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Thoughts on IETF Administrative Support Activities (IASA)
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Abstract

This short memo outlines the author's thoughts about the challenges and opportunities with the IETF's administrative support activities, currently organised as part of the IETF Administrative Support Activities (IASA), IETF Administrative Oversight Committee (IAOC), and IETF Trust.

This memo is just input for discussion that the IETF community should have. The memo is a part of the author's goal to document the status and various challenges and opportunities 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 arrangements relating to administrative support for the IETF (IASA, RFC 4071 [RFC4071]) were created more than ten years ago, when the IETF initially took charge of its own administration. The arrangements have served the IETF well, but there's been considerable change in the necessary tasks, in the world around us, and our own expectations since the creation of the IASA. Looking forward, this is a good time to ask what administrative arrangements best support the IETF in the next ten years.

Background for this analysis are the various challenges and frustrations we have experienced along the way, for instance around meeting arrangements. But we also need to ask the bigger questions about how the organisations are structured. What kind of support we need in the coming years, from the point of view of the community, IESG, IAB, IAOC, Trust, and our partners such as ISOC, meeting hosts or contractors? Areas to look at include structure, financing and sponsorship arrangements, organisation, and ways of working. This is the context of the so called "IASA 2.0" project [IASA20].

This document gives the author's view on structure and ways of working in the current IASA arrangements. This memo is just input for discussion that the IETF community should have. The memo is a part of the author's goal to document the status and various challenges and opportunities in IASA.

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

The authors's views on financing aspects have been discussed in [I-D.arkko-ietf-finance-thoughts]. A collection of early views from a community process on IASA issues has been published in [I-D.hall-iasa20-workshops-report].

2. Changes, Challenges, and Opportunities

It is useful to understand the evolution of the IASA arrangements over time. Leslie Daigle's memo discusses the changes from the initial IASA arrangements to today [I-D.daigle-iasa-retrospective].

But it is also necessary to understand how far along we have come from even the early 2000s. As Leslie's draft notes:

A first priority was to establish meeting dates, locations and contracts more than a year in advance, to improve contract negotiating positions, costs, and provide clarity for attendee planning. (Historical data point: the early 2004 Seoul IETF meeting did not have a hotel contract booked in December of 2003).

So, while there are a number of challenges, overall the system has served the IETF well.

Section 5 of Leslie's draft covers some of issues:

- o Do current arrangements match the tasks and organisation that have grown larger?
- o Today's IETF is international and diverse, which poses challenges to meeting site selection.
- o Too many sponsorship and other aspects of the organisation are focused around the meetings.
- o The line between IETF and ISOC organisation has not been clear-cut, which has lead to issues around transparency, budgeting, and, perhaps more importantly, clarity of control.
- o The role of ISOC in representing IETF towards sponsors and donors is sometimes unclear.
- o Staffing that in practice extends beyond one employee, with structure and control that was designed for one.
- o IAOC membership is structurally challenged, with a significant fraction of members having full-time IETF responsibilities elsewhere.

- o The IAOC also has a limited ability to pick chairpersons, given that some of the members are not eligible for being a chair.
- o Community participation centers on meeting arrangements, with only a small number of volunteers willing to be a part of the board.

In addition, there have been issues around transparency, particularly relating to the meeting location selection process. A change in spring 2016 led to the early release of cities under consideration, to help spot potential issues early. However, other issues remain in discussion, for instance relating to publishing future hotel contracts.

There are also many issues that are not visible externally. For instance, the IAOC is a board for oversight, but the lines between oversight and execution are blurred. Particularly when staff is overloaded. Almost anything that the board does needs staff assistance, so any effort in helping move topics forward adds to the overload situation. This situation is particularly exacerbated when something unexpected happens, such as was the case with the Zika-virus concerns.

But many of the specific issues are by-products of the way that we have structured the activities at IETF. Specifically, the author believes that the following issues are root causes of many of the difficulties:

Internal organisational structure

There is obviously a need for a central entity to keep the full picture of budget and activities, but the current organisation was designed at a time when we expected to have a board and one administrative director. While the organisation has grown, and for instance IAOC committees taking on more responsibility, we still operate largely on this simple model but having to deal with many more vendors and topics than before. The author's opinion is that the IETF would benefit from looking at evolving the structure and practices, for instance, relating to division and delegation of responsibilities, and making the model less dependent on a single director.

Bundling the IAOC with IETF Trust

While the IETF Trust has a budget and regularly deals with IETF lawyer and the legal team, the schedule and nature of the work in the Trust and the rest of the IASA is quite different. The bundling of these organisations with the same members and same meeting slots has hurt our ability to deal with both as effectively as we should. And it certainly adds to the workload

and volunteer problems. The Trust is a stable, long-term entity that deals mostly with legal questions, and typically has low workload. Trust decisions have a very long-lasting effect on IETF, however. The IAOC deals with a large financial responsibility, and is a more high-activity entity.

Expertise and willingness to work on administration

IETF participants are naturally more interested in technology evolution than details of administration or meeting arrangements, unless those arrangements lead to problems. While there are many highly capable persons in the IETF, with a lot of experience of managing budgets and contracts, it generally has not been easy to find volunteers for IASA-related tasks.

This would point to a need to re-evaluate division of work between volunteer boards and contracted, professional services.

Meeting planning processes

Another area where some re-thinking would be useful are the meeting planning processes. Involving community earlier in the location choices and writing a community-specified mandatory requirements for meeting sites seem like obviously useful things, but have started only recently, and have not yet found their perfect forms.

Re-thinking what we as community do and how much we contract out would also be useful here, of course as long as the community has full visibility and ability to affect the decisions.

On a more practical level, a big fraction of the effort within the IASA is spent on meeting arrangements. Community input indicates that while some new locations are necessary, repeat visits are desirable. Indeed, 5 out of 6 future meetings are to locations that the IETF has been to recently (and that one new location was the subject of much controversy).

Given the repetitive schedule, one would assume that this helps meeting planning. While some groundwork (such as site visits) are not unnecessarily repeated, and while contracts often have to be renegotiated, much of the rest of the process is run through as if we were making completely independent decisions. This seems like a missed opportunity for rationalisation, or further delegation to vendors specialising in meeting organisation. Further use of repeats with multi-meeting agreements would also seem to be sensible.

Note: no organisation can rely on a very small number of possible meeting sites, due to the danger of becoming unable to attain competitive pricing. So the pool of possible meeting sites has to be still large enough, and be occasionally refreshed.

Further clarity of roles between the IETF and ISOC

The interface between the IETF and ISOC has evolved in natural ways over the years. For instance, improvements in properly accounting for in-kind contributions have made budgeting clearer. And ISOC's support activities such as sponsorship acquisition are obviously very important and useful for the IETF. Budgeting clarity is only one part of an interface, however, and further work is needed, for instance, in the area of how the different support activities are managed. It might even be useful to refactor the responsibilities between IETF and ISOC. As an example, there's a very clear relationship between the IAOC and the IAD, but it is less clear how ISOC and IETF co-operate in managing a particular support activity.

3. Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Kathy Brown, Andrew Sullivan, Ray Pelletier, Leslie Daigle, Alissa Cooper, Ted Hardie, Tobias Gondrom, and Gonzalo Camarillo for interesting discussions in this space.

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