message Formats”. B2B Trends 2007 series, No. 1. Ken Vollmer is a principal analyst in Forrester's Application Development & Infrastructure research group, covering trends, issues, and strategies related to all forms of integration, including business process management (BPM), enterprise application integration (EAI), B2B integration (B2Bi), and electronic data interchange (EDI).