

Internet Engineering Task Force
Internet-Draft
Intended status: Informational
Expires: September 1, 2017

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February 28, 2017

Thoughts on IETF Finance Arrangements
draft-arkko-ietf-finance-thoughts-00.txt

Abstract

This short memo outlines the author's thoughts of current status and future development questions around IETF's financing mechanisms.

This memo is also input for discussion that the IETF community should have. The memo is the first part of the author's goal to document the status and various challenges and opportunities associated with the IETF Administrative Activity (IASA), in the context of the so called "IASA 2.0" project.

The memo has no particular official standing, nor does it claim to represent more than the authors' thinking at the time of writing.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of the IETF is to "... produce high quality, relevant technical and engineering documents that influence the way people design, use, and manage the Internet ..." [RFC3935]. This is of course only possible when the organisation offers a platform: process, and basic services that allow IETF participants to work Internet technology in an effective way. One part of this platform is sufficient funding to run those services, maintain archives, have web presence, have staff that can do the final publication editing, etc.

The IETF's funding situation is generally in good shape: The IETF has multiple sources of funds, from corporate supporters to participants to Internet Society and to donors interested ensuring in the long-term sustainability of the efforts.

But there are issues as well, such as a rising cost trend in a setting where the basis of our funding from attendees and sponsors is staying largely the same.

And, it is always good to evaluate our arrangements, and the ongoing "IASA 2.0" effort to assess the IETF Administrative Activity (IASA) organisation is a good moment to do this analysis [RFC4071] [IASA20]. For the finance aspects as well as other organisational matters.

This short memo outlines the author's view of the current status and future development questions around IETF's financing mechanisms. The memo is the first part of the author's goal to document the status and various challenges and opportunities associated with IASA.

This memo is also input for discussion that the IETF community should have.

The memo has no particular official standing, nor does it claim to represent more than the author's thinking at the time of writing.

2. Discussion

Some of the trends affecting our financing arrangements include:

Community size is stable

The size of the IETF community both in participants and participating companies has been relatively stable for over ten years. This is by itself neither good or bad, and it reflects IETF's role in the world. While the Internet technology business keeps growing tremendously, standards for core Internet technology are only one part of the overall picture. That is a very important part, and one where there has been a lot of activity. But one should not necessarily expect a tremendous growth.

Continuously rising costs

On the other hand, costs for running the operation have increased, and are predicted to increase. This is partially due to external cost pressures, for instance the of cost hotel services such as meeting space continue to increase. But the trend is also affected by the need to provide more services, for instance related to remote attendance or tools migrating to the secretariat.

Over-the-net participation

The ability to work together without being in the same place continues to improve; global communities can be built based on - at least to large extent - over-the-net collaboration. As engineers working on real-time communication among other things, this trend should be apparent to IETF participants. This is not to say that in-person meetings will cease to be useful.

This will affect one leg of the IETF's funding structure: participant fees. Even where remote participation might be an activity that can have a fee associated with it, such fees are likely smaller than those in physical meetings.

While the IETF financing models have recently started evolving, they are still based primarily on meeting fees and meeting-based sponsorship. It would be useful to build also sponsorship models that allow supporting the IETF's work, not just a given meeting for instance.

Professionally run services

IETF services are increasingly run on a professional, commercial model, as overall number of services continues to grow, volunteer tools are left to be run by the secretariat as the volunteers move on to develop more tools, etc.

Different types of sponsors

There are many willing supporters of the IETF's work. But it is important to recognise how they -- due to their background or in some cases even legal or accounting reasons -- have different sets of expectations.

It is useful to cater for different classes of donors, for instance both large corporations capable of, for instance, hosting a meeting, as well as smaller corporations still interested in supporting the IETF but unable to take a hosting commitment.

Similarly, most corporate sponsorships are typically to support the current activities. Meeting sponsorships are an example of this. On the other hand, IETF Endowment donations are an example of a more long-term support for the long-term. Both models are necessary, and useful.

Finally, the IETF is backed by Internet Society, and the support of the IETF is one of core missions that the organisation was founded for.

The sponsor experience

While there has been a lot of support for, e.g., meeting hosting, getting support for the full sponsorship program is not easy.

The value to sponsors is not always obvious, the IETF community is sometimes critical or unappreciative, and the same sponsors get tapped again and again for many related but different opportunities.

Also, and this may sound obvious, but the IETF should be open for getting sponsorship from the different sources. There is one area that we are not as open as we should be: Traditionally, meeting sponsorship has been sought from the location that a meeting is at. However, this may not be the best strategy when a significant fraction of these sponsorships come from global multinational companies.

A corollary to the desire for supporting multiple different sponsorship models is that the IETF is clear on what the options give, clear how they benefit the IETF. As the number of options have grown, we have not always been clear enough, or provided answers that were aligned with the desires of the sponsors. For instance, the IETF Endowment was re-specified in 2015-2016 to make it about support of the IETF rather than general-purpose support for Internet openness and technology development. But work remains in ensuring that all sponsorship options are crystal clear.

Finally, the basis for any financial involvement of the sponsors needs to be viewed in terms of the value that the IETF provides for the participants and the supporters. Articulating that is important, and this needs work from the IETF. Although again, the value is probably slightly different for different sponsors. Ultimately, value is the one that ensures we continue to draw the participants, and attracts sponsors in a thoughtful and long-term fashion, and helps tune IETF activities to meet the needs of the community.

Expectations on the IETF

Some factors in our environment are changing, and the role of the IETF is also evolving in some ways. For instance, the IETF Trust took a role in managing IANA-related IPR in 2016.

3. Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Kathy Brown, Andrew Sullivan, Ray Pelletier, Leslie Daigle, Alissa Cooper, Gonzalo Camarillo, Greg Kapfer, and Sean Turner for interesting discussions in this space.

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