Report on Interviews with Working Group Chairs

Background
K. Wetzel and P. Stevens interviewed twelve individuals who had chaired or co-chaired eight of NISO’s standards efforts from the last three years. A list of those interviewed and the interview schedule are attached. This report includes a list of best practices for standards development that were identified, recurring issues that negatively impact NISO standards developments and where identified recommendations to address those issues.

All those interviewed expressed support for NISO’s making the effort to learn how to improve its process through these interviews.

Identified Best Practices

Initial Work
- Start with the problem that a standard can help solve. Standards efforts flounder when they start with a technology in search of a solution or with problems that are outside the scope of NISO’s standards. Efforts that have a clear problem focus draw participants; a clearly defined solution helps avoid scope creep.
  Best Practice: The initial charge must identify a specific problem, what constituencies are affected, and how they are affected. The charge must also include a precise description of the proposed standard and how it will help to solve the problem.
- White papers and/or position papers help clarify problems and solutions. A focused examination of a problem area can elicit interest from those affected and help speed the development of consensus on an approach.
  Best Practice: The Architecture Committee and Topic Committees should consider commissioning or soliciting papers before developing the charge for a Working Group if at all possible. This may be done within the context of a meeting or as an independent effort. Exploratory work should be clearly separated from the work of developing a NISO standard or Recommended Practice.
- Well-structured partnerships improve the chance of success. NISO should reach out to organizations that have a stake in a problem. An organizational partner can bring interest and participation from its constituency along with staff and financial resources. It can also create tension where goals are not well-aligned.
  Best Practice: The NISO Managing Director should negotiate a written Memorandum of Understanding or some other formal agreement with the partnering organization or organization. The document should outline the roles and responsibilities of each organization along with a process for resolving issues that might arise between the two organizations. In cases, where the work is jointly managed, it should include a description of how management of the work will be shared.

Investigation and Progressing Work
- Effective Working Group Chairs are leaders first and experts second. The Working Group chair can delegate almost all tasks but s/he cannot delegate the responsibility for facilitating the resolution of contentious issues and keeping work on track.
• **Best Practice:** Topic Committees should select individuals who have proven project management skills as Working Group chairs. Good interpersonal skills are more important than technical knowledge. Drafting the document and other editorial work should be taken on by other Working Group members and/or by an external editor.

• **Regular working group meetings keep members more engaged.** Meetings help build a sense of belonging to a group among members and provide an effective means for building trust and resolving issues.

  **Best Practice:** Working Group chairs should set up a schedule of regular conference calls on at least a monthly basis. During times of active work, these may be bi-weekly or even weekly. Working Groups should also meet face-to-face every six to nine months if at all possible. An in-person meeting at the beginning of work helps to build trust; and an in-person meeting during the drafting process can help speed the resolution of key issues.

• **Focus on problem can prevent scope creep.** Because many problems and issues are highly inter-related, members often want to expand effort to provide a more comprehensive solution. This usually lengthens the process.

  **Best Practice:** Working Group chairs must develop a formal strategy with participants for determining with what is in scope with the agreement that limiting scope is valuable.

• **Get a draft standard out as soon as possible.** Problems attract solutions; if the NISO standards-based solution takes too long to appear, other solutions will emerge.

  **Best Practice:** Working Groups should include a Draft Standard for Trial Use as part of the work plan unless this is impossible. The date for this milestone should be practically achievable and aggressive.

• **Actively recruit and support trial users.** Realistic trial use can identify problems before ballot and widespread implementation, yet organizations are sometimes reluctant to invest in using an emerging standard.

  **Best Practice:** The Work Plan must include a detailed plan for the Trial Use period that describes what types of implementers are needed, how they will be recruited and supported. Organizations represented on the Working Group should be strongly encouraged to participate but not to the exclusion of other organizations.

• **Continuous outreach and promotion build awareness.** Widespread awareness of an emerging standard draws community participation to comment and improve the standard and builds the support for widespread implementation.

  **Best Practice:** The Work Plan must include a communications and outreach plan that outlines key audiences and messages for those audiences, as well as a description of the program that will be implemented. The Working Group must update this plan as it enters each new stage of development. Picking a memorable name or acronym can build awareness as can a clear and consistent logo or image that describes the work.

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**Drafting the standard**

• **Professional editorial support speeds the process.** Often Working Group members have expertise in the subject of the standard but are less familiar with the language and format of formal technical standards. Also, they often lack the time to focus on this writing.

  **Best Practice:** Working Groups who lack members with expertise in drafting technical standards should ask NISO to contract for the support of a technical writer. NISO should provide a technical editor who is familiar with technical standards for all projects.
Recruiting expert reviewers is often necessary. In today’s time-pressured world, it is not enough to just put a document out for review and comment. Effective promotion can raise some interest but it can remain difficult to get thorough review and comment. Best Practice: Working Groups should identify potential reviewers early in the drafting process and ask them to provide a thorough review. Use them as experts during the drafting. Acknowledge their support in the final document.

Long-standing Issues

Confusing Standards Process
- Formal language makes understanding difficult. Working Group members are unfamiliar with the language used in formal standards development. Procedures have been expressed in a legalistic fashion that some find intimidating.
- Authority and responsibility are unclear. It is often unclear who has the responsibility for taking action when an issue needs to be resolved. When responsibility is unclear, often no action is taken. Participants in the process are reluctant to assume responsibility as they see themselves as ‘only volunteers’.
  
  Recommendations:
  - Develop simplified overview of process that highlights responsibility for decision-making.
  - Develop a comprehensive outline for a work plan.
  - Develop templates for all documents including those called for in the work plan that provide directions and guidance.
  - Incorporate best practices into work plan and templates.
  - Ask Working Group chairs to suggest improvements after they complete each stage.
  - Provide mentoring for Topic Committee and Working Group chairs.

Uneven Participation across Development Cycle
- Too many volunteers at inception. Many Working Groups start out with too many members as many organizations insist on having representation.
- Too few active participants during drafting. Interest often declines as work progresses; Working Group members may have different jobs or new assignments; work of drafting standard is of a different nature than planning the standard.
- Unequal expertise among members. Members may be recruited because they have experience in using applications or services supported by a standard. They may lack the technical knowledge necessary for drafting the standard.
  
  Recommendations:
  - Topic Committees might consider breaking large standard projects into smaller projects that can be completed more quickly. Define only projects that can reach final draft stage in 12-18 months.
  - Topic Committees should include a description of specific types of knowledge and skills needed within the Working Group.
  - Working Group Chairs might consider recruiting some participants for only a single stage of the work and retaining them as reviewers for the final draft.
  - NISO should develop a realistic estimate of time commitment for Working Groups and provide this estimate when issuing a call for participation.
NISO might consider a policy shift so that some participation on each Working Group to an organization basis. The organization commits to providing steady participation even if personnel changes.

Long Delays in Development; Dangling Trials; and Limited Implementation

- **Search for the perfect solution.** An unwillingness to accept a solution that suffices for the 80% but leaves some issues for the 20% may cause lengthy delays or a cumbersome standard that is difficult to implement.
- **Difficult individuals block consensus.** Participants who have a strong vision of the preferred approach may try to block an alternative approach.
- **Alternative solutions emerge during development.** In a rapidly evolving technological environment, the problem may be solved through new approaches.
- **Implementation requires extensive development.** Organizations implement standards when there is a positive cost-benefit ratio. If the standard is difficult to implement or if the benefit is unclear, implementation lags.

**Recommendations:**

- Topic Committees should provide specific target dates for major milestones with the initial charge.
- Topic Committees should provide specific guidance on the boundaries of the problem to be solved.
- Working Group chairs should focus attention on the problem within the boundaries and block attempts to redraw the boundaries.
- Topic Committees should terminate projects where alternative solutions have emerged.
- NISO should encourage Working Group chairs to ask for support in dealing with members who block agreement.
- NISO should provide promotional guidance and support to Working Groups so that the benefits of the standard are communicated to the broadest range of constituencies throughout development.
- NISO should work with the Working Group to define what is needed to reduce the burden of implementation. This may include developing implementer guides, providing support for helping implementers share expertise and helpful tools, like SDK’s.