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 Making Less Work for Area Directors

Abstract

Anecdotally, every IESG complains about the Area Director (AD) workload, and says that it takes the first full term to understand the job. Empirically, the AD workload is high sometimes causing backlogs in processing of Internet-Drafts and stressing the ADs.

Empirically, the AD workload is high sometimes causing backlogs in processing of Internet-Drafts and stressing the ADs. This is evidenced by the limits applied to the number of pages on the regular IESG telechats, and by the number of documents waiting in excess of fifty days for initial AD review after a working group has requested publication.

This document proposes a number of ways that the AD workload can be reduced. It will be up to the IETF consensus process to determine which proposals to adopt.

A major goal of this effort is to make it feasible for a wider diversity of people to volunteer as candidates for AD positions by reducing the barriers and costs to individuals and their employers.

About This Document

This note is to be removed before publishing as an RFC.

Status information for this document may be found at <https://datatracker.ietf.org/doc/draft-rsalz-less-ad-work/>.

Discussion of this document takes place on the GENDISPATCH Working Group mailing list (<mailto:gendispatch@ietf.org>), which is archived at <https://mailarchive.ietf.org/arch/browse/gendispatch/>. Subscribe at <https://www.ietf.org/mailman/listinfo/gendispatch/>.

Source for this draft and an issue tracker can be found at <https://github.com/rsalz/ietf-less-ad-work>.

Status of This Memo

This Internet-Draft is submitted in full conformance with the provisions of BCP 78 and BCP 79.

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This Internet-Draft will expire on 24 December 2023.

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1. Introduction

Anecdotally, every IESG complains about the Area Director (AD) workload, and says that it takes the first full term to understand the job. This implies that a successful AD will need to serve at least two terms to be effective, making the role a commitment of at least four years.

Empirically, the AD workload is high sometimes causing backlogs in processing of Internet-Drafts and stressing the ADs. This is evidenced by the limits applied to the number of pages on the regular IESG telechats, and by the number of documents waiting in excess of fifty days for initial AD review after a working group has requested publication.

This document proposes a number of ways that the AD workload can be reduced. These proposals are intended for discussion and adoption either individually or in groups such that no one suggestion shall be blocked by discussions of the others. It will be up to the IETF consensus process to determine which proposals to adopt.

A major goal of this effort is to make it feasible for a wider diversity of people to volunteer as candidates for AD positions by reducing the barriers and costs to individuals and their employers.

2. Conventions and Definitions

DISCUSSION Probably delete this section.

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "NOT RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in BCP 14 [[RFC2119](#)] [[RFC8174](#)] when, and only when, they appear in all capitals, as shown here.

3. History of IESG Job Descriptions

The IETF Nominations Committee (NomCom) appoints ADs to the IESG according to their judgement, but taking feedback from the community on the suitability of the candidates, and considering the job descriptions provided by the sitting IESG. It is useful to look at the job descriptions provided to the NomCom over the years.

In 2013, the first year for which the job description is preserved in the datatracker, the description said

The basic IESG activities can consume between 15-40 hours a week.

In 2017, this changed to

The ability to contribute more time is useful, but if the NomCom should pick a few ADs who can only do 15 hrs/week on a routine basis, the IESG can cope with that.

Starting with the 2018 NomCom, this changed to the following

Many ADs allocate 15 hours or more per week...

This boilerplate has been unchanged in the five years since then.

At the same time (2018), the description added text to say

Enough time must be allocated to manage approximately 10 to 15 working groups, [and] to read on the order of 500 pages of internet-drafts every two weeks

This text has also not changed in the last five years.

TODO: Would be interesting to find out why this changed.

The IESG secretary says that this past year (ending in March), the IESG has requested agenda's be limited to 400 pages.

TODO: Get pagecounts for the past several years; maybe from the sodastream folks? From the datatracker? The Secretariat says they do not not have access to this historic data.

4. Rationale

We want the IESG to be staffed with the best possible people with the appropriate technical and management skills. In order to achieve this, the job must be achievable, rewarding, and not an insufferable strain on the ADs. But the high workload and constant stress mean that this is not always possible.

At the same time, the ADs must be funded, and this is usually by their employers. But, although some companies consider funding an AD as "paying the Internet tax," the companies are being asked to release the time of one of their key engineers for no or little direct return. At the least, they hope that some of their employees's time will be available for work within the company; that is, that the AD job will not be a full time job. Furthermore, as it is often claimed that an AD does not become fully effective until their second term, the role implies a commitment from the AD and their employer of at least four years.

The current requirement is not sustainable, and leads to the centralization of technical leadership in only the largest companies

-- those that can afford the costs and mitigate the loss of a key worker. Of the 14 Area Directors in March 2023, eight (more than half) work for the one of the 2,000 largest global companies [[FORBES](#)] or a subsidiary. Of course, this is a generalization -- there have been multiple ADs who came from Academia or worked for smaller companies.

In order to make the AD positions (except for the IETF Chair) more accessible to candidates from different backgrounds and companies, the IETF needs to make the AD job less time-consuming.

TODO: Look at previous IESG membership.

5. Recommendations/Suggestions

5.1. Only one AD to approve

An Internet-Draft ballot should allow only one AD in each area to vote. The other director(s) can either vote "no objection" or the ballot tracking can be modified to handle this more directly. Coordination between area ADs is left to them to handle; this document suggests that the *non-responsible* AD be the one to vote. During discussion, all ADs should participate.

For any area with a directorate, the default ballot position should be to accept that review, if one is given.

DISCUSSION I'm not clear on this idea. Is it based on a misunderstanding of the current requirements? Currently, no AD is required to ballot on any document, although it might be considered as bad manners to not ballot. However, a "no objection" doesn't require a review, and indeed many ADs trust their co-ADs or the sponsoring AD. I believe that the IESG would respond in the same way: that the reviews are not the problem.

This might, however, turn into advice and guidance phrased as "expectations and non-expectations for document review during IESG evaluation." It could cover: - trusting other ADs - sharing review responsibilities between ADs - delegation of review to others such as Directorates - the meaning of "no objection"

We might, however, look again at the number of "no objections" required for a ballot to pass on a standards track draft because it could be claimed that this puts additional pressure on ADs to do reviews. I don't think this needs to be done, because I think that ADs need to understand better that "no objection" can be entered without doing a review.

5.2. No "revisit" documents open across change-over

Any ballots cast before an AD change-over should stand. Notably, any DISCUSS issues, if resolved, should result in clearing and allowing the former AD to ballot. This is similar to the NomCom term of office, which lasts until the next NomCom is seated. Perhaps a time-limit of a year or six months should be added, allowing a reasonable time for the document queue to drain.

An incoming AD would have to review the in-process draft, and while the number of such documents might be small, the potential impact on the amount of effort on the document authors, not to mention their morale -- "what, we have to do this again?" -- can be significant.

5.3. Documents, not scheduling

What is the rationale for the IESG setting meeting logistics? How much time is consumed with scheduling?

We have professional staff, with Board oversight, and consultations. The meeting venue requirements are being discussed as an update to [\[RFC8718\]](#) and any policy changes will be acted on.

DISCUSSION Isn't this an example of the issue rather than the problem itself? Should we rephrase this more along the line of "priorities"? That is, once the ADs have done "facilitating" the work of the working groups, they are free to spend their time on anything they like. But actually, the IESG would always say that they are making daily decisions about the priority of what they spend their time on. They would say that one of their jobs is to look at the IETF and see what needs them to act, and that sometimes this results in documents being delayed in favour of other tasks. So what is needed is to give the IESG instructions about priorities and what tasks to drop. This can go further by listing the tasks that should be done by others, but it is hard to make such a long list: it is easier to list the tasks that should be done first.

5.4. Content not language

It is not an effective use of technical experts to review and correct for things like typo's, etc. We recognize that many ADs will be "unable to help themselves" as the personality trait of nit-picking is endemic to our profession, and they should feel free to point out nits, but they should be conscious of the time and effort involved.

If a document lacks clarity or has so many issues with English that there is a risk of it being misunderstood, the AD should recognise this and feel free to send the document back to the WG for the authors to fix. This may be hard, particularly for contributors where

English is not their native language, but all working groups have the resources to help with this.

CITATION I think it was the MPLS WG that instituted an English language review team.

We also note that the existing RFC Production Center is already highly focused on copyediting.

6. Increasing the candidate pool

This document offers a number of suggestions to reduce the workload of an IETF Area Director, in the hopes that it will increase the diversity of candidates.

The IETF has learned to accommodate to remote meetings, if in-person attendance at IESG meetings is perceived as a requirement, perhaps that should be explicitly discussed.

7. Security Considerations

This document could change the IESG review process.

8. IANA Considerations

This document has no IANA actions.

9. References

9.1. Normative References

[RFC2119] Bradner, S., "Key words for use in RFCs to Indicate Requirement Levels", BCP 14, RFC 2119, DOI 10.17487/RFC2119, March 1997, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc2119>>.

[RFC8174] Leiba, B., "Ambiguity of Uppercase vs Lowercase in RFC 2119 Key Words", BCP 14, RFC 8174, DOI 10.17487/RFC8174, May 2017, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc8174>>.

9.2. Informative References

[FORBES] Forbes Magazine, "The Global 2000", 2022, <<https://www.forbes.com/lists/global2000/?sh=3d73be235ac0>>.

[RFC8718] Lear, E., Ed., "IETF Plenary Meeting Venue Selection Process", BCP 226, RFC 8718, DOI 10.17487/RFC8718, February 2020, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc8718>>.

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None yet.

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