MicroStandards
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Publish and/or Perish (Or, Who Wants To Use a Trial-Use Standard?)

In the annals of the Computer Society lie numerous stories of the attempts to publish drafts of proposed standards. Few of these attempts were successful—most were (and are) not. The arguments, pro and con, about publishing draft standards have taken on religious overtones. Adherents to each argument may even refuse to see little, or any, value in the other arguments.

Typically, a working group in the process of developing a standard needs to publish a draft to solicit comments from a broad base of peers. Standards administrators in the IEEE and especially in the Computer Society fear that, no matter how disclaimers are worded, someone will insist on mistaking the published draft for an adopted standard.

Let’s examine the positions with a hypothetical dialogue...

Standards developer (SD): The most important feature of IEEE standards is that they are standards of consensus. We must see to it that every attempt is made to involve all interests in the activity so that “it can be presumed that the document represents a consensus of all interests concerned with the scope of the standard.”

The working group developing the standard and the sponsoring technical committee often feel that true consensus requires broadly circulating the draft to stimulate comments from all facets of the interested parties. This is done best by printing the draft under consideration in a widely read professional publication such as IEEE Micro or Computer.

Standards Administrator (SA): There are other ways to get the wide distribution you feel you need—without publishing the draft of a proposed standard. You can publish articles about the draft and about the working group’s resolution of opposing interests. Or, you can recommend that the proposed draft be adopted as a trial-use standard.

A trial-use standard has a two-year life span. During that time, it will be treated by the IEEE as a true standard. It will be published and offered for sale by both the IEEE and the Computer Society. Comments received by the working group during the trial-use period represent the public comments that you need to achieve consensus. You then can revise your draft, resubmit it, and resubmit it—this time for adoption as a full-use standard.

SD: You mean that by accepting a two-year trial-use period as a delay, we can go for a full standard without really achieving consensus—after all, few in the microcomputer area would bother implementing or examining in detail a “trial-use” document? Its very name implies that it will change just about the same time that a new and complying product could get to market. Note also that IEEE standards go on to become ANSI standards and often become international standards.

About an article on a draft—just who will write it? We have already devoted hundreds of our volunteered hours to writing the draft. Now you also want us to write an article about it for publication. My department’s budget doesn’t stretch that far. I still have to do my regular work and satisfy my managers.

SA: There is great concern that a published draft might be mistaken for an approved standard. This seems to happen even when care is taken to include disclaimers, expiration dates, etc. Official policy about publication of drafts of standards is that “the practice is deprecated by the Standards Board.”

SD: There is another reason that we feel publication of drafts of standards should be unhindered—FAIRNESS. Working groups often have few members—perhaps a dozen or so, commonly only a handful of participating members. Now, I mean members of all categories, including nonparticipating observers. These members become an informed elite who have an information advantage over others. This translates into unfair advantage in marketing and technology. If the IEEE and the Computer Society truly serve their professional membership, it should see that all of these standards development activities get widespread dissemination, including the publication of drafts. It’s only fair.

SA: Fairness as you see it may be a luxury that we cannot afford. There is no requirement to force the membership to be knowledgeable about standards developments. The publishing of additional hundreds of pages each year in society magazines is a cost not warranted by member interest.

SD: Well, then let us submit the draft for publication in other trade journals after giving the society’s publications the first right of refusal. Publishing the draft also updates users about the state of the development of the standard. Many individuals working from third-hand and out-of-date information do not know how the specifications have been changed over several drafts. We do a disservice by not explicitly telling them about the changes.

SA: You can certainly supply them with a current copy of the draft as a working document, upon request. There is no obligation to do that, but each project may (with approval) supply copies of their documents and charge for that service.

Well, working professional, what do you think? Does the publication of draft standards, the resulting spread of information, and the opportunity to contribute comments during development outweigh the risk of mistaking a draft for an approved standard? Or, do you think the risk of accidentally working to an unapproved draft (proposed standard), with the possibility of wasted resources and efforts, outweighs the arguments to publish draft standards?

References

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High 189 Medium 190 Low 191