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EDITORIAL

RESPECTING THE "STANDARDS PROFESSIONAL"

Andrew Updegrove

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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FEATURE ARTICLE

PARTICIPATING IN STANDARD SETTING ORGANIZATIONS: VALUE PROPOSITIONS, ROLES AND STRATEGIES

Andrew Updegrove

Abstract: *Today there are more information and communications technology standard setting organizations (SSOs) than even the largest corporations could afford to join. The effectiveness, speed, stability and reputation of these organizations vary widely, as does their suitability for a given purpose. Any prospective member of an SSO therefore needs to make intelligent choices as among the various SSOs that are relevant to its business, in order to spend its resources wisely in pursuit of the achievement of its goals. In this article I provide a framework within which such an entity can define its goals, and offer guidelines to be used in evaluating whether a given SSO is appropriate to join, with a special emphasis on those SSOs that serve the needs of the ICT industry.*

Introduction. Today, there are hundreds of standard setting organizations (SSOs) maintaining hundreds of thousands of standards. In addition to organizations primarily concerned with standard setting, there are many whose mission is to promote the acceptance or proliferation of new standards-based technologies, products or services, either in conjunction with standard setting activities or as their sole reason for being.

As a result, it would be a rare vendor or service provider that could not find anywhere from several dozen to literally hundreds of accredited standards development organizations (SDOs) and, in the information technology and communications (ICT) sector, unaccredited SSOs (commonly referred to as consortia) whose goals were germane to its own success. But for all but the largest global corporations (some of which are active members of hundreds of SDOs and consortia), participation in all relevant SSOs would not be practical from either a financial or a human resources point of view.

There are other reasons for exercising selectivity as well, including the fact that not all SSOs are equally effective, respected, efficient or neutral. For all these reasons, it is only prudent for any organization to properly investigate a prospective organization before applying for membership, whether its interest and budget extend to a single SSO membership or to hundreds.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that those that participate in standards development and related activities have different motivations for doing so, and look to gain benefits that vary as well. This differentiation in position may make one SSO more attractive to a given potential member than another, and if one type of participant is better represented in one SSO rather than the other, the dynamics and outcomes of those two SSOs may differ as well.

In this article, I will describe the different types of participants that are active in standard setting, the goals that are common to each category, and the SSO benefits that are likely to be of greatest interest to each. I will then lay out guidelines intended to assist anyone evaluating whether a given SSO is appropriate to join, with a special emphasis on those that are interested in joining SSOs that set standards for the ICT industry.

I The Generic SSO Value Proposition

A reasonable threshold question to ask is why anyone should join an SSO at all? Given that participation can be expensive and time consuming, why not simply utilize the standards that others develop and that the market has already begun adopting?

In point of fact, playing a passive role is what many choose to do, thereby saving on time and expense, as well as avoiding the risk of early-adopting a standard that may ultimately fail in the marketplace. The

fact that so many tens of thousands of universities, government agencies, individuals and companies do choose to participate actively in voluntary, consensus-based standard setting activities, however, offers clear proof that significant benefits may be gained from diving into the standard setting process rather than standing aside.

Benefits of participation. Those benefits include the following, among others:

- **Strategic Influence.** Those that participate in the governing bodies of SSOs decide which standards will be created, and in what order, and to serve what purposes.
- **Technical influence.** After a working group has been chartered, there are still many decisions to be made among technical details, architectural approaches and final results. The members that join the working group make these decisions, subject only to such level of oversight, if any, as the given SSO may provide or require. A member that successfully nominates the Chair of such a working group gains additional influence over the result.
- **Early access.** While many SSOs (and especially SDOs) allow some degree of public access to the ongoing work of a working group, others do not allow the public to review a specification until it is in final draft form, or has been actually adopted. Members have early access to information relating to an evolving standard, and can use that knowledge contemporaneously to formulate and implement their own design and product strategies based on their knowledge of where a draft specification is heading, while those on the outside must wait until a public draft is released to make the same decisions. As a result, SSO members that can make use of early information enjoy a strategic advantage that non-members do not share.
- **Training.** The representatives of vendors and others that participate in a design process frequently gain valuable experience in the process. Many SSOs also conduct training seminars, produce white papers, and offer other benefits that provide useful information and training opportunities for member employees.
- **Messaging.** Corporations often signal and emphasize their commitment to markets, technologies or architectures by joining the SSOs that are creating the standards that are essential to the strategic direction being underlined. When vendors do so, they typically join the SSO at the highest (and most expensive) available level of membership, to emphasize their point.
- **Joint marketing.** Many consortia engage in marketing as well as technical activities. While consortium budgets are virtually never sufficient to perform marketing on a corporate scale, they do provide a venue within which marketing messages and strategies can be agreed upon and coordinated, within which collateral materials can be created, and whereby related costs can be shared.
- **Certification and branding.** SSOs can also provide a venue for other supporting activities, such as "plugfests" that permit implementers to determine whether their products or services conform to the standards created by the SSO, and whereby such compliance can be branded, using trademarks created and owned by the SSO, and licensed to those that successfully pass the required tests.¹

SSOs are sensitive to the fact that no one can be compelled to become a member, and therefore structure themselves and operate in such a way as to provide an attractive value proposition for all constituencies that are needed to create both effective standards as well as to provide enough early adopters to convince non-members that adopting the standards of the SSO is a sensible thing to do.

II Personalizing the Value Proposition

While SSOs offer a broad range of benefits, those benefits are not uniformly attractive to all types of members with an interest in standards. As a result, it is helpful for anyone considering participation in the

¹ For more on certification and branding, see the July, 2006 issue of the Consortium Standards Bulletin, and particularly the Feature Article in that issue: Updegrove, Andrew, [Standards Certification and Branding in the Information and Communications Technology Sector](http://205.134.252.89/bulletins/july06.php#feature), ConsortiumInfo.org, Consortium Standards Bulletin, Vol. V, No. 7 (January 2005), at < <http://205.134.252.89/bulletins/july06.php#feature>>, and October 27 – 29, 2006.

standard setting process to identify where they fit into the standards ecosystem in order to identify those benefits that are likely to be important to them in accomplishing their goals. Otherwise, the process of identifying which SSO to join, and what category of membership to seek, becomes an inexact exercise that may result in overpayment, or failure to achieve desired results.

Placing oneself in the standards ecosystem involves determining a number of factors, including *relationship to standards*, *industry identity*, and desired *role* in the standard setting process, each of which is addressed in detail below.

Relationship to Standards. Broadly speaking, there are two primary relationships that anyone can have to a given standard: as a *proponent*, and as a *consumer*.² Standards are developed by those that have each type of relationship the standard under development, but these two categories of developers do not share all of the same concerns and goals. As a result, the decisions that each may make in relation to a given SSO are likely to be in some respects different.³

Standards proponents hope to reap benefits from specific standards coming into being, and (usually) from those standards being developed to meet specific criteria. Those benefits include the development of new markets for goods and services, maintaining or attacking the advantages enjoyed by existing market incumbents, and the more profitable extension of existing capabilities and revenue sources into the future (all of which will be discussed in greater detail below). As a result, proponents are likely to play more active roles in SSOs, and are invariably the founders of new consortia.

Consumers as a generality have less interest in which specific standards development efforts are launched, but are interested in whether and how they can employ those standards in their businesses or other affairs.⁴ As a result, they tend to be less concerned with the future activities of an SSO, and more interested in aspects such as early access to information and training opportunities. Of course, a given SSO will often be relevant to a given entity in its capacity as both a proponent and as a consumer.⁵

This distinction between proponents and consumers is fundamental to almost everything that follows below, and will dictate in large measure not only which SSOs will be attractive to a given potential member, but also what membership level it will select, and in which activities it will participate.

² The terminology used to describe the relationship of standards to standards implementers differs by discipline. For example, to an economist, someone using a standardized product is a "consumer," while to those actually developing an ICT standard, the same person is referred to as an "end-user." Both camps are likely to refer to those that create a standard as a "developer," but as noted in this article, some developers have purely utilitarian goals, while others have strategic intentions as well that are better indicated by the word I have chosen to use in this article: *proponents*. Moreover, dividing discussion between "developers" and "consumers" obscures the fact that (not surprisingly) the developers of standards are often those that use them as well.

³ To give a single example, an SSO's reputation for neutrality is usually a positive to a consumer, but may be a negative to a proponent that hopes to create a standard. All else being equal, as between two SSOs that could each serve as capably as the host for a new standards project, the proponent of that project will choose the SSO in which it enjoys the greater degree of influence.

⁴ There are many exceptions to the generality of this statement, and particularly so in the area of information technology, where the availability and nature of appropriate standards can be essential to the effective operation of a company. Although SSOs are more commonly created by proponents, there are exceptions to this statement as well. For example, the CAD Framework Initiative (no longer active) was created by CAD software users in an effort to influence the behavior of CAD suppliers. More recently, the [Jericho Forum](#) was formed by standards consumers who desired better security solutions, and the [Coalition for eHealth Standards](#) (CHeS) was created by hospitals to set common product identification and other standards that their suppliers would be required to adopt in order to lower costs and increase efficiencies in hospital supply purchasing.

⁵ The decision for a large company to join an SSO is usually made at a divisional or other operating unit level, based upon the needs of the unit that processed the application, rather than at the enterprise level, based on all of the needs of the applicant. As a result, such a member often uses its membership in only one capacity (proponent or consumer) through poor internal communication, thereby obtaining less benefit from its membership fee than need be the case.

Identity. SSO participants also fall into constituencies defined by their identity, with certain categories of participant predominating. Not surprisingly, the interests and goals of these discrete groups will differ to varying degrees one from the other. The groups that most frequently participate in SSOs (in rough order of numbers of participants) are: *vendors and other commercial entities, universities and colleges, governmental bodies of all levels, individuals, and consumer groups and other non-profits.*

While the goals of a potential member may be obvious to it, the goals of other types of members may be less so. If a given SSO is dominated by members of an identity other than that of the potential member evaluating that SSO, then the SSO in question may prove to be a less fruitful venue for participation. Understanding where all types of participants in the standard setting process are coming from is therefore an important aspect of choosing an SSO, and in knowing what to expect after joining.

Vendors and other commercial entities. This category forms the largest, most motivated, and most economically influential category of members in most SSOs. This is especially true in the ICT sector, where standards are particularly pervasive and essential, and where new products, markets and services emerge and grow obsolete more quickly than in traditional industry. As a result, standards tend to more frequently have strategic interest, and there is therefore a particularly high degree of participation by standards proponents, as compared to standards consumers.⁶

This is particularly true among vendors and other commercial members, because the benefits of participation are usually higher for the vendor proponents than vendor consumers. In consequence, it is easier to recruit proponents (and particularly so in the early days of a consortium), and SSOs often have to work harder to attract consumers as members, sometimes creating different classes of membership, or even lower dues within the same class of members, for non-vendor members.⁷

Universities. University and college budgets for professorial participation in SSOs are limited (and SSOs often provide discounted rates to encourage academic participation in consequence), both in respect of membership fees as well as attendant costs, such as travel. While academic representatives do not often have direct economic stakes in the outcome of standards development efforts, they do have professional interests in what standards are set, and how they are structured. In this sense, they are sometimes non-commercial proponents.

Universities and colleges are standards consumers as well, and some institutions (such as most state and some private universities) are very substantial enterprises in their own right. As a result, two different constituencies exist within such institutions, and each can have different evaluation and approval processes, depending upon the participating group (academic department, administration, IT services, etc.), the goals for participation, and its sources of revenue.

In the case of academic staff, standards development may be related to, or an extension of, research. In this case, staff may wish to participate to observe, to influence, or to discuss the development of the standards at hand, and participation would focus on those organizations that are active in disciplines of academic interest, such as computer science and geospatial information. The costs of participation may be funded by the general departmental budget, or derive from grants or other external funding.

⁶ Moreover, the participation by ICT standards proponents is often steroidal in contrast to that of proponents in more traditional industries, where the progress of standards development activities can often be more relaxed, collegial and consensual.

⁷ The high strategic value of ICT standards is one of the major reasons for the emergence and predominance of consortia in this sector. At the time when consortia first began to proliferate, SDOs were commonly perceived by ICT vendors to be too slow moving, and too subject to influence by non-vendors. The solution was to simply create new, more easily controlled, and more flexibly structured entities to set ICT standards. With time, however, many consortia have become as well-established, open and respected as their accredited brethren. For more on the rise of consortia and the continuing process of process evolution in standard setting, see: Updegrove, Andrew, [*Standards, Cycles and Evolution: Learning from the Past in a New Era of Change*](#), ConsortiumInfo.org, Consortium Standards Bulletin, Vol. IV, No. 5 (May 2005), at <<http://www.consortiuminfo.org/bulletins/aug05.php#feature>>, and sources cited therein.

For infrastructural staff, goals will be similar to those of other standards consumers, and costs will be allocated from the general operating budget. As a generality, the larger the institution, the more complex the infrastructure it will have, the better-paid its senior staff will be, and the more likely it will be that individual employees (e.g., IT staff) will wish to have the same opportunity to participate in SSOs as they would enjoy in the commercial sector.

Government. Governmental entities have the unique role of being not only standards consumers and proponents, but also standards developers in their own right, through the adoption of laws and regulations that function as standards. Moreover, they enjoy a symbiotic relationship with SSOs, in that they also adopt SSOs standards into regulations by referencing and requiring compliance with those standards. Governments therefore participate in SSOs at every level, from legislators and staff that liaise with SSOs, to federal agencies that are required to utilize SSO standards,⁸ to state agencies, to cities, towns and counties. Such participation is particularly common in the ITC sector.

When government entities participate in SSOs as consumers, they rarely join at levels that would entitle them to act on Boards of Directors or in other control functions, due to the relationship of government with the private sector. However, government agencies sometimes fund testbed projects or other standards-related activities, thereby providing a level of funding not often available through any other means.⁹

Individuals. While the majority of consortia either do not permit individuals to become members, or do not make it economically attractive to do so, many SDOs offer memberships with meaningful participation rights in exchange for modest membership fees. This is due in part to the accreditation rules under which SDOs operate (which stress openness of access), and in part because some SDOs (such as the IEEE) are also professional associations.

Individuals may participate in SSOs at the behest of their employers, with the knowledge and cooperation of their employers, or completely independent of their "day jobs." Their conduct in standard setting may therefore be independent, or very much at the direction of their employers.

In the latter case, there may be little difference in the behavior of a nominally individual member and a representative of a commercial member. In the former case, however, the motivations of the individual may vary widely.

Individuals that participate in standard setting other than in the scope of their employment do so for a variety of reasons, including education, the ability to make a difference within their areas of expertise, to network, and out of pure professional interest. However, their ability to participate in face-to-face activities is likely to be less than that of individuals whose time is released and whose expenses are being paid by their employers. Nonetheless, where they participate in SSOs that have a "one member, one vote," rule, the influence of individuals over outcomes can be real.

Consumer groups and other non-profits. Not surprisingly, it is a challenge to attract consumers, or their representatives, to become members of SSOs, even where they set standards that impact non-commercial end-users. Individuals are rarely interested in such activities in their capacity as standards consumers, and consumer groups do not have the resources to participate in the many SSOs that do have such an impact. Nevertheless, there is participation by such groups in many SSOs (and

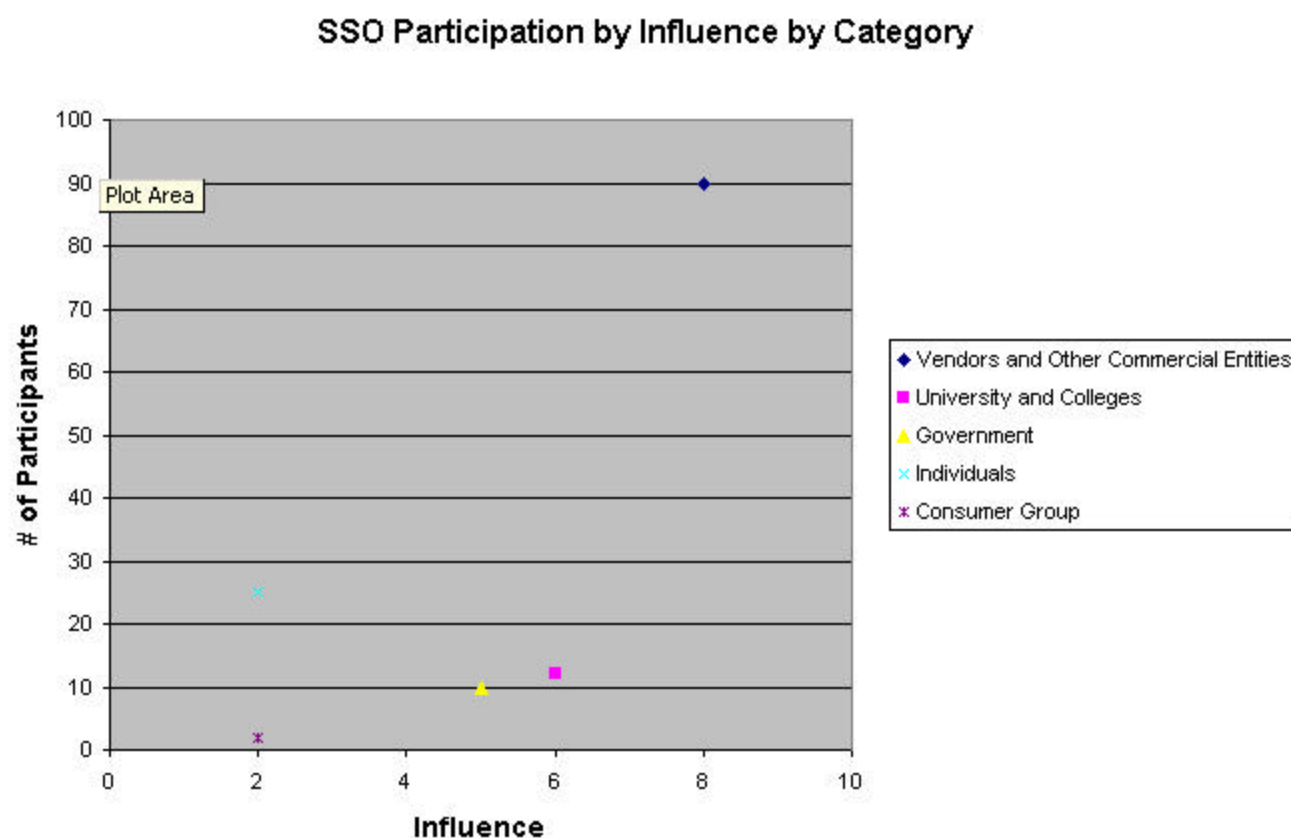
⁸In the United States, the Technology Transfer and Advancement Act of 1995 and the related Office of Management and Budget Circular A-119 require the Federal Agencies to utilize private sector, as compared to "government unique," standards wherever possible, as well as to participate in their development. For more on the relationship of the U.S. Federal government to standard setting, see: Updegrove, Andrew, [*A Work in Progress: Government Support for Standard Setting in the United States: 1990 – 2004*](#), ConsortiumInfo.org, Consortium Standards Bulletin, Vol. IV, No. 1 (January 2005), at < <http://www.consortiuminfo.org/bulletins/jan05.php#feature>>, and sources cited therein.

⁹ For more on the interaction between government and SSOs, see: Updegrove, Andrew, [*Understanding the Roles and Optimizing the Relationships of Governments and SSOs*](#), ConsortiumInfo.org, Consortium Standards Bulletin, Vol. IV, No. 8 (August 2005), at < <http://www.consortiuminfo.org/bulletins/aug05.php#feature>>, and sources cited therein.

particularly SDOs, which are more interested in attracting them), and particularly where the standards being created are intended to support (or, if deficient, could have a negative impact) on health, safety, or other core areas of consumer concern.

A variety of other non-profit groups may participate in SSOs as well. These organizations may be research groups, trade associations, and (most frequently) other SSOs, which sometimes trade memberships on a no-fee basis, and often maintain less formal liaison relationships under simple memoranda of understanding.

Influence and representation: The exact mix of member identities will vary widely from SSO to SSO, depending upon factors such as the domain being addressed (e.g., education vs. office productivity software) they address. That being said, the number and influence of participants, by type, in a typical ITC SSO might be graphically represented as follows:



SSO participation roles. After determining one's relationship to standards and identity for purposes of this exercise, it becomes possible to put those determinations to work by deciding what type of ***role*** in the standard setting process should be sought in order to make participation worthwhile.

Like Caesar's Gaul, the universe of standard setting participants can be divided into three parts: those for whom SSO participation is highly important (or even essential) to their business (or other) success, those for whom SSO participation is a logical extension of their technical, promotional, research or other activities, and those for whom participation is elective or optional.

One may logically think of these three groups as the ***Leaders***, the ***Followers***, and the ***Spectators***. Each of these groups has different goals, and therefore needs to find an SSO that provides the tools and opportunities to achieve those goals.

The Leaders. Leaders may be thought of as those members for whom participation is most critical, based upon a desire to accomplish one or more of the following:

- **Market creation:** This is the most critical strategic role that a standard can play: to create a new market which would not exist "but for" broad industry agreement on a new standard (e.g., to enable high definition television, or to make wireless networks possible).
- **Market conditioning:** Few single companies have the resources required to condition a market to demand a new product (WiFi chips and routers), service (WiMax) or computing model (service oriented architecture). However, combining the marketing resources of multiple companies to promote any of these – or simply announcing that the majority of the big players in an industry have committed to the new offering – can achieve that goal more reliably and at far lower per-company cost.
- **Collaborative R&D:** In some cases, using a consortium as an extension of the members' own research and development efforts, backed by the commitment to utilize the standardized product of that R&D, can create high-quality technology at a far lower per-member cost (examples of this process include the original Sematech, for chip design, the X Consortium for the X Windows system, and the many open source projects in existence today).
- **Ejecting an incumbent:** Standards efforts have frequently been used in an effort to displace a powerful incumbent that has succeeded in creating a monopoly, or near-monopoly, position in a product area based upon a "de facto" standard controlled by it alone.¹⁰

Not surprisingly, companies that find themselves faced with such challenges are often willing to form a new consortium to accomplish the task at hand if they conclude that no existing SDO or consortium exists that would be adequate or appropriate to the task.¹¹ The same companies are often willing to make a larger investment in the creation of a new organization than is borne by those that join the same organization at a later date, and also assume a greater risk that their investment will not prove to be rewarded. Other companies with the same needs typically are the first to join such a consortium after it has been announced by its founders.

Some of the world's largest technology companies (e.g., IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Intel and Motorola) have been particularly active in forming consortia, as so many aspects of their businesses are dependent on the predictable adoption of new standards and business models. However, many consortia have been launched by groups of smaller companies as well, particularly where a technology is very new, or is relevant to a smaller market niche. These founders have usually concluded that such an effort provided the only way in which their meager resources could be deployed to reach an ambitious and essential goal.¹²

While forming a new consortium requires expenditures of time and expense by the founders, the strategic price of not creating a particular standard when it is needed can far outweigh the out of pocket and time costs attendant in taking part. Costs of non-participation can include missing the opportunity to steer a standard in the manner most compatible with a company's product offerings, falling behind competitors, or failing to head off broad adoption of a second standard not conducive to a company's legacy offerings.

¹⁰ In fact, far more efforts to unseat incumbents through the use of standards have failed than succeeded, and particularly where the target of the initiative was Microsoft. Currently, the OpenDocument Format, which enjoys the strong support of IBM and Sun, among others, is showing surprising momentum in its effort to provide an alternative to Microsoft document formats.

¹¹ There are many variations on this theme besides forming a new standard setting organization. For example, IEEE does not currently include promotional or certification activities within its mandate. However, instead of forming a new consortium to both develop standards as well as perform these additional services, the corporate members of several IEEE 802 wireless standard working groups have formed and funded a series of external organizations (e.g., the [WiFi Alliance](#), [WiMedia Alliance](#) and the [WiMax Forum](#)) to take up these supporting tasks.

¹² For more on when and how to create a consortium, see the ConsortiumInfo.org Essential Guide to Standard Setting and Consortia section entitled [Forming a Consortium](#), at <http://www.consortiuminfo.org/forming/>.

For better or worse, "Leader" companies in this category sometimes expect to control the strategy and direction of a consortium for some period of time, rather than to merely participate in its activities. Typically, they are willing to pay the highest fees in order to do so, and most consortia rely disproportionately on such companies for their operating budgets, particularly in their early years of operation.¹³

Not surprisingly, "Leader" members are almost invariably vendors.

The Followers. Most SSO members (Leaders included) hope to enjoy some subset of the following types of benefits:

- influencing the direction in which a given standard or group of standards may evolve
- receiving advance knowledge of the direction in which standard setting efforts are heading, and thus being able to launch new compliant products before non-participants
- gaining early access to test suite software and certification testing of compliant products
- collaborating on creating "white papers", commissioning analysis, agreeing upon joint marketing programs, creating consortium presence at trade shows, and other cooperative efforts
- sending staff to consortium meetings to receive training and stay abreast of new techniques and technology
- publicly demonstrating commitment to specific new markets and technologies
- influencing others in the industry
- meeting other interested players in a given niche and forming partnerships with other companies

Companies in this group usually wish to have full rights of participation in all activities, but may be less interested in influencing the strategic direction of the efforts and goals of the organization.

Follower members that want voting rights most typically are vendors and other commercial entities, governmental entities, universities and colleges, with government and academic members often receiving the same benefits for lower fees. Where memberships are inexpensive, individuals may be found in this category as well

Not all of the benefits listed above are of interest to companies that are more interested in participation than influence. Most consortia therefore offer a less expensive class of membership that permits attendance and participation in all activities, but not the right to vote.

Follower companies that do not care about voting can be of any type, as well as non-profit groups and individuals.

The Spectators. For many companies and individuals, there is a desire to know what a given consortium is doing or producing, but little need to dedicate any significant degree of resources to the effort. Typically, this group comprises academics and commercial entities of any type (e.g., developers, consultants, integrators, etc.). Such members wish to acquire, through an appropriate category of membership, knowledge of:

- new standards as they are released
- who has joined a given standards or promotional effort
- the nature of evolving "best practices"
- which standards are likely to be adopted and which not

¹³ Whether or not the founders of a consortium seek to exercise disproportionate control varies greatly, depending on whether they have specific ideas about the standards to be created, as compared to the generic need for such standards, their level of sophistication and experience, and other factors. As a practical matter, any such control tends to dissipate quickly (as to a given company or companies) as membership increases, unless the consortium has been overtly structured to avoid that result.

Many SSOs create an inexpensive class of membership to satisfy such needs. The rights of such a class are typically limited to the distribution of information (increasingly in electronic information only). In some cases, this distribution is in advance of public disclosure.

III Evaluating a Specific Consortium

Prior to joining an SSO, it is helpful to define the goals of participation with respect to a given areas of standardization (which are likely to vary from case to case), in order to generate a list of what is important to find in an SSO, and what is not. Where an important goal is to have influence on which standards efforts are launched, choosing among available options is particularly important. In some cases, this exercise can lead to a conclusion that no existing SSO is appropriate for the task at hand, and that the only alternative is to consider whether forming a new organization is necessary. Where this is the conclusion, the next step is to determine whether such a project would be feasible, taking into account whether there would be sufficient interest among other potential members, and the time, costs and effort required relative to the anticipated benefits of the exercise.

Defining Goals Not surprisingly, the first step to take in evaluating a specific SSO (and especially if there is more than one organization to choose from in a given area) is to define the goals that participation should serve. Only after those goals have been outlined can the adequacy of a given SSO be determined to meet the current need. Often (for example) an SSO may be primarily technical in focus, while a prospective member's needs may be entirely promotional. In such a case, the value of participation may be insufficient to justify the costs, particularly if no lower cost membership levels are offered. Again, where two alternatives exist, one SSO may be primarily promotional in nature, while the other may focus principally on standard setting. Depending on a member's specific needs, it may suffice to join one or the other, or on occasion to commit to both.¹⁴

It is especially important to determine what role will need to be assumed in an SSO in order to achieve the goals of joining. If being a Spectator is sufficient, then many more SSOs will meet minimum standards for participation. However, if being a Leader is essential, then many more criteria will become important in evaluating an SSO, such as effectiveness and speed of the technical process, whether it would be easy to gain support for launching a standards development project of particular interest, and whether the SSO includes promotion as well as development of standards in its mission.

Similarly, while it may be that an SSO exists in the desired technical area, its current strategic direction may not be compatible with the prospective member's own strategic goals. In such a case, it may not be worth joining any organization at all, or it may be wise to join at the highest (and most expensive) level with marketing partners, in an effort to persuade the existing members of the desirability of steering the organization in a different direction.¹⁵

SSO characteristics: Once armed with a list of goals, it might be assumed that determining which SSO to join would be an easy task. Unfortunately, there are many differences between SSOs, most of which are meaningful. Some of these differences are easy to find (e.g., costs of participation) simply by reviewing the SSO's Website, while others are more difficult investigation (e.g., how "open" is the process of the SSO, and is that process dominated by a group of companies?). Some of the more important questions to ask are explored below.

¹⁴ Recall the example in note 11 above of the separate entities that have grown up around various IEEE 802 wireless standard working groups. Members of most identities discussed above would be interested solely in the IEEE working group, while vendors would be very interested in participating in the related alliances or forums that create and promote certification tests and brands.

¹⁵ It is an unfortunate reality of standard setting that not all participants join SSOs with the intention of furthering their standards development and promotional effort. When a given standard can threaten the status quo, those with a vested interest in the current state of affairs have been known to join SSOs solely for the purpose for blocking or delaying the release of the standard in question. Others may join simply to keep an eye on what is happening in an SSO that they believe to be setting standards that may threaten them. Typically, this last group joins at a lower class of membership that provides information, but not meaningful participation.

What is the fully burdened cost of membership? Membership fees for SSOs range from the trivial to the breathtaking, with the highest and most influential level of corporate membership level in a consortium typically costing from \$10,000 to \$60,000. A modest number of consortia have dues ranging up to \$200,000, and a few require the payment of dues of \$1 million or more. However, as discussed below, almost all consortia, and many SDOs, have multiple membership classes, and the differences in costs between classes of membership can be very great. As a result, meaningful participation is often possible even in an expensive SSO for a price that is far less than is required to join at the highest membership level.

But dues may represent only a part of the total economic commitment required to meet a member's objectives. For example, if full participation involves regular in-person attendance at meetings, travel expenses can become substantial. Such participation can be mandated by less-obvious considerations, such as the SSO's rules of participation. For example, in order to ensure continuity and avoid confusion and repetition, some SSOs condition voting or verbal participation on consistent attendance (e.g., in order to fully participate, a member representative must have attended at least two out of the three preceding meetings). Some SSOs also require the dedication of the part or full time services of one or more employees as a requirement of the highest class(es) of membership.

In the case of a small company, the requirement to "second" one or more valued technical employees can be more burdensome than the dues obligations of membership. On the other hand, some companies would regard the same requirement as a valued perk, as the employee involved might exercise great influence over the technical result, as well as become intimately familiar with the optimal way of utilizing the standards which result from participation.¹⁶

In recent years, participation in many SSOs, and particularly consortia in the ITC sector, has become less expensive, due to the development and deployment of sophisticated Web-based platforms that enable collaborative efforts, list serves for communication, archives for document access, and electronic platforms for voting. As a result, much can be accomplished remotely and more quickly than was the case when such activities could only occur through face-to-face meetings, through conference calls, and via the mails.¹⁷

Regardless of such new efficiencies, a prudent decision to participate in a given consortium cannot be made until all aspects of productive participation have been identified, and the real cost of that participation weighed against the prospective benefits.

How open is the SSO? While there are variations in specific practices among SDOs, their processes and rules of admission are reasonably uniform, due to the requirements for accreditation that must be observed.¹⁸

Consortia, on the other hand, are free to set their own rules, and those rules can vary considerably. Increasingly, most consortia operate on a basis that is very similar to SDOs, accepting any qualified entity or individual as a member, and operating under rules that do not give disproportionate influence to any class or type of members. As a result, the most noticeable difference between well-respected consortia

¹⁶ The track record of SSOs that have required seconding of employees is at best mixed, with many members not following through on their obligations. Often, these requirements are dropped after reality sets in. As a result, when evaluating a new SSO, it is wise to consider whether the organization is likely to be successful in achieving its goals if the seconded employees do not materialize as required.

¹⁷ The current market leader in developing and hosting SSO Websites appears to be Kavi, Inc. A [list of the SSOs](http://www.kavi.com/clients/) that it currently serves can be found at < <http://www.kavi.com/clients/>>.

¹⁸ In the United States, the accrediting body is the American National Standards Institute, or ANSI, which both sets the criteria for accreditation as well as conducts audits to confirm compliance. An [overview](http://www.ansi.org/conformity_assessment/overview/overview.aspx?menuid=4) of ANSI's accreditation services, with links to more specific information, can be found at <http://www.ansi.org/conformity_assessment/overview/overview.aspx?menuid=4>

such as the W3C and OASIS is that consortia are almost always global in membership, while SDOs have traditionally been national in scope.¹⁹

On the other hand, there remain many non-accredited organizations that are far less open.²⁰ One popular non-incorporated model for such an entity employs what is usually called a "promoter agreement," which may be entered into by invitation only. The promoter agreement provides a cross license among all adopters as to any patent claims that may be infringed by the implementation of the standards created by the group, and each promoter is permitted in turn to sublicense those rights to implementers under an "adopter agreement." While this mechanism provides an effective and efficient means for addressing intellectual property rights (IPR) issues, the invitation-only foundation upon which such organizations are built does not lead to what would be considered to be "open standards."

Between these two extremes there are many gradations of influence to be found, including organizations with membership criteria that may be more restrictive than necessary, that have boards of directors that are not as accessible to later-joining members, that are not representative of all relevant constituencies, or that have other flaws that make them less conducive to creating "open standards."²¹

Will the SSO (or the standard of interest) be successful? It is of course important to evaluate whether a consortium which otherwise appears appropriate is likely to be able to deliver on its promises. As with any other type of non-profit or for-profit enterprise, some SSOs are better structured, governed, managed, effective, and stable than others. Where an SSO has earned respect and enjoys a solid reputation for producing standards that are usually widely adopted, it can be assumed that participation is more likely to be rewarding without spending a great deal of time investigating such questions. Obviously, where the reputation of an SSO is just the opposite, it is more likely that it would be a waste of time to join. However, such a conclusion should not be reached lightly, since SSOs are just as likely to be attacked or criticized unfairly as are the commercial entities that join them.

Joining a new or recently formed consortium that has not yet earned a reputation necessarily requires more innovative diligence. The level of investigation will vary, depending on the goals of the consortium. For example, if the mission of the consortium is primarily to promote an existing technology, its success will largely be a product of whether it is well run and can attract a sufficient number of members to fund its programs and cooperate on its initiatives. The goals of the prospective member will also factor into the evaluation: if those goals are primarily educational and independent of whether or not the primary goals of the consortium are achieved, then the ultimate success or failure of the consortium may be irrelevant, so long as the quality of the programming is high.

Conversely, a company faced with the necessity of adopting one competing standard over another can ill afford to back the wrong technological horse. In short, the degree of diligence to perform in investigating a given SSO will generally be proportional to whether the applicant wishes to be a Spectator, Follower or Leader. The choice becomes particularly acute where there is already a standards war in process, because the consequences of backing the wrong technology can be severe.²²

¹⁹ Even this distinction is becoming increasingly blurred, as SDOs such as the IEEE and ASTM have become global in their memberships.

²⁰ Historically, such organizations were often named Special Interest Groups (SIGs), Alliances or Forums. However, these names are often now adopted by consortia with very open policies, and therefore no conclusions should be drawn from the particular name adopted by any non-accredited organization.

²¹ I have worked with over 75 consortia, and helped to form most of them. In my experience, while many founders of consortia are initially concerned with ensuring that control of the new organization stays in the hands of those that are likely to pursue the path the founders have in mind, these restrictions are almost always eased (often quite quickly) when the need for such concerns proves to be unfounded, and as the benefits of openness (including as regards recruitment) become more evident.

²² The classic example of the type of situation that a standards effort (and everyone else) hopes to avoid is the battle that raged for years between the Betamax and VHS video formats. Until that struggle was resolved in favor of VHS, vendors and consumers alike were trapped in a confusing and expensive limbo of duplicative inventories, more meager selections, and higher costs of doing business. Many of the

Trying to decide whether a given SSO that has yet to establish a reputation is likely to launch successful standards can be informed by looking into the following factors:

- **Positive support:** Which vendors have already aligned themselves with a given standard or SSO? If the most significant players in the industry are backers, then, all other things being equal, the likelihood of the SSO's or standard's ultimate success is high, as potential implementers will be likely to believe that wide adoption is a foregone conclusion.
- **Non-support:** as significantly, which companies are not backing the standard? At times, the bulk of the market may be expected to align itself against a given company, or group of companies. Whether or not the challengers will succeed in displacing a powerful incumbent is particularly hard to predict (the answer is most often in the negative).
- **How open is the SSO?** If one (or a small number of allied companies) have locked in control of an SSO, then there is the potential for the standards generated by the organization to be perpetually slanted in favor of the control group. Whether or not this skewing of result in fact occurs, the consortium's standards may be expected to be regarded with suspicion, and may not be widely adopted in consequence.
- **Staff resources:** How well is the SSO funded and staffed? While there are examples of all-volunteer consortia that have been quite successful, this type of organization requires greater commitment by both members as well as their representatives. If a consortium that lacks paid staff also lacks a culture of strong committee chairs, timely process and continuity of membership, its efforts are vulnerable to failure.
- **Member resources:** While SSO staff support the standards development process, standards are developed by SSO member representatives. If existing member participation in the technical process is not robust, then the standards that the SSO creates may not only be of poor quality, but they will be very unlikely to be widely adopted as well.
- **Funding:** How realistic is the SSO's budget? While vigorous member participation is the most important resource factor, and standards development can be a very low budget operation, certain actions essential to success do require funding.²³
- **Leadership:** How strong and committed are the SSOs leaders? The most successful SSOs often have well-recognized, trusted and inspirational leaders (Tim Berners-Lee, of the World Wide Web Consortium and Jim Thomas, of ASTM, an SDO, are current examples, while Robert Scheifler, of the former X Consortium, was instrumental to the success of that SSO). In the often rough and tumble world of technology, a leader whose authority is respected is vital to promoting the vision of the SSO and to maintaining strong recruitment.
- **Technical process:** Is the process efficient and rapid? Are the working group chairs fair, respected and effective?
- **Strategy:** How appropriate are the consortium's strategy and plan of execution? Are they adequate to achieve its goals? Are they likely to gather wide support, or to prove to be a lightning rod for opposition?
- **IPR policy:** How mainstream is the intellectual property rights policy of the organization? If it veers too far towards stringency, many companies important to success may refuse to join. If it steers too far in the other direction, the standards developed will be more vulnerable to "submarine" patents. If open source implementations of the standards are important, is the IPR policy conducive to such implementations?
- **Stability:** Some consortia are formed to create a single standard, and then hand that standard off to another SSO for long-term maintenance, while others are formed, like most SDOs, to

same companies are now engaging in a replay of the same debacle, this time lining up behind two competing DVD standards: HD-DVD and Blu-Ray. For more on the nature and consequences of standards wars, see: the [March 2006](#) issue of the Consortium Standards Bulletin at <<http://www.consortiuminfo.org/bulletins/mar06.php>>, and particularly Updegrove, Andrew, [Standards Wars: Situations, Strategies and Outcomes](#), ConsortiumInfo.org, Consortium Standards Bulletin, Vol. V, No. 3 (March 2006), at <<http://www.consortiuminfo.org/bulletins/mar06.php#feature>> and sources cited therein.

²³ Standards development in consortia is a surprisingly lean enterprise. The vast majority of the successful consortia with which I have worked have had budgets of well under \$1 million a year, and large budgets have not correlated highly with success, in comparison to factors such as member commitment and the existence of a non-participating incumbent(s).

provide a long-term venue for developing standards within a certain domain. Often, a standards-related goal may only be achieved through creating multiple related standards, together with certification tests and a branding program, all of which will require long-term maintenance. In such cases, it is important to compare long-term goals with the capabilities of a given SSO, to determine whether it is likely to have the degree of longevity of existence that is needed to justify the investment of participation.

Unfortunately, there is no single source of information to consult for answers to most of these questions. Moreover, internal and external information about SSOs is as prone to be inflated or misrepresented as any other information that arises in the technology industry. As in all commercial situations, it can be expected that a given SSO and its members will accentuate the positives, while nay-sayers will resort to distortion. Fortunately, the larger consortia attract sufficient attention from the press and analysts that at least some reasonably informed third party verification can be found for the contentions of one camp or the other. With a smaller SSO, a dialogue directly with the Executive Director or another member of the organization may be the most productive way to gain a sense of the strength and prospects of the effort.

Where information gathering proves inconclusive and upper level memberships are expensive, a useful strategy can be to join at a lower membership level, and subsequently upgrade (even before the initial membership year is completed) to a higher level, if expectations are met.

IV Joining an SSO

When all the information has been gathered that is appropriate, a final question remains: what class of membership in a given SSO is most likely to lead to the satisfaction of the applicant's goals?

While the range of SSO structures is broad, the good news is that most organizations have multiple membership classes offering a broad array of rights on a sliding cost scale. For organizations with high membership fees, these fees are often scaled proportionately to the revenues of corporate members, and/or discounted for government and non-profit members.

Consortia are particularly likely to offer multiple membership classes, in order to provide a class of membership with a value proposition that is commensurate with the economic realities of as large and wide a pool of potential members as possible. A typical range of membership classes to be found in a standard-setting consortium with a large number of membership classes, and the principal benefits and obligations of each class, would often be similar to the following

- **Strategic Member:** Guaranteed board seat, or reasonable likelihood of eventually gaining one, and all privileges of lower categories of membership (other than the right to vote for additional directors); can nominate officers and committee chairs
- **Appeals to:** Companies (usually vendors) that wish to set the strategic objectives of the consortium
- **Cost:** \$25,000 - \$50,000, depending on revenues of member

- **Technical Committee Member:** Full, voting participation in all technical and marketing processes; as a class, can elect three board representatives (perhaps with the type of member specified, to ensure diversity of representation); may be invited to provide a committee chair; all privileges of lower categories of membership
- **Appeals to:** Companies, universities, colleges, and government agencies wishing to influence the standards that are developed
- **Cost:** \$15,000 - \$25,000, depending on revenues or type of member

- **Advisory Member:** Full non-voting participation in all technical and marketing processes; all privileges of lower categories of membership
- **Appeals to:** All types of members that wish to participate in, but do not need to influence, the technical process, and that wish to have the most timely information regarding technical direction and results
- **Cost:** \$10,000 (regardless of revenues)

- **Informational Member:** Receives periodic information regarding technical and other programs, as well as standards as they are made public
- **Appeals to:** Academics, consultants, analysts, individuals
- **Cost:** \$250 (regardless of revenues)

Each of the classes described above is crafted to appeal to potential members with a particular focus. Using the categories referred to in Section II above, Leaders will always join at the Strategic or Technical Committee membership levels, Followers will usually join at the Technical Committee or Advisory Member levels, and Spectators will join as Advisory or Informational Members.

In addition to differentiating by revenues in order to broaden participation, consortia will at times provide the same benefits to different types of companies for radically different prices. This occurs where the participation of a particular type of company is essential, but the market motivation of participation for that type of company is low. One frequent example occurs in consortia that are formed by hardware companies to achieve important strategic goals. Achieving these goals often depends upon securing the cooperation of independent software vendors (ISVs) who have far less reason to be interested in whether or not those goals are attained. In such a situation, hardware vendors may pay very large dues, while ISVs may be invited to become members at little or no cost.

A final aspect to consider is the "bundled" value of benefits at a given level of membership, as compared to the per-service cost of the various activities that a prospective member may be interested in pursuing. For example, the top level of membership may entitle a member to:

- send multiple representatives to meetings without payment of attendance fees
- receive free delivery of test suites to achieve compliance with consortium standards
- free use of consortium logos and trademarks in connection with certified products
- free receipt of consortium-commissioned analysis, whitepapers and the like
- listing of compliant products at no charge at the consortium Website and elsewhere

The next lowest class may provide all or some of the same services at a discount, and so on. On occasion, and particularly where the prospective member intends to participate fully, such additional benefits may lead to a decision to join at a higher class.

V Institutionalizing the Evaluation Process

As noted at the beginning of this article, there are many corporations today that are members of from 100 to more than 300 SDS and consortia around the world. Given the magnitude of such a commitment, it would be wise to institutionalize the process of both evaluating SSOs before joining them, as well as monitoring the continuing value of participation at the time of renewal.

Perhaps surprisingly, it does not appear that many companies have done so.²⁴ One reason is that the decision to join an SSO is often made at the "local" level (i.e., by a business unit rather than at the enterprise level), and those that wish to join an SSO would be loath resistant to adding another level of delay and bureaucracy to the process of joining an SSO. Beyond such motivations, simply knowing what is happening within a multinational corporation is an enormous challenge that is never completely realized.

²⁴ An exception to this statement relates to IPR. Some companies require (or at least try to require) that no SSO membership may be entered into until the legal department has had an opportunity to evaluate the IPR policy of the SSO in question to determine whether it might provide unwanted opportunities to commit IPR without proper prior review. On one occasion when I have asked a standards director why her department has not sought to further institutionalize the process, I received the interesting response that it might make the full costs of standards participation more visible, and therefore more susceptible to budget cuts.

Be that as it may, it should nonetheless be possible to lay out a methodology for evaluating SSOs that could be distributed internally to provide guidance for those managers that are engaged in standards-related activities.

Assuming that a given company has concluded that SSO participation is appropriate to its strategic direction, a prudent initial and ongoing program for managing that participation could proceed as follows:

Stage One (implementation of program)

- Establish budgetary parameters for SSO participation
- Define internal approval requirements and process for joining and renewal

Stage Two (selection of individual SSOs)

- Create business case for participation in a given area of standardization including role (Leader/Follower/Spectator). If Leader, define specific key objectives to be pursued
- Agree upon technical/marketing areas of interest
- Define any other goals within each area
- Identify existing potential SSO alternatives
- Evaluate each existing organization for appropriateness, likelihood of success, reputation, etc.
- Examine intellectual property and other policies for acceptability
- Determine fully-burdened cost of participation at level necessary to achieve goals
- If no existing consortium seems appropriate, consider whether founding a consortium is justified

Stage Three (joining and participating in a specific consortium)

- Define specific goals to guide member representatives (e.g., participate only, or seek approval of specific new standard working groups)
- Commit to appropriate membership level to meet goals
- Make appropriate staff assignments
- Obtain final internal budget approval
- Evaluate success of participation after ten months (i.e., before renewal invoice arrives)
- Review and approve/disapprove renewal

While the above level of bureaucratization may be excessive for a small company, for a larger organization with a need for broad SSO participation, the effort to establish such a program should be amply repaid in less haphazard participation, lower over-all expenditures and greater rewards. For a smaller company, the same methodology may productively be employed on a less formal basis.

In either case, the following table could be used in support of such an SSO participation program.

SSO PARTICIPATION ASSESSMENT FORM			
Step 1: Goal Assessment			
<i>Goal</i>	<i>Relationship (Proponent, Consumer)</i>	<i>Importance (1 – 10)</i>	<i>Desired Role (Leader, Follower, Spectator)</i>
Strategic Influence			
Technical Influence			
Early Access			
Training			
Messaging			
Joint Marketing			
Certification			
Branding			
Joint R&D			

Other (describe)		
Step 2: Ranking of Alternatives		
SSO	<i>Composite Score</i>	<i>Comments</i>
SSO 1		
Reputation		
Industry Support		
Staff Support Required		
Cost (dues)		
Cost (fully burdened)		
Technical Process		
Marketing Process		
Stability		
Other (describe)		
SSO 2:		
Reputation		
[etc.]		
Form new SSO?		
RECOMMENDATION:		

VI Summary

In the modern technology-based world, the range of for-profit, non-profit and governmental organizations that should actively consider participating in SSOs continues to increase. And, in fact, the number of SSOs in existence and the number of participants in the standards development progress in the ICT sector is also increasing. For some organizations, and particularly for some vendors, the costs of such participation are becoming very great.

Based on the author's experience, it appears that few companies are engaging in an enterprise-wide evaluation of SSOs before joining them, and even fewer pay close attention to renewals. In theory, bringing an appropriate level of order to this process need not be a daunting task. Moreover, the process laid out in this article for evaluating SSO prior to making a decision to participate should not only result in more cost-effective participation in standards-related activities, but more empirically effective participation as well, through greater identification of goals, better selection of venues to pursue those goals, and closer attention to whether those goals have been achieved.

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ORACLE JOINS FREE STANDARDS GROUP AT HIGHEST LEVEL

Andrew Updegrave

Thursday, October 26, 2006 @ 5:51 AM EDT

Oracle's announcement yesterday of its "[Unbreakable Linux 2.0](#)" program, aimed squarely at Red Hat, understandably overshadowed another announcement Larry Ellison made in the same speech. The fact that Oracle will provide cut-rate support for Red Hat Linux is of course big news, and if you have any doubt that Oracle thinks so, too, check out Oracle's [home page](#) today, which is entirely dedicated to its Linux news (even featuring the commanding presence of a body-armored penguin with clear steroids-abuse issues). You'll also find an audio link to Ellison's speech there, and if you check out the Oracle [News page](#), you'll see that Oracle issued a total of 8 press releases yesterday as part of its media blitz.

Naturally, you'll be able to find reams of news, prognostications and punditry on the Linux announcement all over the Web, so I'll focus my attention today on the press release that I find to be most interesting: the one that tracks Ellison's announcement in the same speech that Oracle has joined the [Free Standards Group](#) (FSG), at the highest level of membership. You can find that press release [here](#). (Disclosure: FSG is a client of mine, and I'm also on its Board of Directors.)

Why the FSG announcement is important has to do with why the FSG is important. You can begin to get a handle on that reality from the squib in the press release that summarizes what the FSG is all about:

The Free Standards Group is the standardization and certification authority for Linux. Without a commonly adopted standard, Linux could fragment, proving costly for ISVs to port their applications to the operating system and making it difficult for end users and Linux vendors alike. With the LSB, all parties - distribution vendors, ISVs and end users - benefit as it becomes easier and less costly for software vendors to target Linux, resulting in more applications available for the Linux platform. All major Linux commercial and community organizations support the Free Standards Group.

Stated even more simply, the FSG is an essential component of the Linux ecosystem. Without such a conscious and well-supported effort to keep Linux cohesive, it could fly apart. With the FSG, dynamism, creative evolution, multiplying distros and end-user freedom can continue to flourish.

Of course, the press release also includes the traditional complementary quotes from both parties, which are intended to place the announcement in context for each party. The Oracle quote, from Donald Deutsch, Oracle's Vice President, Standards Strategy and Architecture, reads as follows:

Linux is a strategic platform for Oracle. Because of that, we felt it's important that we extend our commitment to standards-based computing and join the standardization authority for the Linux community: the Free Standards Group. Their Linux Standard Base is an ideal forum to collaborate with the greater Linux ecosystem on important issues for our customer base. We look forward to working with the FSG and its member companies to continue to drive the adoption of Linux as a solution for our enterprise customers.

I know Don well. He's a long-term standards professional who knows his stuff, and should ensure that Oracle's participation in the FSG is productive for both sides.

Jim Zemlin, FSG's Executive Director, responds in kind like this:

As the largest enterprise software company, Oracle is one of the most influential and important Linux software vendors. By joining the FSG they send a clear message that they support open standards. Their joining the FSG is a watershed moment for the Linux platform, showing that all major Linux software vendors have joined together to support the LSB and keep Linux from fragmenting. Their participation in our workgroup will help us meet the most pressing needs for Linux users and developers.

The fact that Oracle is joining the FSG – and at the highest level - at the same time that it announces its new commercial initiative is significant in that it publicly demonstrates Oracle's commitment to work with, rather than against, the Linux community. By both economically as well as technically supporting FSG, Oracle is helping further the cause of keeping Linux both technically strong and vendor-independent.

At another level, the FSG is notable for being in the vanguard of the evolving effort to mesh open standards with open source – two methodologies that need each other but present interoperability issues of their own. For example, standards are based on agreeing to do certain things the same way every time, while a fundamental value of open source is to have the freedom to change anything, any time.

If you're curious about how FSG has solved that conundrum, you might find this detailed overview of FSG and interview with Jim Zemlin from earlier this year interesting: [The Free Standards Group: Squaring the Open Source/Open Standards Circle](#). The rest of the issue in which it appears also focuses on the challenges of [Bridging the Open Source – Open Standards Divide](#).

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CONSIDER THIS

‡ ‡ ‡ **October 30, 2006**

#43 *The Wikipedia and the Death of Archaeology*

For more than 200 years, moderns have sought to divine the life stories of the ancients through the practice of archaeology. Through such efforts, we can learn something about the quotidian existence of not only those prehistorians that left no written descriptions of their daily lives at all, but also of our more recent forebears, who rarely saw fit to tell us what they ate for breakfast or which penny dreadfuls and broadsheets they liked to read.

Of course, archaeology permits us at best to see through a glass very darkly. Not only are we limited by the vagaries of what has survived through fortuitous chance, but by the fact that few materials used in daily life are designed for long-term survival under harsh conditions. As a result, not much has been consistently preserved from before the last millennia other than a limited number of works of art, personal adornment and literature. For more, we must grub around in the ruins of palaces and hovels to see what has survived the unforgiving embrace of dirt, or search about in the more preserving, chilly waters of the deep sea.

Hence, the farther back we look into the past, the less we are likely to find, and the more limited will be the types of artifacts we can hope to find. For a few hundred years of history, we may discover glass and metal, crockery and bones, and (particularly in arid regions), scraps of basketry and fabrics, as well as seeds, pollens and bones. But soon enough there are only bones and stones, and finally only enigmatic stone flakes and tools – not much from which to intuit how a people lived, what they knew, and how they understood themselves, their gods and the world around them.

But surely we must know all we need to know about the post-Gutenberg era? Well, not really, as so little that may be of interest in the future seems to have much value in the moment to those that own it (the contents of your garbage can as you read this, for example). How great the gap can be between those two perceptions can be demonstrated by the archaeology projects that are ongoing at any point in time. Those projects include simple explorations of the contents of privies that stood in the backyards of colonial Boston, and far more ambitious efforts to investigate, and even raise, ships from the last century.

If such is the case, certainly there must be some better way to preserve the reality of everyday existence, thereby avoiding the necessity to use trowels and screens, laboratory analysis and intuition to recreate what has so recently been real?

In fact, there is.

Consider this: Given a sufficient amount of server space and the commitment to maintain it, a resource already exists that may represent, for almost all purposes, not only the death of archaeology, but also the opportunity to enable a greater depth and sophistication of anthropology than has ever before existed. So radical an innovation would this new anthropological methodology represent that it deserves its own name.

Call it *Wikipediology*.

Is the Wikipedia sufficiently comprehensive to replace the tangible record of the past as a subject of study? According to the Wikipedia's description of itself as of 18:14 UST on October 29, 2006 (the entry was last updated at 15:18 UST today), the Wikipedia currently hosts more than 5 million articles in many languages (over 1.4 million in the [English-language version](#)). In all, there are 229 language editions, sixteen of which already have more than 50,000 articles each.

But, you may ask next, is the Wikipedia accurate enough? After all, there is an ongoing controversy over whether its accuracy is the equal of a traditional encyclopedia.

That question, I think, is entirely misses the point, because I believe that the real significance of the Wikipedia is not its status as a compendium of information, but rather its ability to provide a record of how we see ourselves, our heritage, our current events and our culture in real-time as those perceptions evolve. And that significance clearly transcends the utility of the shelf-bound reference works traditionally described as encyclopedias.

I would encourage you to consider this definition of the Wikipedia, which is how I think of it:

The Wikipedia is the most detailed, comprehensive, concise, culturally-sensitive record of how humanity understands itself at any precise moment in time

Viewed in this light, when the Wikipedia is "inaccurate" due to bias or limited understanding rather than simple error, it becomes more interesting *because* it is inaccurate. Looked at from this perspective, the word "inaccurate" turns inside out, because the Wikipedia is being used to determine *how* we see the world, and not whether that view is "accurate" in any empirical sense. In fact, in this light the more accurate an entry is, the less useful it becomes. And, of course, what those that contribute to a given entry have found to be worth including is most interesting of all.

Moreover, since the Wikipedia exists in many non-identical, language-based independent editions, each of which is constantly changing, all of the editions taken together provide a real-time record of not only how our perception of ourselves morphs over time, but how that perception differs culturally around the world as well.

Let's conduct a simple test to determine what the Wikipedia would tell a future Wikipediologist in a few moments, as compared to what a traditional archaeologist could learn from significantly greater labor.

We'll use this [brief account](#) of the contents of Katherine Nanny's late 17th century privy in what is now downtown Boston. That account provides no end of interesting guesses about the life of Ms. Nanny, an evidently feisty personage who divorced her husband in 1671, accusing him of (among other bad acts) "whoredomes," and "abuses of the marriage bed." For example, do the scraps of fine material indicate that Katherine dumped her husband's clothes down the chute rather than send them to faithless husband when he requested them, after absconding with the pregnant servant girl? Or perhaps that she simply made the family's clothes? That there were well to do, or that she was as seamstress for the well-to-do?

Or what of this?

Most intriguing of all were 250,000 seeds and pits from fruits, nuts, and spices, analyzed by Lawrence Kaplan and Marie Mansfield King of the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Cherry and plum pits made up 95 percent of the total, far more than any normal household would consume. Was Nanny making brandied cherries, or a steeped alcoholic drink called cherry bounce? "It looks like she was making preserves," says state archaeologist Brona Simon. "I think it was her business, a cottage industry." "There had to be something going on," Bob Hasenstab agrees, speculating that granary weevils, pollen, spoiled flour, and cherry pits meant Nanny was baking cherry pies.

Intriguing though these guesses may be (or not, depending on how much you care to obsess about granary weevils), merely guesses they must remain.

Note also that analyses such as these obscure the true purpose of archaeology to begin with, which is not to determine how Katherine Nanny in particular spent her free time towards the end of the 1600s, but what life was like in general in Boston at the same time. And the contents of one privy, no matter how interesting, do not a cultural portrait of an entire people make.

Now let's consult the Wikipedia to see how it would compare, using a Wikipedia definition of an archaeological artifact commonly found from the same period, one that, as is typical, can offer at most only a few enigmatic clues to its discoverer: the spoon. Likely enough Nanny's three-holer (a commodius

facility, to be sure) must have yielded at least one spoon, which could have been interesting from its style, composition (silver or pewter) and maker's mark, if any. But beyond that – not much.

In contrast, consider the following extracts from the Wikipedia [entry](#) on this humble implement

Extract from "Uses":

"Teaspoons are commonly employed by [heroin](#) addicts to "cook" the drug in by use of holding a flame underneath. The resulting liquified heroin is then transferred to a [syringe](#) and injected.

As of the 1940s, a combination utensil of spoon and [fork](#), the [spork](#), has been in use. Likewise, small, often flat, disposable [wooden spoons](#) are commonly given away with ice cream, cakes, and [malts](#) for use during their consumption. The [runcible spoon](#) is a spork with a cutting edge like a [knife](#).

Partial list from "Spoon Types," with separate supporting entries in each case:

- [Iced tea spoon](#)
- [Dessert spoon](#) — between tablespoon and teaspoon in size
- [Demitasse](#) spoon
- [Bouillon](#) spoon
- [Grapefruit spoon](#) — a spoon with serrated edges for cutting into and eating [grapefruit](#) halves
- [Egg spoon](#) — used for hens' eggs; smaller than a teaspoon
- [Caviar](#) spoon — usually made of [mother of pearl](#), [gold](#), [animal horn](#) or wood. [Silver](#) cannot be used because it affects the taste.
- [Absinthe spoon](#) — a flat, [slotted spoon](#) used to prepare [absinthe](#) for drinking
- [Plastic spoon](#) cheap and easily mass produced
- Spoodle — a cross between a spoon and a ladle, often used in [European cooking](#), particularly for [soups](#) and [stews](#)
- [Slotted spoon](#)
- [Wooden spoon](#)
- [Runcible spoon](#) — invented by [Edward Lear](#) in *The Owl and the Pussycat*, but later given a real meaning
- [Love spoon](#) — a carved wooden spoon given as a token of betrothal
- [Silver spoon](#) — a small spoon given to a newborn child to ensure good fortune; used as a metaphor for someone born to riches
- When a precious serving spoon is used for an [anointment](#) as part of a [coronation](#), it can be given the status of [regalia](#).
- [Cocaine spoon](#) — a very small spoon used to sniff [cocaine](#)
- Ear spoon — a small spoon used to remove [earwax](#)
- [Souvenir spoon](#) — may be any of the above types of spoon, but an important additional function is to signify or hold a memory of a place or event, or to display as a 'trophy' of having been there, thus also a classical memento from pilgrimage sites; they are often in more fancy materials and highly ornamental, depicting sights, coat of arms, associated characters, etcetera.

Try and pull that richness of cultural and factual detail out of your privy!

But there is also far more in this single entry, weaving together idioms, everyday practices, and much more, encapsulating within a single Webpage a snapshot of early 21st century life that incorporates details otherwise doomed to disappear beyond the horizon of time sooner rather than later.

Such as the following sampling:

- In the [culinary](#) world, a "spoon" is a restaurant owned and opened by a notable [chef](#) who sets the restaurant's overall tone and menu, but who largely leaves the day-to-day management to others while the chef operates one or more principal ([haute cuisine](#)) restaurants. Spoons are less expensive, but offer many recipes from the [high end](#) restaurant.
- [Wooden spoon](#) is a phrase used to describe the "achievement" of a team or individual in finishing last in a contest, a wooden spoon being a common and almost valueless object, in stark contrast to the contest winners who will often receive a trophy made of silver or similar precious metal. The term originates from [Cambridge University](#), wherein professors used to dangle a wooden spoon humiliatingly before students who had failed their [tripos](#).
- Spoon! Is the battle cry of the cartoon hero parody [The Tick](#).

Of course, There are also links to other significant resources, including the many [quotes](#) – both humorous and non - that can be found at [Wikiquote](#), each focusing on the word "[spoon](#)."

Does all of this add up to simple collection of disconnected trivia? Perhaps. But another name for a "simple collection of disconnected trivia" is "culture." And in the case of the Wikipedia, in contrast to what archaeologists can find, each virtual artifact comes with its connotations intact, connected by electronic links. And in real time: the spoon entry quoted above was last edited only two days ago.

I personally believe that the Wikipedia is too important a cultural resource to risk losing, and would propose that Google partner with the Wikipedia to archive and maintain the entire Wikipedia at some regular interval - not less than annually – and make these copies available to the public indefinitely. Being able to compare how a given entry changes over time, and how entries on the same topic in different languages compare at the same time, could offer a depth of understanding and study undreamed of in the history of the world.

There remains, of course, one final question. What of the romance of archaeology? If the Wikipedia is the ultimate crystal ball within which all may be seen, will technology have once again made our world a more comprehensible, but less pleasantly mysterious place in which to exist?

After all, I think not. One need only look once again to the Wikipedia entry on the humble spoon, and find reassurance in an external link to "The Spoon Project." The description of the link explains that The Spoon Project presents a "Gallery of people with spoons on their noses."

Perhaps the significance of this creative endeavor will be instantly comprehensible to future Wikipediologists, who will immediately place it into its proper socio-economic and political context.

But I'm betting not.



Spoon Man
From
[The Spoon Project](#)
Website

Comments? updegrove@consortiuminfo.org

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