

A Fly on the Wall at Standards Bodies' Working Groups

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Different stakeholders exert varying degrees of influence over an SSB's process, depending on their respective levels of interest in a new standard, but also on rather more mundane aspects like deep pockets and market power. However, at the end of the day, a standard's specification results from the efforts of the members of a Standards Setting Bodies' (SSB) working group. Consequently, these individuals' motivations, attitudes, and views are very likely to have an influence on their contributions to the standards setting process, and thus on its outcome.

Following a brief digression into the theory of the 'Social Shaping of Technology', and a description of the relations and links that exist between the different stakeholders in ICT standardisation the paper reports the findings from two surveys of members of different SSBs. It turns out that a Working Group's (WG) decisions are taken for a variety of reasons, a proposal's technical merits being just one of them. The interviewees stressed the importance of the rather more non-technical aspects of the standardisation process, including, for instance, continuous participation at meetings, assuming responsibility as document editor or WG chair, and being outspoken.

One survey was dedicated to IEEE, who are very proud of their 'individual membership'. This survey's responses paint a somewhat ambivalent picture. On the one hand, it seems that the majority of members of the 802.11 WGs have a very strong sense of fairness – they try not to allow a group of powerful companies to dominate the process. On the other hand, it is safe to say that the majority of the leading figures are coming from exactly these powerful companies – they have the means and the motivation to invest heavily in standardisation, as the RoI may be enormous.

Overall, WG members seem to cast their votes at least with a view towards their respective employers' business interests. Yet, exceptions from this seem to not-so-infrequent, and typically aim at technically superior solutions. All in all, I do not believe that the IEEE's 'individual' membership is making a big difference. The responses from 802.11 members are pretty much in line with those from members of other standards bodies also prescribes that committee members "act in a personal capacity". People act differently; some may consider 'individual' membership as *carte blanche* to push their own proposals, others will still act exclusively on behalf of their employers, both regardless of the official membership rules.