

The Role of the IRTF Chair

Abstract

This document briefly describes the role of the Chair of the Internet Research Task Force (IRTF), discusses its duties, and outlines the skill set a candidate for the role should ideally have.

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1. Introduction

The Internet Research Task Force (IRTF) focuses on longer-term research issues related to the Internet, while its sister organization, the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), focuses on the shorter-term issues of engineering and standards making.

The IRTF consists of a number of topical and long-term Research Groups (RGs). These groups work on issues related to Internet protocols, applications, architecture, and technology. RGs have the stable long-term membership that is needed to promote the development of research collaboration and teamwork in exploring research issues. Individual contributors participate in the IRTF, rather than representatives of organizations.

[RFC2014] details the procedures by which RGs operate. [RFC4440] discusses a view from the Internet Architecture Board (IAB) on the IRTF and its relationship to the IETF. The RFC Editor publishes documents from the IRTF and its RGs in the IRTF Stream [RFC5743].

The IRTF Chair is appointed by the IAB [RFC2014] for two-year terms and manages the IRTF in consultation with the Internet Research Steering Group (IRSG) and -- for some types of decisions -- the IAB. The IRSG membership includes the IRTF Chair, the chairs of the various RGs, and other individuals ("members at large") from the research community selected by the IRTF Chair.

There is no general appeals process defined for the IRTF. However, [RFC2014] states that when an RG disagrees with the IRTF Chair's decision to close the group, it can appeal to the IAB. Since the IRTF Chair serves at the discretion of the IAB, it has been current practice to generalize this special case in [RFC2014]: any grievances related to the IRTF Chair can be taken to the IAB, and it takes appropriate measures.

2. Duties

This section discusses the various duties of the IRTF Chair and outlines the skill set a candidate for the role should ideally have.

2.1. Strategic

Arguably, the most important part of the duties of the IRTF Chair is strategic and concerns shaping the purpose and scope of the IRTF, by making decisions about which RGs to charter, which RGs to terminate, and which other activities or efforts the IRTF should organize or affiliate itself with in order to further its charter and increase the interaction and collaboration between network research, engineering, operations, and standardization.

For some new RGs, the research and engineering community brings a proposal to the IRTF Chair for discussion. However, it is common for the IRTF Chair to identify a new area of research that is considered of importance to the Internet, actively motivate people in the research and engineering community to consider the formation of an RG, and help them navigate the process for doing so.

In order to be able to fulfill this duty, it is important for the IRTF Chair to be involved in both the academic research community as well as engineering or operational communities. Without a demonstrated history of participation in these often somewhat isolated communities, it will be very difficult to identify areas of academic research that are suitable for being brought into the IRTF. A good network of contacts in these communities will be very helpful in identifying and motivating potential RG chairs and participants.

Involvement in the academic research community can be demonstrated in various ways -- a publication record, membership in conference program and organizational committees, participation in publicly funded collaborative research projects, etc.

In addition to chartering new RGs, it is equally important for the IRTF to end RGs that have run out of energy, are focused on issues no longer considered important for the Internet, or are otherwise not operating well. Careful communication and good people skills are essential in order to explain the reasons for concluding an RG. The same skill set is also useful when explaining to proponents of a new RG why their request is being denied.

The Applied Networking Research Prize (ANRP) is a joint award of the Internet Society (ISOC) and an example of a strategic initiative that since its inception in 2011 has turned into more of an administrative duty. The IRTF Chair and an ISOC representative pick and chair the

ANRP selection committee, which advertises the ANRP, encourages community nominations for the prizes, and reviews nominations and selects prize winners. The IRTF Chair and the ISOC representative also mentor the ANRP winners, who are often IETF newcomers, and introduce them to other attendees who may have an interest in their work.

Chairmanship of the ANRP selection committee also relies on strong ties to the academic research community, to identify suitable selection committee members and to encourage nominations for suitable work that is published in a given year. The selection committee operates similar to a program committee for an academic conference (more specifically, it performs a function similar to the selection of a best paper award). It is therefore useful if the IRTF Chair has firsthand experience serving on program committees, and ideally, chairing them.

2.2. Administrative

A good fraction of the duties of the IRTF Chair are administrative. Some of them may be permanently or temporarily delegated to other IRSG members, but they ultimately always remain the IRTF Chair's responsibility.

Some of those are related to publishing RFCs on the IRTF Stream, such as ensuring sufficient review, so that documents published are of good quality; scheduling the required Internet Engineering Steering Group (IESG) review [RFC5742]; and following up with the IESG, IANA, and the RFC Editor during and after the publication process.

Other administrative duties include reviewing and approving requests from the RGs for time slots during IETF meetings or interim meetings elsewhere, ensuring that meeting materials are submitted on schedule, maintaining the IRTF web site, and -- in cooperation with the RG chairs -- ensuring that the IETF Datatracker correctly reflects the status of the various IRTF-related documents.

The IRTF Chair appoints, replaces, and manages the RG chairs and the IRSG, and follows the research work of the chartered and proposed RGs to a degree that is sufficient to let them develop an understanding on whether they are generally operating well.

The IRTF Chair also defines the operational procedures for the IRTF (in the boundaries defined by [RFC2014]) and the IRSG. At the moment, these procedures are captured as a set of wiki pages [IRTF-WIKI], and it is the duty of the IRTF Chair to refine and update these descriptions as procedures evolve. When process questions on the IRSG or in an RG arise (e.g., on IPR, liaison

statements, consensus procedures, copyright, plagiarism, document publication, etc.), the IRTF Chair is frequently consulted and needs to have sufficient familiarity in the area to provide a definitive answer, or at least be able to identify an external party for further consultation.

The IRSG tries to schedule a working dinner during each IETF meeting, and the IRTF Chair is responsible for organizing the agenda and a suitable venue.

The IRTF Chair provides a status report on the IRTF to the IAB on a monthly basis and also writes a regular column for the IETF Journal [IETF-JOURNAL] on recent IRTF-related events.

During each IETF meeting, the IRTF Chair is responsible for organizing and chairing the "IRTF Open Meeting", during which topics related to the IRTF are presented and discussed. This includes a report by the IRTF Chair on the status of the IRTF and its RGs (an abbreviated version of this report is also usually given during the IETF technical plenary) as well as other presentations from RGs, ANRP prize winners, individuals wishing to propose new RGS, or others.

These administrative duties are very similar to part of the duties of an Area Director (AD) in the IETF and require the same set of organizational and communication skills [IESG-EXP]. They also require a regular time commitment throughout the year, the ability to attend most of the IETF meetings in person, as well as some other related travel.

The IRTF Chair regularly interacts with the ADs and the IESG for document reviews, planning IETF meeting agendas, and providing input on various IETF efforts and topics. The IRTF Chair also regularly interacts with the IETF Administrative Oversight Committee (IAOC) and the IETF Secretariat for meeting planning, budgeting, and other organizational purposes. In addition, the IRTF Chair also interacts with the Tools Team to provide input on how IETF tools can best support the operation of the IRTF. Finally, the IRTF Chair is the owner of the IRTF Stream of RFCs and is hence part of the group that reviews the RFC Editor's performance and operation; also, the IRTF Chair engages with the Independent Submission Editor in cases where submissions on the Independent Stream have relationships to the IRTF. A good understanding of the purpose and procedures of these different bodies and a good working relationship with the individuals serving on them are important.

2.3. IAB Membership

The IRTF Chair serves as an "ex officio" member of the IAB [RFC2850] and is expected to participate in IAB discussions and activities alongside the NomCom-appointed IAB members.

This duty benefits from expertise that is similar to those of full IAB members [IAB-EXP] and requires a similar time and travel commitment, for example, to attend IAB retreats, relevant IAB workshops, as well as other meetings the IAB is participating in or organizing. Per [IAB-EXP], "it is desirable for IAB members to have technical leadership experience, operational management backgrounds, research or academic backgrounds, implementation experience, and experience in other bodies involved in Internet governance."

The IRTF Chair frequently provides input to "birds of a feather" (BoF) sessions, either as an ex officio IAB member (i.e., as a "BoF shepherd") or because it may be unclear whether a proposed effort should be started as an IETF WG or an IRTF RG.

3. Security Considerations

This document raises no security considerations.

4. Informative References

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