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An Update on Milestones
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Abstract

As mandated in RFC 2418, working group charters currently contain milestones. However, these milestones are often sufficiently out of date that they no longer provide value. This document makes milestones optional and allows more discretion on their dates. It updates RFC 2418.

About This Document

This note is to be removed before publishing as an RFC.

The latest revision of this draft can be found at <https://davidsschinazi.github.io/draft-schinazi-update-on-milestones/draft-schinazi-update-on-milestones.html>. Status information for this document may be found at <https://datatracker.ietf.org/doc/draft-schinazi-update-on-milestones/>.

Source for this draft and an issue tracker can be found at <https://github.com/DavidSchinazi/draft-schinazi-update-on-milestones>.

Status of This Memo

This Internet-Draft is submitted in full conformance with the provisions of BCP 78 and BCP 79.

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1. Introduction

As mandated in Section 2.2 of [RFC2418], a working group charter "enumerates a set of milestones together with time frames for their completion". That document also leans heavily on milestones as a process mechanism that dictates how a working group spends its time and conducts its business. However, more than 25 years after the publication of that document, the reality is often different. Milestones are now commonly ignored, and often insufficiently updated to the point of irrelevance. Since 2020, it has been possible for some working groups to use dateless milestones (see [DATELESS]). Since current usage has diverged significantly from the requirements mandated by [RFC2418], we update that document to better match how the IETF now operates. Making milestones optional allows removing them from working groups that would otherwise perpetually have out-of-date milestones, while retaining them when the chairs do keep them up-to-date.

1.1. Conventions and Definitions

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "NOT RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in BCP 14 [RFC2119] [RFC8174] when, and only when, they appear in all capitals, as shown here.

2. Prior Text

At the time of writing this document, the current normative language around milestones is in Section 2.2 of [RFC2418]:

The working group charter MUST establish a timetable for specific work items. While this may be renegotiated over time, the list of milestones and dates facilitates the Area Director's tracking of working group progress and status, and it is indispensable to potential participants identifying the critical moments for input. Milestones shall consist of deliverables that can be qualified as showing specific achievement; e.g., "Internet-Draft finished" is fine, but "discuss via email" is not. It is helpful to specify milestones for every 3-6 months, so that progress can be gauged easily. This milestone list is expected to be updated periodically (see Section 5 of [RFC2418]).

3. Issues

Milestones were designed as a tool to share information from the corresponding working group to various interested parties. When milestones are years out of date, they can no longer serve that purpose. They can also cause harm if someone interprets them as being timely when they are in fact out of date.

Additionally, the current datatracker tooling that allows dateless milestones appears to be in violation of the RFC 2418 text quoted above. While this is not a critical issue in and of itself, it helps motivate updating RFC 2418.

4. Update

This document updates the guidance in RFC 2418 in the following ways.

4.1. Optionality of Milestones

Milestones are now optional, on a per-working-group basis. During chartering, new working groups can now begin existence without milestones. Once a working group is chartered, milestones can be enabled or disabled without rechartering.

4.2. Optionality of Dates

In RFC 2418, milestones were associated with dates. In 2020, the IESG ran an experiment that removed dates from milestones from some working groups. This practice is now officially supported. When a new working group is chartered, its milestones can be dated or dateless. After chartering, changing whether dates are enabled does not require rechartering.

4.3. Granularity of Dates

Milestones can carry dates, and those dates have a granularity. Commonly, the dates have the granularity of a month. Other granularities are possible, such as a quarter, a half-year, or an IETF meeting. New granularities can be chosen by the IESG without updating this document.

4.4. Date Management

For each working group that has enabled dated milestones, the dates can be configured to be modifiable either by the chairs, or by the area director. This allows the area director to trust the chairs to update dates without approval in those cases. The decision of who manages change control for the dates lies with the responsible area director.

4.5. Ownership

As was the case in RFC 2418, changes to milestones are subject to IESG approval. In particular, whether a specific working group uses milestones, whether they have dates, and the granularity of those dates, is a decision made by the Area Director responsible for that working group. Once made, these decisions need to be posted to the mailing list of the corresponding working group.

The Area Director is encouraged to discuss these choices with the working group chairs, as the success of milestones is predicated on the chairs updating them in a timely manner. While it is expected that this decision will almost always be made as agreement between working group chairs and their responsible area director, in the case of a disagreement the final decision lies with the area director.

4.6. Guidance for Chairs

For working groups where milestones are enabled, chairs are expected to keep milestones up to date. Chairs are expected to review milestones at least once per IETF meeting (every four months) to ensure they are accurate.

5. Security Considerations

Readers of the datatracker REALLY SHOULD NOT make important decisions based solely on the status of working group milestones as those could be out of date.

6. IANA Considerations

This document has no IANA actions.

7. References

7.1. Normative References

- [RFC2119] Bradner, S., "Key words for use in RFCs to Indicate Requirement Levels", BCP 14, RFC 2119, DOI 10.17487/RFC2119, March 1997, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc2119>>.
- [RFC2418] Bradner, S., "IETF Working Group Guidelines and Procedures", BCP 25, RFC 2418, DOI 10.17487/RFC2418, September 1998, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc2418>>.
- [RFC8174] Leiba, B., "Ambiguity of Uppercase vs Lowercase in RFC 2119 Key Words", BCP 14, RFC 8174, DOI 10.17487/RFC8174, May 2017, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc8174>>.

7.2. Informative References

- [DATELESS] "wg-chairs list discussion: Milestones and dates", <<https://mailarchive.ietf.org/arch/msg/wgchairs/GKTCAY5As7czqteM-MlhqIvL2Ig/>>.

Appendix A. Alternatives Considered

During discussions around this document, the following alternatives were considered.

A.1. Do Nothing

As is often the case, the simplest path forward is to do nothing at all. It has the advantage of requiring the least work, but the obvious downside of not addressing the issues described in Section 3.

A.2. Ensure Chairs Update Milestones

One potential solution to the issue of out of date milestones is, unsurprisingly, to update the milestones often enough. This solution has the advantage of not requiring community consensus to update RFC 2418. Since working chairs serve at the discretion of the Area Director, it is absolutely within the area directors' mandate to request that chairs update milestones. However, since chairs are a volunteer unpaid position, they might not always have the time to fulfill all the tasks requested by their responsible area director. The benefits of up-to-date milestones would need to be demonstrated in order to motivate their use.

A.3. Improve Tooling to Automate Milestones

The overwhelming majority of milestones currently on the datatracker are specific to a given draft. The datatracker even includes tooling that allows attaching a draft to a milestone as an "associated document". This tooling could be enhanced to automatically update the milestone based on the status of the corresponding document. However, this raises the question: if the relevant information is already available in the datatracker, what is the purpose of duplicating it in a milestone?

A.4. Remove Milestones Entirely

Another more drastic option would be to remove milestones entirely from the datatracker, and update RFC 2418 to no longer mention them.

A.5. Rewrite RFC 2418

During the 25 years that have gone by since RFC 2418 was published, many aspects of the IETF process have changed. At this point, some portions of RFC 2418 now feel anachronistic. As a random example, working group minutes are theoretically required to be encoded in ASCII, and that almost never happens any more in order to allow using the names of working group members that require different character sets. Similarly, RFC 2418 still requires chairs to circulate an attendance list (also known as the "blue sheets"), a task that has now been automated.

While such small points do help motivate updating RFC 2418, it is unclear if much larger changes would be beneficial.

Acknowledgments

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