

## STANDARDS BLOG:

### OOXML Payback Time as Global Standards Work in SC 34 "Grinds to a Halt"

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One of the more egregious behaviors observed in the recent global vote on OOXML was the sudden and last minute surge to join not only various National Bodies just before they voted on OOXML, but also the relevant committee of ISO/IEC for the same purpose. At the latter level, not one but two unusual membership changes occurred. During the voting period, more and more countries joined SC 34, the committee within ISO/IEC's Joint Technical Committee 1 (JTC1) that addresses document formats, at the Observer (O) level. Then, in the final weeks and days before the voting closed, many of these new members as well as some longer term members suddenly upgraded their status to Principal (P) membership, thereby gaining greater influence in the final vote under the complex rules under which the committee operates (those rules are described in detail [here](#)).

SC 34 is one of the more important and active committees in JTC1, and has a constant stream of standards under active consideration and balloting. In anticipation of the OOXML vote, its membership surged – with 23 new National Body members, and the number of P members spiking by 11. When almost all of the new members voted for adoption (most of those countries that were long term P members voted against adoption, with comments), many felt that the standard setting process had been abused.

Unfortunately, the damage has not stopped there: since the OOXML ballot closed on September 2, not a single ballot has received enough votes to count in this important committee. Why? Because the last minute arrivals to SC 34 are not bothering to vote.

The resulting gridlock of this committee was as predictable as it is unfortunate. The extraordinarily large number of upgrades in the final months, and particularly in the final days, therefore seemed attributable not to an abiding investment and interest in the work of SC 34, but in the outcome of a single standards vote. That conclusion

is now certain, given the voting performance of the upgraded members since they cast their votes on OOXML.

The specific problem arises from the rules under which JTC1 committees operate, which are intended to ensure that specifications do not become approved unless there is sufficient interest in them, as well as adequate review, to merit issuance as global standards. One of these rules is that at every balloting stage, at least 50% of the P members eligible to vote must in fact return a ballot. Even this requirement, however, does not set a high bar, because a member is permitted to return a ballot of "Abstain," and inadequate review to form an opinion is accepted as a valid reason to abstain. As a result, returning a vote of "abstain" constitutes at best only the most minimal level of good citizenship.

Sadly, even that level of responsibility has been lacking in the newly upgraded members, whose numbers have dramatically raised the number of P members required to vote in order to advance a standard towards final approval. While I'm told that 90% of committee votes have achieved the necessary 50% return in the past, the current numbers tell a far different story: the three most recent ballots ([SC 34 N 870](#), [SC 34 872](#) and [SC 34 N 874](#)) have all failed because of P member apathy. As I read the tallies at those links, only one recent P member responded to a single ballot, even after some votes had been reissued for a second or even a third time. Had it not been necessary to include the new P members in the calculations, the second two votes would have passed (the first related to establishing a liaison relationship with another organization, and not a standard).

The result is that a very important committee has, in the words of its Secretariat Manager in frequent pleas to the non-responsive members, "ground to a halt." The impact is significant, since this is the committee that controls standards such as RELAX NG (ISO/IEC 19757 Part 2), Schematron (ISO/IEC 19757 Part 3) and Topic Maps (ISO/IEC 13250) – not to mention ODF (if will be interesting to see if participation increases when Microsoft's PDF-competing XML Paper Specification advances to SC 34 from Ecma, where it is currently in preparation). It is also a committee that attracts top talent on behalf of its traditional members, such as Ken Holman, Jon Bosak, Murata Makoto, Steve Pepper, Patrick Durusau, Francis Cave, Martin Bryan, and Rick Jelliffe, to name only a few.

It's a sad story, and one that at present does not have a happy ending in sight. For now, those that want to advance the cause can only grow increasingly frustrated. If you want to sample the depth of that frustration, read the excerpts reproduced below from Secretariat Manager Ken Holman's plaintive weekly memos. And if you know anyone involved in standard setting in Malta, Cyprus, Lebanon, Cote d'Ivoire (and so on), do everyone a favor and ask them to consider either voting, or dropping back to Observer membership.

\* \* \* \* \*

8/26/2007

This week I am excited to report an additional five (count 'em!) participating memberships in our committee, adding Malta, Venezuela, Pakistan, Poland and Egypt to our ranks. We also have a new observer membership from Indonesia. We

welcome all of these new members to our committee and look forward to their contributions.

Speaking of contributions, please remember that participating members have an obligation to participate in *\*all\** ballots for the subcommittee and not just in some of the ballots. There was a disappointing response to the last ballot, and so far a disappointing response to the ballot that is due in the week ahead.

*9/7/2007*

This week we welcome six new P-members to JTC 1/SC 34, three of them new: Lebanon, New Zealand and South Africa, and three of them as transfers from O-membership: Romania, Sri Lanka and Chile. We look forward to their contribution to our committee.

Regarding contributions, last week I tried to remind all participating members that you have an obligation to participate in *\*all\** ballots for the subcommittee and not just in some of the ballots you might be interested in. My comments went unheeded and as a result the outstanding letter ballot 870 regarding Category A Liaison membership for the XML Guild failed due to a lack of response.

Directives 9.1.10 explicitly indicates "if more than 50% of the P-members have not voted, the vote will have failed." Until we get 50% of *\*all\** P-members responding to ballots, the work of SC 34 will grind to a halt. Please consider your obligations of P-membership.

In the next few days I will re-issue the liaison ballot, this time for 1 month. This is the third time this question has been put forward to the membership of SC 34

*9/18/2007*

In the past week we have had two new ballots issued from WG 3, and a (second!!) reissue of the liaison request from the XML Guild. Until we get sufficient response on committee ballots, the work of SC 34 will grind to a halt and all insufficiently-responded ballots will have to be reissued. This is a critically important issue to our committee and I commend all P-members to assess their responsibility to respond, and to consider changing their membership to Observer status if they do not plan on participating in the work of our committee. Please remember that abstention is a valid vote and will help the committee continue its progress.

*9/30/2007*

You will see at that link that (as of Sunday evening) only 7 member bodies of our 38 participating members have actually submitted a ballot response....Since the recent influx of new P-members to SC 34, not a single ballot has been able to be processed...

It is critically important that P-members remember their obligations: if we do not get 20 responses per ballot, the work of SC 34 will grind to a halt....If you do not plan to participate in the work of SC 34, please consider changing your membership to Observer status. For those national bodies that joined in the interests of DIS

29500 Ecma 376 OOXML, remember that P-member/O-member status in SC 34 has no effect on attendance and voting at the Ballot Resolution Meeting being held in February. If this is your only interest, it would serve SC 34 well to change your membership status to O-member.

10/7/007

Regarding the two ballots that closed in the last week, even with all of the reminders I sent out we still fell short of the required number of ballot responses for either ballot to have their results considered. ...Since the recent influx of new P-members to our committee, not a single ballot has had a sufficient number of responses to be considered.

For further blog entries on ODF and OOXML, click [here](#)

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