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EDITORIAL

RESPECTING THE "STANDARDS PROFESSIONAL"

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How important are standards in the world of information and communications technology? On a scale of "not important" to "damn important," I would cast my vote to place them at the profane end of the spectrum. Assuming that judgment is on target, I find it curious that so little attention is paid to how standards are created.

The great majority of all ICT standards are developed today within consortia that have been formed within the last decade, and more of are being created all the time. Happily, there are a large number of such organizations that are well respected and highly effective, and which provide an essential function in the modern ICT world. But who created these new standard setting organizations created by, and who manages them once they are off the ground?

Based on my own experience working with more than 75 such organizations, it is the exception rather than the rule that a new consortium is created by those with significant prior experience in creating such organizations. Often, most or all of the representatives of the founding members are from the marketing or business side of the house, and may have had little real experience with the operation of standard setting organizations, although they may have a firm grasp on their strategic function.

This may be because few individuals can be found in most corporations today that could be considered to be true "standards professionals" – people with comprehensive hands-on experience working with standard setting organizations. True, there are business and marketing employees that may spend a significant amount of time working with one or more standard setting organizations in some capacity for some part of their career. And there are far more engineers that participate in standard setting organizations, often throughout their careers. But business and marketing employees are not likely to be skilled in designing an effective technical process, and engineers are less likely to have the opportunity to participate in the financial, recruiting, accounting, marketing, public relations or other aspects of running a successful consortium.

As a result, I often encounter a new consortium that has been cobbled together from loose pieces that can be begged, borrowed or copied in approximate form from existing organizations. Some of these pieces were themselves poorly conceived, or are reused in the wrong context. The result is a new organization that may look approximately right, but may or may not actually work very well in practice.

All of this is not too surprising, since not only are there too few people with deep experience in forming and managing consortia, but the "how to" book on the subject has yet to be written (this site, and its [Essential Guide](#) section in particular, representing perhaps the closest approximation available). Even documented best practices are few in number, because successful consortia are busy enough documenting best practices relating to the standards they were chartered to create.

Over time, I have developed quite a complete set of documents to cover just about every aspect of consortium planning, formation, governance, business and standards process operation, intellectual property regulation, certification, branding and so on. But merely having such paper tools to operate by is not the same as knowing in detail why they are the way they are, how they should be used, and when they should be changed.

Even when a new consortium has been properly structured, its founders face another problem: there is no real pool of professionals available to hire to manage a consortium, because few individuals have made a career in that capacity. When a new consortium wishes to hire an executive director, business development vice president, or director of the technical process, it is usually necessary to hire someone from the generic management pool, who lacks the specific management experience needed to run an SSO, and who may not function well in a mostly virtual organization with little administrative or other support.

Fortunately, there are a few management companies that host consortia and provide management services, but they are few in number, and that number ebbs and flows with fluctuations in the economy. Only a few provide a complete range of services and have broad experience in supporting standard setting organizations.

Finally, while engineering schools are supposed to provide some level of instruction relating to standards and their development, courses dedicated to this topic are almost nonexistent. Instead, standards are dealt with piecemeal through brief mentions in other courses - an ad hoc approach that lacks cohesiveness.

The result is that while there are many individuals become comfortable and capable participating in standard setting technical committees over time, few gain the kind of experience that would qualify them to run a successful standard setting organization, or to serve as a well-informed director of an SSO.

One reason for this state of affairs may be that accumulating experience in standard setting does not appear to have significant resume value. I have heard this from many people within corporations, and that's a shame, given the importance of standards to ITC business models, and the degree to which knowledge and experience about standard setting can enable a member to have greater influence within standard setting organizations.

In a better world, identification as a "standard setting professional" would be a credential of significance that would add luster to a resume, give rise to greater opportunities of advancement, and result in higher compensation. Absent such recognition, there will be little motivation for those that come in contact with the standard setting process to do more than meet basic expectations, and look forward to moving on.

If standards are as important as I believe they are, its time for the concept of a "standards professional" to become recognized, and for employers to send the message that qualification as such is a smart move for those wishing to advance their career.

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