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Creating an IETF Working Group Draft draft-crocker-id-adoption-03

Abstract

The productive output of IETF working groups is documents, as mandated by the working group's charter. When a working group is ready to develop a particular document it usually "adopts" it as a working group draft. The document that a working group adopts and then develops further is based on initial input at varying levels of maturity. An initial working group draft might be a document already in wide use, or it might be a blank sheet, wholly created by the working group, or it might represent any level of maturity in between. This document discusses typical aspects of a working group's handling of its formal documents, which are targeted for publication.

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[1.](#) Introduction

The productive output of IETF working groups is documents, as mandated by the working group's charter. Working groups develop these documents based on initial input of varying levels of maturity. An initial working group draft might be a document already in wide use, or it might be a blank sheet, wholly created by the working group, or it might represent any level of maturity in between. This document discusses the criteria and sequence often applied when adopting and developing formal IETF working group drafts, which are targeted for publication. The discussion applies only to the IETF and does not cover IRTF groups, where practices vary widely.

Within the general constraints of formal IETF process and the specific constraints of a working group's charter, there can be considerable freedom in the adoption and development of drafts. As with most IETF activities, the ultimate arbiter of such choices is working group agreement, within the constraints of its charter. As with most working group management, this agreement might be explicit or implicit, depending upon the efficiencies that the group deems appropriate.

NOTE: This draft is intentionally non-normative. It is meant as a guide to common practice, rather than as a formal definition of what is permissible.

1.1. What is a Working Group Draft?

Working Group drafts are documents that are subject to IETF Working Group revision control. Adoption of the draft by the working group, and substantive changes to the document, need to represent working group rough consensus.

Documents under development in the IETF community are distributed as Internet Drafts (I-D). Working groups use this mechanism for producing their official output, per [Section 7.2 of \[RFC2418\]](#) and [Section 8.3 of \[RFC4677\]](#) and [\[ID-Info\]](#). The convention for identifying an I-D formally under the ownership of a working group is by the inclusion of "ietf" in the second field of the I-D filename and the working group name in the third field, per Section 7 of [\[ID-Guidelines\]](#). That is:

[draft-ietf](#)-<wgname>-...

Responsibility for direct revision of a working group I-D is assigned to its authors. See [Section 3](#) for discussion about their selection and role.

1.2. Working Group Authority and Consensus

A core premise of IETF working groups is that the working group has final authority over the content of its documents, within the constraints of the working group charter. No individual has special authority for the content. The chairs task document authors/editors and can formulate design teams, but the content of working group documents is always, ultimately, subject to working group approval. Approval is described in terms of the IETF's "rough consensus" construct, which is the prime example of the IETF's preference for pragmatics over niceties. Unanimous agreement is always desirable, but more approximate (rough) agreement will suffice, as long as it is clear and strong.

Other than for selection of document authors, as discussed in [Section 3](#), working group decision-making about document management is subject to normal IETF process rules. Useful descriptions of this process for a working group are in [Section 3.3 of \[RFC2418\]](#) and [Section 5.2 of \[RFC4677\]](#).

In formal terms, a working group raises and discusses each item of document content. For difficult topics and/or difficult working group dynamics, this is the required mode. It is laborious, but diligent, and it validates progress at each step along the way.

At times a document author can appear to have considerable authority over content, but this is (merely) for efficiency. That is, the chairs can permit authors to proceed with an implied (default) working group agreement, as long as the working group is comfortable with that mode. Of course the benefit in the mode is efficiency, but its risk is failure to retain or verify actual consensus among the working group participants. When a working group is operating in the mode of active, direct author content development, an easy validation method is simply to have chairs query the working group when a new document version appears, asking for comments and concerns.

In general when it is not completely obvious what the opinion of the working group is, working group chairs can poll the working group to find out. As with any other consensus question, the form in which it is asked can make a difference. In particular, a general 'yes/no' question often is not as helpful as asking supporters and detractors of a draft to provide their reasons, not merely their preferences. In effect, this treats the matter of consensus as an on-going discussion. Ideally, that can produce changes in the document or in participant views, or both.

[1.3](#). Questions Considered in This Document

The purpose of this document is to discuss the criteria and sequence typically followed when adopting and developing a formal IETF working

group document. Therefore, this document considers the following questions that are particularly relevant to working group chairs who are charged with running the process:

- * How do working group chairs decide which drafts to adopt and when?
- * Is it necessary to poll the working group explicitly, and what does a working group poll look like?
- * How do working group chairs make the decision?
- * What are the process steps the working group will choose to use, for an I-D to become a WG I-D?
- * Are there any special cases?
- * Can a document be created as a WG I-D from scratch?
- * How can competing drafts be handled?
- * Can an Individual I-D be under the care of a WG?

2. Adoption Sequence

2.1. Typical Steps

To adopt a new working group document, the chairs often:

1. Inform the working group of the intent.
2. Obtain working group rough consensus.
3. Choose document editors.
4. Pre-approve the document as an Internet Draft, using [\[Approval\]](#).
5. Tell the editors to submit the -00 version of the document.
6. Enjoy the ensuing working group discussion...

2.2. Criteria for Adoption

No formal specification for working group 'adoption' of a draft exists; the current document is meant to provide a description of common activities for this, but again note that it is not normative.

There are some basic considerations when deciding to adopt a draft:

- * Is there a charter milestone that explicitly calls for such a document?
- * Is the topic of the I-D within scope for the working group?
- * Is the purpose of the draft sufficiently clear?
- * What are the process or technical objections to pursuing the draft?
- * If not already in scope, is a simple modification to the charter feasible and warranted?
- * Does the draft carry known intellectual property rights issues?
- * Is there strong working group support for working on the draft?

Some specifically-inappropriate criteria include:

- * Working group support is not required to be unanimous.
- * The writing quality is not required to be ready-for-publication, although writing quality can be a problem and does need explicit attention; certainly a new working group draft needs to at least pass [\[IDNITS\]](#).
- * The document is not required to already contain a complete and/or sufficient solution, although of course this can be helpful.
- * The position of the working group chairs, concerning the draft, has no special authority.

REMINDER: Once a working group adopts a draft, the document is owned by the working group and can be changed however the working group decides, within the bounds of IETF process and the working group charter. Absent explicit agreement, adopting a document does not automatically mean that the working group has agreed to all of its content. So a working group (or its charter) might

dictate retaining some or all of a draft's content, technical details, or the like. However in the absence of such constraints, it is worth having the adoption process include a sub-process of gathering working group concerns about the existing draft and flagging them explicitly.

3. Authors/Editors

Document authors/editors are chosen by the working group chairs. Authors are described in [Section 6.3 of \[RFC2418\]](#).

NOTE: The distinction between an 'author' and an 'editor' is, at best, subjective. A simplistic rule of thumb is that editors tend to do the mechanics of incorporating working group detail, whereas authors tend to create the detail, subject to working group approval. That is, one role is more active with the content and the other is more passive. It is a responsibility of the working group chairs to ensure that document authors make modifications in accord with working group rough consensus. Authors who demonstrate sustained misunderstanding of their authority are subject to replacement...

For existing documents that are being adopted by a working group, there is a special challenge in the selection of document editors: The document has already had editors. So the question is whether the same people are appropriate for continuing the task? Often the answer is yes, but this is not automatic. The process within an IETF working group can be quite different from the process that created previous versions. This well might make it appropriate to select one or more new editors, either as additions to the editor team or as primary pen-holders (effectively re-classifying the previous team as co-authors).

If the original editors are to continue in their role, the chairs might want to ensure that the editors understand IETF working group process; it is likely to be quite different from the process that developed earlier versions of the document. If additional or new editors are assigned, the transition can be discussed, including its reasons; this is best done as quickly as possible.

4. Document History and Stability

Working group charters often specify an initial set of existing documents to use. The basis of that use can vary widely. Documents that are used as 'input' or as 'a basis' to the working group's efforts. In some cases, a charter essentially declares an existing document to be the formal start of a working group document. The details can vary quite a bit over the life of a working group,

concerning adoption of drafts and the constraints on changes made to them.

Absent charter restrictions, a working group is free to create new documents. It is not required that all drafts start outside the working group. Of course, the criteria for brand new documents are likely to be the same as for those imported into the working group with the additional and obvious requirement that the working group chairs will need to appoint authors/editors before any work can progress. Note that from time to time a working group will form a design team to produce the first version of a working group draft. Design teams are discussed in [Section 6.5 of \[RFC2418\]](#).

Work that is brought to the IETF has different levels of completeness and maturity, and different timings for having achieved those levels. When the IETF charters a group and includes existing material, the charter can cast the role of that material in very different ways:

- o It can treat it as no more than a set of ideas, to be used or ignored;
- o It can treat it as a basic design, with all of the actual details still fluid;
- o It can treat it as a rough draft, subject to extensive revision;
- o It can treat it as a solid specification that merely needs review, refinement and maybe enhancement;
- o It can treat it as a deployed technology that is best served by trying to protect its installed base, but with some tolerance for changes that affect interoperability;
- o It can treat it as a deployed technology for which protecting the installed base is essential, including retention of core interoperability.

These suggest a wide range of possible constraints on working group effort.

Equally, those bringing technology to the IETF do so at different points in the maturity of their work. Any of the above might make sense, depending upon that maturity, the extent of deployment, and the timing of the investment made by the installed base.

When technology is brand new, with at most some prototypes done as proofs of concept, then significant changes to the spec won't necessarily add much to the development and deployment costs. On the

other extreme, a mature, deployed market can be almost cavalier about the freedom of a working group charter, because its base of experience is sufficient to hold sway over a working group that gets silly: that is, the installed base is sufficiently well-established and unified in what it will accept, so that its leverage is clear.

However, immediately after the development investment is made -- and especially when there has been considerable initial deployment, but still room for quite a bit more -- the installed and potential base will not take kindly to disruptive standards work that undermines their recent investment; worse, such work can seriously damage further adoption.

In reflecting upon the basis for adopting an existing draft, it is important to consider the document's place in its lifecycle and the needs of any installed base when deciding on the constraints to impose on document development.

5. Some Issues

5.1. Individual I-Ds Under WG Care

Although rare, a working group sometimes facilitates a draft, but does not own it. These are "individual" drafts, with a common filename convention of the working group name following the personal name:

draft-`<lastname>-<wgname>...`

Typically such documents are subject to normal working group process. However ownership stays with the original author and the document is not formally working group output. In these situations, when publication is requested, it might be the case that the working group has consensus that the document will be published as an RFC, but not have agreement about the text in the document.

Of course, the author and the working group might decide to change the document's status, such as making it a formal working group draft, or publish it along a different RFC stream or submission path.

This is a rare situation and working group chairs can be assured that the Area Directors will want to understand why the document could not be adopted and owned by the working group.

5.2. Competing Drafts

Engineering for interesting topics often produces competing, interesting proposals. The reasons can be technical aesthetics, engineering tradeoffs, architectural differences, company economics and the like. Although it is far more comfortable to entertain only one proposal, a working group is free to pursue more than one. Often this is necessary until a clear preference develops. Sometimes, multiple versions are formally published, absent consensus among the alternatives.

It is appealing to ask authors of competing proposals to find a way to merge their work. Where it makes sense to do this, it can produce a single, strong specification. On the other hand, some differences cannot be resolved and attempting a merge can produce a weaker result. [[Heli-Sub](#)] Some would argue that this is the more common outcome. At the least, detailed discussions to merge are better held in private than amidst the dynamics of an open working group mailing list. The working group has ultimate authority to approve any decisions, but it is not required that it be involved in all the discussions.

Various management efforts can facilitate the handling of competing proposals. Some examples include:

- * Develop a requirements document that is independent of specific proposals; this can highlight features that are deemed essential, from those that are of secondary importance, and facilitate a discussion about features without reference to specific proposals.
- * Develop a comparison table of the proposals; this can aid understanding of their differences.
- * Discuss the relative importance and effects of having one proposal, versus multiple; this can focus people's efforts at compromise and encourage a willingness to choose a single proposal.

The problem of competing drafts can be particularly painful when it arises in either of two circumstances:

- * If a second proposal appears as a new draft, just as the chairs were ready to poll the working group on adoption of the draft containing the first proposal, then the authors of the first proposal could feel affronted. It does not follow that the

second draft was written to be difficult or derail the first: it might even include better ideas. So it is best not to disregard it. However, automatically asking the authors to merge their work will not necessarily produce a more solid solution and will not guarantee faster progress. This situation will be a judgement call in each case, and it might help to ask the working group for their opinion: shall the working group adopt one document as a starting point and fold in the ideas from the second under the control of consensus, or shall the working group wait until the authors of both documents have reached agreement?

- * If the working group has already adopted an I-D on a specific topic, the posting of a new individual I-D on the same topic could be seen as an attack on the working group processes or decisions. However, posting an I-D is often a good way to put new ideas into concrete form and into the public domain for consideration and discussion. The working group chairs will want to encourage the working group to consider the new proposal. Shall it be adopted and entirely replace the current working group draft? Shall the new ideas be incorporated into the work of the working group through the normal editorial process? Shall the working group adopt a second competing solution? Or shall the new draft be rejected and not adopted by the working group?

6. Security Considerations

Beyond the credibility of the IETF, this document raises no security concerns.

7. Acknowledgements

This draft was developed from an IETF tutorial given by A. Farrel. L. Anderson contributed useful comments.

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[Appendix A](#). Acknowledgements

This document was based on a presentation made at an IETF Working Group Chairs lunch. [[Farrel-Chairs](#)])

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