EDITORIAL

DO I KNOW YOU?

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For the last ten months, I have had the pleasure of serving on the committee chartered by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) to revise the National Standards Strategy first created by ANSI some four years ago. The invitation extended to me was in furtherance of achieving diversity of input on the committee, since my experience lies largely in the consortium world, while the great majority of the other members on the committee have roots primarily or exclusively in the world of accredited standards development organizations ("SDOs").

My experiences to date on this committee have been educational on many levels, as I have had the opportunity to become better acquainted at first hand with the procedural values, priorities and strengths of SDOs. In a sense, it has been somewhat like the experience of Tony Curtis' character in the classic Hollywood film "Some Like it Hot": spending your life in the same industry with SDOs is very different than living in the same room with them for six hours at a time every six weeks.

As in so many other situations where there are two distinct groups (ethnic, religious, or even high school football rivals), it is surprising to see how little one side actually knows about the other. Although consortia have now been around in appreciable numbers for over 20 years, many who are heavily involved in SDOs have little or no direct experience with consortia, and vice versa. Perhaps more surprisingly, a very large number of companies are members of both types of standard setting organizations, and yet misconceptions nonetheless abound among those that live only in one universe or the other. Why is there so little information flow between these two accepted forms of achieving the same goals?

As explored at greater length in a later article in this issue ("Reimagining a National Standards Strategy"<link>), there are in fact a few understandable reasons. One is that SDOs tend to be older and established, while most consortia are newer and/or transitory. That means that many SDOs have had time to grow bureaucracies and significant budgets and become more set in their ways, while most consortia are lightly funded, even more lightly staffed, and are still figuring out what ways they might like to eventually settle into. Another is that most consortia seek to set global standards that get implemented locally, while most SDOs set national standards first, and seek global recognition for those standards second. A third is that consortia are the province primarily of industrial participants, while SDOs are open to wider constituencies, including individuals.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising at all that the cultural gene pools of these two kindred types or organizations have evolved to become so different. But need that be so?

In fact, many of the historical differences between the two types of organizations are already eroding. The mere existence of consortia has resulted in many SDOs speeding up their processes and adopting "fastrack" or other innovations to address the perceived advantages that consortia offer. Similarly, many consortia, such as the World Wide Web Consortium, OASIS, and the Open Geospatial Consortium, have become sufficiently institutionalized that they are in most respects indistinguishable from SDOs.

And as some SDOs have responded to loss of market share to consortia by changing their ways, so also have some of the global organizations, such as ISO, which has created a track by which consortium-developed standards as well as standards of SDO origin can achieve of global ratification. Finally, there are not a few SDOs that now operate consortium-like non-accredited processes as well as accredited

processes within their organizations (the Interactive International Imaging Industry Association, or i3A, is one example), and there are other SDO's (such as the National Information Standards Organization, or NISO) that now give away their standards, rather than supporting themselves through their sale.

This type of convergent evolution is hardly unique to standards organizations, and is therefore not surprising. But there still seem to be residual and unnecessary degrees of separation. Why, for example, is there no ANSI for consortia? Or, for that matter, why is there not a way for consortia to take advantage of some of ANSI's (or ETSI's) domestic and international connections to achieve consortium ends, without jeopardizing the international credentials of consortia?

The fact is that the American national interest (and the national interest of every nation) is ultimately best served by the development of the most robust, open and efficient standard setting infrastructure possible. In order to achieve that end, we should use all of the existing tools at our disposal in as intelligent and coordinated a fashion as possible. That means figuring out how SDOs and consortia can not merely coexist, forming the odd liaison relationship here and there, but rethinking how they can actively work together to achieve the best results with the least overlap.

As in so many other areas of the world, it is more convenient to maintain separation than to create alliances, especially where an "us" and "them" mentality has evolved. But when any lines of separation between SDO and consortium standards *users* that may ever have existed have dissolved (as they have), then its time for the glass walls that divide SDOs and consortia, and that separate national *de jure* standards bodies from each other, to dissolve as well. In an era of globalization, such divisions not only no longer make sense, but they shouldn't be tolerated.

It's hardly to be expected that globalization will demand change everywhere but in the field of standards development. Logically, that day will arrive in the world of standards first.

In fact, it already has.

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