The Impact of Continuity

Carsten Griwodz, Safiqul Islam, Michael Welzl

We all know implicitly that it takes persistence to promote ideas in the IETF. Historically, attendance of the IETF meetings was a key factor, but this has been reduced with the growing scale of meetings and broad participation in online discussions.

Where RFCs are concerned, it is important to lay groundwork in studies, code and verification, but after the publication of an initial draft, it is essential to follow up by engaging in email discussions, acquire support for the idea, and probably improve the idea itself, its verification and the draft several times before it reaches the state of an RFC.

Both in industry and academia, there are voices that speak up against active contribution to the IETF because of the time requirements. In overcoming these initial restraints, it is important for potential contributors to understand how to succeed.

We propose to look at success and failure in completing the path from first draft to RFC, but we look particularly for ways to distinguish the reasons for failure. Proponents of a draft may fail to complete the path because they were simply not persistent enough to pursue the entire process to the end, not persistent enough to overcome passive resistance, or they may have yielded to active resistance. The latter two points imply that there has been an active discussion about the draft; we need to distinguish requests for additional contributions (passive) and contributions to the discussion that provide counter-arguments (alternative code, alternative studies).

In this investigation, it is interesting to see whether seniority improves the chances of success. Obviously long-term contributors have shown their persistence, and many are successful RFC authors. It is impossible to assess whether senior contributors have a higher success rate when they pursue RFCs because they have more opportunities to "test the waters". But do they face less or more resistance in discussions, or is the atmosphere in discussions different from that faced by newcomers?

Finally, does the atmosphere in discussions for proposals that face active resistance develop over time, or does it stagnate?

The study is meant to extend our existing work [1] by correlating discussions with the development of drafts. We suggest to attempt sentiment analysis on the email archives to study the development of discussions over time.

[1] Michael Welzl, Stephan Oepen, Cezary Jaskula, Carsten Griwodz, Safiqul Islam: "Collaboration in the IETF: An Initial Analysis of Two Decades in Email Discussions", editorial note (not peer reviewed), ACM Computer Communication Review (CCR) 51(3), July 2021.