

A Market for RFC Publication and Review

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Abstract

We describe a market mechanism for providing incentive for the review of IETF documents. Reviewers would be "paid" by the IESG to for their reviews. In turn, document authors would need to "pay" the IESG to take up their documents. This mechanism rewards reviewers for their reviews, thus (hopefully) increasing the quantity and quality of reviews.

1. Introduction

The IETF process depends critically on peer review of documents. However, it is notoriously difficult to get quality review of documents. Most documents receive few if any Last Call comments and it's quite common to see that almost noone has read the documents at IETF meetings. We believe that much of the reason for this lack of review is a lack of incentives. Since reviewers are not compensated, it is not surprising that the IETF process lacks sufficiently detailed early review.

In this memo, we describe a system for compensating reviewers for reviews. Although the IETF is not in a position to pay reviewers actual money, that does not mean that there is nothing of value to offer them. The most obvious thing to offer is the right to publish documents. We propose to use this right as the source of our incentives.

2. An IETF Currency

We propose to use the common tactic of introducing an internal IETF currency, the "Itil", based on the right to publish documents. The source of the Itil's value is that the IESG charges individuals and working groups for the right to publish documents. The IETF can then pay individuals for specific activities judged to be useful.

2.1. Charging for Publication

The central idea is that the IESG charges for admission to the publication queue. When a document is submitted to the IESG, the authors must also provide a certain number of Itils. This admission fee is what gives the Itil its value. Since no document can be published without paying the fee, it's therefore desirable to be in possession of Itils. It is not necessary that the authors of the document personally have the appropriate number of Itils. Rather, they merely need to convince enough people to "chip in" so that they can collectively pay the fee. This allows people to pay for the publication of documents they consider valuable.

Note that the idea is not to circumvent the IESG quality review process. One cannot simply pay one's fee and publish. Rather, the fee is simply for admission to the queue. Once the fee has been paid, the IESG review process proceeds as normal. Similarly, Area Director approval would be required to submit documents, as per usual. The purpose of this fee is purely to create the proper incentives.

The publication fee is intentionally left unspecified here. It is the intent that the IESG could adjust the fee as necessary to keep the queue of appropriate depth. We envision the IESG publishing a price list and adjusting it on a periodic basis.

2.2. Issuing Itils

The basic way in which IETF members obtain Itils is that they perform services judged to be socially useful. These services might include:

- * Reviewing documents.
- * Chairing working groups.
- * Serving on area directorates.

We envision that the IESG would publish a price list of the value of various services. Thus, IETF members could know what they were going to be paid for various services.

2.3. Transferability

In the proposed system, the only built-in way to obtain Itils is to get them from the IESG. The only built-in way to spend them is to pay the IESG for publication. However, in practice, a system of fungible tokens will usually end up being used for private transactions as well. Rather than discouraging this, we think it better to encourage it. Thus, for instance, members of the WG might pay an external (to the WG) expert to assist them in developing their system. The existence of such a secondary market for Itils means that the IESG needs to set the price on fewer quantities since the market will automatically adjust them to their efficient values.

3. Practical Issues

In this section we discuss a number of practical issues relating to our proposed system.

3.1. Ensuring Quality

One obvious objection here is that reviewers will submit low quality reviews in order to accumulate Itils. This is easily solved by requiring reviews to be accepted by a member of the IESG. If reviews are not judged to be of sufficient quality then they simply would not be paid for.

In practice the IESG might simply accept reviews by default, and withdraw the payment after the fact if a valid complaint about a review were received. As most reviews would be public, kept online, and attributed to an individual, we expect social pressures would prevent people trying to game the system.

3.2. Accounting

The conventional method of providing a currency is to have actual physical tokens. This is inconvenient in the IETF. However, it's relatively simple just to keep electronic accounts of everyone's Itil balance on a web site somewhere.

The third-party transfer of Itils poses a minor authentication problem. However, unlike cash, Itils are not anonymous. Thus if someone asserts that someone else has transferred one of their Itils without their authorisation then it is relatively simple to audit what really happened. Again, we expect that as the IETF is a relatively small

organization of peers, social pressure will mean that we shouldn't need strong authentication mechanisms.

3.3. Undesirable Incentives

If the IESG changes a per-document fee, then there is an incentive for document authors to merge what should be multiple documents into a single document. However, if the IESG charges a per-page fee, then there's a risk of the system quickly getting very complex, with possibilities like paying more for better reviews. A per-page fee also provides disincentive for properly explaining the background to an idea. Clearly it's undesirable for documents to be excessively long, but it's also undesirable for documents to be excessively brief.

We believe the system has to be simple to work well. Thus we propose a flat fee per document as a starting point. The IESG can always require a document to be re-submitted if they believe that it would be better as multiple separate documents. Charging a re-submission fee would then provide a disincentive to submitting merged documents in the first place.

3.4. Priming the Pump

In the initial stages of this system, there will be an undersupply of Itils relative to the demand. We propose to prime the pump by simply issuing a modest number of Itils initially. A number of criteria could be used for the initial grant, including a lottery, a minimal bar (everyone who's published an RFC), or delaying charging for publication until a sufficient number of Itils had been earned.

4. Some Initial Prices

Although the IESG needs to periodically adjust prices, it is useful to have an idea of an initial starting set. We propose the following starting price list. Negative numbers are paid to the IESG, positive numbers are paid by the IESG.

Activity	Price

Admission to the IESG queue	-5
Resubmission of a revised document	-3
Review of a document	+1
Chairing a WG	+2/yr
Serving on the IESG	+5/yr
Serving on the IAB	+2/yr
Serving on a directorate	+1/yr

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