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## EDITORIAL

### CONSORTIUM PROLIFERATION – TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

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By my count, no fewer than 45 new consortia have been formed to date in 2006. To my knowledge, only a much smaller number of standard setting and promotional consortia have dissolved, ceased active operations or merged into other organizations. The result is that the ranks of the many hundreds of consortia already in existence continue to swell.

That's a good thing, in that each of these new organizations was obviously formed to do what its founders deemed to be important work. And it's also good news, because it indicates that the technology sector continues to innovate and move aggressively into new areas of endeavor that require standards. I see multiple new organizations, for example, in each of the following categories: RFID, security (in many contexts), payment and credit card technology, wireless, mobile services, digital television and radio, Ethernet, and more.

It's also good news that the very flexible consortium concept has proved to be so adaptable and durable, allowing new initiatives to be rapidly deployed when needed to accomplish what needs to be done. After all, that's one of the reasons that consortia first began to multiply in the IT sector some twenty years ago, breaking out of the traditional system of nationally-based, accredited standards development organizations (SDOs) that had evolved over the preceding hundred years.

But there's an unfortunate side to the proliferation of consortia as well, because the same light-weight approach that permits consortia to be created and launched cheaply and quickly does not provide well for the types of communication and collaboration that the accredited world of standard setting was designed to provide, and up a point achieves. Nor do the strategic plans of most consortia include all of the activities that their accredited brethren often pursue, such as public advocacy, and support in international trade matters.

Instead, the ties among consortia, and among consortia and SDOs, are more ad hoc than systemically conceived. Individual consortia and SDOs form liaison relationships as needed that form single points of contact on a one-on-one basis, but these networks of contacts work only as well as the individuals deployed to maintain them, and each network operates largely in isolation from every other network, with each overlaying, rather than supplementing, the other.

Consortia are also ill-equipped to assist their members in more peripheral, but still important challenges in successfully selling standards-based products. Consortia are typically low budget and lightly staffed, and their managements are usually more than fully occupied executing on their core missions of standard setting, recruitment and promotion. Adding certification and branding to the mix is often necessary and adds additional burdens to the mix. As a result, becoming knowledgeable about international conformity testing requirements on a country by country basis goes well beyond the time and competency resources of almost all consortia, although many SDOs would provide assistance in these and other international trade areas to their members.

And while standards can, and increasingly are, submitted by consortia to ISO/IEC for adoption, many consortia are unfamiliar with the process or methodology for submitting standards for such consideration. When members suggest for the first time that a given standard should be offered to ISO through the PAS process, management must embark on a venture into what is often alien territory.

In some ways, the coexistence of consortia and SDOs resembles two different cultures living side by side in the same country, each maintaining a polite distance from the other and rarely intermingling, even though each could gain much from coordinating more closely with the other. In both cases, such a state of artificial separation breeds misunderstanding and counter productive behavior, rather than cooperation.

One reason for this state of affairs is that the majority of information and technology consortia have been organized, and continue to be headquartered, in the United States. Most also have more U.S.-headquartered members than members from any other nation or region. As a result, consortia take pains not to appear to be too U.S.-centric, given that their goal is to set global standards.

Still, the U.S. remains (at least for now) the largest market for IT products and services, and what Congress does, and does not, do can have a major impact on the businesses of all consortium members, wherever they may be. But few consortia (unlike many of their accredited peers) have the related resources or staff competency to be active in informing Congress about the standards-related needs of their industries.

In the accredited world, many of the issues mentioned above would be met or facilitated by the national organizations that accredit their domestic standard setting organizations (in the United States, the American National Standards Institute, or ANSI (of which I am a director), fulfills this role). These organizations, and many individual SDOs, participate internationally in activities organized by ISO and the IEC, and nations participate together in the ITU. Consortia, no matter how large and influential they may become, remain largely outside these processes, and in any event are relegated to spectator status.

It seems odd that no better ways have been found to coordinate appropriate activities among consortia, and to optimize the interaction of the accredited and non-accredited worlds of standard setting. Certainly there must be something of potential value that is being left on the table as a result of this historical, but unnecessary separation.

If I am right in believing that there is a need that is going unmet, then the question becomes how that need should be addressed? Should some sort of new coordinating and facilitating organization be formed by and among consortia to better coordinate and leverage their activities? In the United States and elsewhere, should a formal interface be created between the national standards body and consortia, whereby consortia could engage with SDOs to better coordinate their standard setting activities (e.g., by seeking to reduce duplication of efforts), and whereby consortia could draw upon some of the resources already serving SDOs (e.g., conformity testing information, public advocacy and assistance with ISO/IEC submission mechanics and adoption strategy)?

These are some of the questions that are being asked within ANSI right now, and I've been asked to lead a working group that is exploring what some of the possibilities might be for the accredited and non-accredited standard setting worlds to work together more productively, to mutual advantage. If you have any thoughts or suggestions, I'd love to hear them. And if you have an interest in actively participating in the dialogue as the working group moves forward, be sure to let me know.

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