

GenDispatch
Internet-Draft
Intended status: Informational
Expires: 7 November 2026

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6 May 2026

Some Anachronisms in IETF Standards Process Documents
draft-carpenter-gendispatch-anachronisms-05

Abstract

This document discusses some aspects of documents describing the IETF standards process that have been overtaken by events. It covers the six-month expiry of Internet-Drafts, the citation of Internet-Drafts, the reality of the two-stage standards process, and other issues. This draft is posted only to open a discussion.

About This Document

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Status of This Memo

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1. Introduction

This draft is posted only to open a discussion and to record known issues. If there is interest in the issues raised, they should probably be split out into separate, more focussed, drafts. Each of the following sections considers a specific issue.

Note that [I-D.ietf-procon-2026bis] and [I-D.ietf-procon-2418bis] may clarify some of these issues. An open question is whether the PROCON WG should be rechartered to consider formal rule changes for such issues.

2. Making Internet-Drafts Inactive

Experience has shown that the expiry after six months of Internet-Drafts, as described in [RFC2026], is meaningless and often leads to wasted effort. It is meaningless because drafts, once posted on line, never disappear; indeed the IETF maintains a public archive of them. It leads to wasted effort since authors often feel obliged to refresh a draft every six months with no significant change. This wastes effort and resources for the authors themselves, the IETF's own computing resources, and potentially the resources and time of innumerable others. Additional arguments can be found in [I-D.thomson-gendispatch-no-expiry].

The following sentence in Section 2.2 of [RFC2026] (or its equivalent in [I-D.ietf-procon-2026bis]):

An Internet-Draft that is published as an RFC, or that has remained unchanged in the Internet-Drafts directory for more than six months without being recommended by the IESG for publication as an RFC, is simply removed from the Internet-Drafts directory.

describes what used to happen in the twentieth century. What really happens today is closer to the following:

An Internet-Draft that is published as an RFC, or that has remained unchanged for more than six months without being approved for publication as an RFC and is not under active discussion in a working group, is marked as "inactive" in tooling maintained by the IETF (such as the Datatracker).

In other words, nothing really "expires" after six months; either the draft is actively developed, or it simply remains in the archive. Mentions of the expiry of Internet-Drafts in [RFC2418] (or [I-D.ietf-procon-2418bis]) are anachronisms, as are references to expiry or the period of six months in the header or boilerplate of Internet-Drafts.

3. Citing Internet-Drafts

Another rule about Internet-Drafts is broken as a matter of course - that they can only be referenced "without referencing an Internet-Draft". Yes, that's what our rules say today; [RFC2026] says:

Note: It is acceptable to reference a standards-track specification that may reasonably be expected to be published as an RFC using the phrase "Work in Progress" without referencing an Internet-Draft. This may also be done in a standards track document itself as long as the specification in which the reference is made would stand as a complete and understandable document with or without the reference to the "Work in Progress".

This isn't what we do, for sound practical reasons - we refer to I-Ds frequently in other I-Ds, and those references are often normative when two documents are being developed simultaneously. (Which leads naturally to an interlock between the two documents if they come to be approved as RFCs.) Also, we refer informatively to I-Ds in published RFCs. Also, in some circumstances we refer to them as stable references in IANA registries.

In the real world these references explicitly do cite an I-D with its DataTracker URL, directly in contradiction to the first sentence quoted above. This makes sense, since otherwise the reader couldn't easily find the cited document.

Note that at the time of writing, this issue is fixed in [I-D.ietf-procon-2026bis] by removing the phrase "without referencing an Internet-Draft" cited above, but that seems to be an actual rule change, not a clarification.

4. Single-step Standards Process and STD numbers

Experience has shown that the process for elevating a Proposed Standard (or a residual Draft Standard) to Internet Standard is so similar to the process for approving a Proposed Standard that there is now no practical difference between the two. In reality, the Proposed Standard process is more stringent in practice than the description in [RFC2026], with in-depth reviews during the IETF Last Call and IESG discussion stages. This is underlined by the Implementation Status Section recommended by [RFC7942], and echoes the arguments used in [RFC6410] to reduce the standards process to two stages. Additional arguments can be found in [I-D.loughney-newtrk-one-size-fits-all].

Another perspective -- the confusion caused by STD numbers -- is covered by [I-D.klensin-std-numbers], and those arguments are not repeated here, except to note that when a Proposed Standard updates or obsoletes an Internet Standard, the STD number loses its legitimacy.

It has long been observed that "The Internet runs on Proposed Standards." What harm to the Internet would result if we replaced the two-tier maturity ladder defined in [RFC6410] with a single level of maturity, namely "Internet Standard"? This maturity level would be a merger of Proposed Standard, Draft Standard, and Standard as they are described in [RFC2026]. The characterization of an Internet Standard could remain as stated in RFC 2026:

An Internet Standard is characterized by a high degree of technical maturity and by a generally held belief that the specified protocol or service provides significant benefit to the Internet community.

In effect those criteria have long been applied by the IESG for the Proposed Standard maturity level, including when a Proposed Standard is updated without promotion to Internet Standard. Merging the two levels would not change much at all, except for making things simpler. Clarification of the scope of STD numbers is also needed.

It would be good if all standards-track drafts required an Implementation Status section [RFC7942] (noting that this section will not be included in the published RFC). Then the IESG could consider the following issues if they are applicable, especially when the new document replaces or updates a previous one:

1. Are there at least two independent interoperating implementations with widespread deployment and successful operational experience?
2. Are there changes, including corrected errata, in the specification that would cause a new implementation to fail to interoperate with older ones?
3. Are there non-essential features in the specification that might increase implementation complexity?
4. If the technology required to implement the specification requires patented or otherwise controlled technology, do existing implementations demonstrate at least two independent, separate and successful uses of the licensing process?
5. How many BOFs?

Another issue is the number of BOFs allowed. We are currently inconsistent with our own rules. [RFC2418] seems to limit the number of Birds of a Feather (BOF) sessions to one per new working group:

Note that an Area

Director MAY require holding an exploratory Birds of a Feather (BOF) meeting, as described below, to gauge the level of support for a working group before submitting the charter to the IESG and IAB for approval.

Or it doesn't:

To facilitate exploration of the issues the IETF offers the possibility of a Birds of a Feather (BOF) session, as well as the early formation of an email list for preliminary discussion.

In reality the IESG has interpreted this to allow "non-WG-forming" BOFs, possibly followed by a "WG-forming BOF", and occasionally a second one. Also there is a practice of creating non-WG mailing lists which may or may not be associated with a BOF.

The current documentation does not really describe the current practice. [RFC5434] is realistic but only Informational.

6. Area Director for Individual Submissions

Section 6.1.1 of [RFC2026] mentions individual submissions quite briefly:

A standards action is initiated by a recommendation by the IETF Working group responsible for a specification to its Area Director, copied to the IETF Secretariat or, in the case of a specification not associated with a Working Group, a recommendation by an individual to the IESG.

This leaves it open which IESG member shepherds such a document.

Section 4.2 on non-standards track documents also leaves this open, as does Section 5 on BCPs.

It seems necessary to state that a specific AD needs to sponsor and shepherd such a submission, which is today's current practice.

[I-D.ietf-procon-2026bis] partially clarifies this by citing an IESG Statement (<https://datatracker.ietf.org/doc/statement-iesg-guidance-on-area-director-sponsoring-of-documents-20070320/>).

7. Defining the IETF

[RFC3233] (BCP 58) offers a slightly out-of-date definition of the IETF. Should this be resolved by

1. updating BCP 58,
2. adding a sentence or two to the definition of the IETF in Section 3.1 of [RFC9281] (BCP 11), or
3. leaving this matter for the IETF web site?

Suggested text is along the lines of:

The IETF is an unincorporated, freestanding organization composed of volunteers who are independent, bound only by policy, not by any membership agreement.

8. Force Majeure

"Force Majeure" is the phrase used in many contexts to indicate that normal rules may be broken when an event entirely outside the control of those involved occurs and makes those rules unworkable. A recent example in the IETF's history is the COVID-19 pandemic. Another example could be an urgent need to temporarily replace a person much more quickly than the NomCom can act.

At the moment, the IETF's process documents do not tackle this issue, yet the pandemic obliged both the IESG and IETF LLC to take urgent decisions regardless of process rules and normal practice.

9. IESG Statements

Sometimes it occurs that a procedural issue of some kind is not covered, or is ambiguously covered, by any formal document (typically a BCP). In this case the established practice is that the IESG publishes a statement to settle the procedural issue, possibly in conjunction with or embedded in an appeal response. Such statements become part of the IETF process unless negated or replaced by a new formal document.

At the moment the IETF's process documents do not describe this mechanism.

10. IANA Considerations

No IANA actions are needed.

11. Security Considerations

This document does not directly affect the security of the Internet.

12. Acknowledgements

Useful comments were received from Toerless Eckert, Paul Hoffman, John Klensin, Michael Richardson, Rich Salz, Martin Thomson, and others.

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Appendix A. Change Log [RFC Editor: please remove]

A.1. Draft-00

- * Original version

A.2. Draft-01

- * Added individual submission issue
- * Simplified Introduction

A.3. Draft-02

- * Clarified that Implementation Status sections are removed before RFC publication

A.4. Draft-03

- * Added "Defining the IETF"

A.5. Draft-04

- * Mentioned STD number issue
- * Added "Force majeure"
- * Note on IANA citing I-Ds

A.6. Draft-05

- * Added IESG Statements issue

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