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Some Practical Tips for Speeding up Ballot Comment Resolution

One of the questions I have been asked on numerous occasions about the IEEE standards development process is, "How long does it take to create an IEEE standard?" My normal response used to be that it is typically a five- or six-year process. My rationale was that the lifespan of an approved PAR is four years, and it is not uncommon at all for a Sponsor to request a PAR extension allowing more time to finish the work. Today, many projects are completed within the four-year validity of a PAR.

IEEE-SA President Bruce Kraemer presented a very enlightening report to the Standards Board at the meeting held in March 2015. As of February 2015, there were 557 active PARS within the whole of the IEEE SA, 237 of those from PES. I was pleasantly surprised to learn the average age of all 557 projects is actually 2.7 years. I stand corrected.

I had the honor of serving as chair and vice-chair for two Working Groups (WG) that recently completed standards revision projects. In both cases, the actual time it took from start to finish was less than the 2.7 year average. It dawned on me that maybe we were doing something in those Working Groups worth sharing that could help keep a project moving forward. These tips might not be applicable to all projects, but in my experience they help greatly in expediting the ballot comment resolution process.

- Use continuous line numbers for balloted drafts. The MS Word template automatically restarts line numbering on each page, but it is not mandatory. Select the entire document and then change the line numbering to "continuous" in page layout menu item. The comment form contains columns used by the voter to identify the page number, subclause and line number that point to the specific area of the draft document where a proposed change should be made. Sometimes a voter indicates the page number of the document, and sometimes the file page number (which is different) is entered. Some drafts do not contain line numbers, or often the line numbers are restarted on each page. Sometimes voters don't identify the subclause correctly (MyProject converts numbers that end in a zero, such as "4.10" to "4.1," which results in much confusion). Continuous line numbers are extremely helpful when the page, subclause and line numbers filled in by the voter do not agree or are ambiguous.
- Establish a small "core group" of WG members to initially review the ballot comments. For smaller WGs it could consist of only the WG chair and vice chair. For larger WGs a Ballot Resolution Committee (BRC) or Comment Resolution Committee (CRC) is sometimes formed.
- Download the comments periodically during the ballot period and start the resolution process as early in the cycle (and before the ballot closes) as possible. Add a descending sequential number to the comment spreadsheet in the "Other1" column immediately after the ballot comments are downloaded. This might seem redundant to the Comment# column, but it can save time when sorting and resorting the comments during the resolution process. Note: These numbers must be removed from the spreadsheet prior to uploading the comment resolution spreadsheet after the resolution process is completed.
- Sort the comments by line number. (See the first bullet.) Sometimes several voters identify a common portion of the draft where the same or similar change is proposed. Sorting by sequential continuous line numbers groups similar comments to any portion of the draft together which helps facilitate coordinated disposition status and detail responses. This is VERY important when there are several comments on one issue and helps avoid resolution of two comments on the same issue where the resolutions themselves are in conflict.
- Create "straw man" proposals for each comment. Focus on the editorial comments first. In my experience, for the vast majority of editorial comments the disposition status is "accepted" and requires no disposition detail. Therefore, this portion of the process is completed relatively quickly. Fill in those cells with a shade of green. General and Technical comments then follow. The core group generates an opinion of the disposition status (a straw man) and disposition detail. In many cases, the disposition status might be left blank initially and the disposition detail states "Needs WG Discussion." Fill those cells with a shade of yellow.
- Periodically during the ballot cycle, check for additional comments and download the file as required. Newly received comments can be extracted from the newly downloaded file and inserted into the existing "straw man" resolution file. Repeat the process above as required.
- As soon as practical after the close of the ballot, circulate the comments and straw man proposals to the entire WG. Emphasize to the WG that the straw man positions are in no way binding, but rather only represent the opinion of the group that created them. Create a deadline for WG response to the straw man proposals. Depending upon the quantity of comments received, a period of one to two weeks is usually sufficient. If no E-Mail discussion occurs on a particular straw man proposal, consensus on that particular proposal is assumed, and there is no need to discuss it further in telephone or face-to-face meetings. Attention can thus be focused on each of the straw man proposals on which E-Mail discussion has taken place.
- Use on-line polling tools to coordinate and schedule telephonic or web-based conferences to address comments and straw man proposals, or any other controversial topics, which do not have consensus.
- In follow-up telephonic or web-based conferences, establish the rule that if no one commented via E-mail on the draft comment responses then those disposition status and details will not be discussed in the conference unless there is a specific request to do so. If there are many items to discuss, establish in advance that a select number (for example, 30 or so) identified items will be discussed in this conference, so that you can focus the discussions on the items that matter.
- When the WG reaches consensus on all of the ballot comment resolutions (status and detail), enter all in the MyProject spreadsheet. Then, the WG editor should go through and create the new draft of the actual ballot document, giving care to make sure that the resolutions determined are consistent.
- After both the comment resolution statuses and details are final, and the ballot draft is updated, then you are ready to upload them in MyProject and initiate your recirculation ballot.

Using these techniques, we have often been able to initiate recirculation ballots within a few weeks, and only in unusual situations has it taken six months or more. We have seen a number of projects where balloting, from submittal to the issuance of the ballot invitation, through the first ballot and one or two recirculations, occurs in 8-10 months and often less.

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