Considerations for Having a Successful Birds-of-a-Feather (BOF) Session

Status of This Memo

Copyright Notice

Abstract

   This document discusses tactics and strategy for hosting a successful
   IETF Birds-of-a-Feather (BOF) session, especially one oriented at the
   formation of an IETF Working Group. It is based on the experiences
   of having participated in numerous BOFs, both successful and
   unsuccessful.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

   This document provides suggestions on how to host a successful BOF at
   an IETF meeting. It is hoped that by documenting the methodologies
   that have proven successful, as well as listing some pitfalls, BOF
   organizers will improve their chances of hosting a BOF with a
   positive outcome.

   There are many reasons for hosting a BOF. Some BOFs are not intended
   to result in the formation of a Working Group (WG). For example, a
   BOF might be a one-shot presentation on a particular issue, in order
   to provide information to the IETF Community. Another example might
   be to host an open meeting to discuss specific open issues with a
   document that is not associated with an active WG, but for which
   face-to-face interaction is needed to resolve issues. In many cases,
   however, the intent is to form a WG. In those cases, the goal of the
   BOF is to demonstrate that the community has agreement that:

      - there is a problem that needs solving, and the IETF is the right
        group to attempt solving it.

      - there is a critical mass of participants willing to work on the
        problem (e.g., write drafts, review drafts, etc.).

      - the scope of the problem is well defined and understood, that
        is, people generally understand what the WG will work on (and
        what it won't) and what its actual deliverables will be.

      - there is agreement that the specific deliverables (i.e.,
        proposed documents) are the right set.

      - it is believed that the WG has a reasonable probability of
        having success (i.e., in completing the deliverables in its
        charter in a timely fashion).

   Additional details on WGs and BOFs can be found in [RFC2418].

2. Recommended Steps

   The following steps present a sort of "ideal" sequence for hosting a
   BOF where the goal is the formation of a working group. The
   important observation to make here is that most of these steps
   involve planning for and engaging in significant public discussion,
   and allowing for sufficient time for iteration and broad
   participation, so that much of the work of the BOF can be done on a
   public mailing list in advance of -- rather than during -- the BOF
   itself.

It is also important to recognize the timing constraints. As
described in detail below, the deadline for scheduling BOFs is
approximately six weeks prior to an IETF meeting. Working backwards
from that date, taking into consideration the time required to write
drafts, have public discussion, allow the ADs to evaluate the
proposed BOF, etc., the right time to start preparing for a BOF is
almost certainly the meeting prior to the one in which the BOF is
desired. By implication, starting the work aimed at leading to a BOF
only 2 months prior to an IETF meeting is, in most cases, waiting too
long, and will likely result in the BOF being delayed until the
following IETF meeting.

The recommended steps for a BOF are as follows:

1) A small group of individuals gets together privately, discusses a
   possible problem statement, and identifies the work to be done.
   The group acts as a sort of "design team" to formulate a problem
   statement, identify possible work items, and propose an agenda for
   a BOF.

   Possible sub-steps:

   a) Consider whether the work might already fall within the scope
      of an existing Working Group, in which case a BOF might not
      even be necessary. Individual Working Group charters can be
      found at http://www.ietf.org/html.charters/wg-dir.html and
      indicate what a group is scoped to work on.

   b) Select the area or areas in which the work most naturally fits
      by identifying WGs that most closely relate to the proposed
      work. Note that it is not uncommon to find that a work item
      could easily fit into two (or more) different areas and that no
      one area is the obvious home.

   c) Consult with specific WGs to see whether there is interest or
      whether the work is in scope. This can be done by posting
      messages directly to WG mailing lists, contacting the WG
      chairs, or contacting individuals known to participate in a
      particular WG (e.g., from their postings or from documents they
      have authored).

   d) Consult with an area-specific mailing list about possible
      interest. (Most areas have their own area-specific mailing
      lists. Follow the links under each area at
      http://www.ietf.org/html.charters/wg-dir.html to find details.)

   e) Produce one or more Internet Drafts, describing the problem
      and/or related work. It cannot be emphasized enough that, for
      the BOF, drafts relating to understanding the problem space are
      much more valuable than drafts proposing specific solutions.

   Timeline: This step can easily take 1-2 months; hence, begin 3-4
   months before an IETF meeting.

2) The group may (or may not) approach an Area Director (or other
   recognized or experienced leader) to informally float the BOF and
   get feedback on the proposed work, scope of the charter, specific
   steps that need to be taken before submitting a formal BOF
   request, etc. By "leader", we mean persons with significant IETF
   experience who can provide helpful advice; individuals who have
   successfully hosted BOFs before, current or former WG chairs, and
   IESG or IAB members would be good candidates.

   The dividing line between steps 1) and 2) is not exact. At some
   point, one will need to approach one or more Area Directors (ADs)
   with a specific proposal that can be commented on. Step 1) helps
   shape an idea into something concrete enough that an AD can
   understand the purpose and provide concrete feedback. On the
   other hand, one shouldn't spend too much time on step 1) if the
   answer at step 2) would turn out to be "oh, we had a BOF on that
   once before; have you reviewed the archives?". Thus, there may be
   some iteration involving going back and forth between steps 1) and
   2). Also, a quick conversation with an AD might lead them to
   suggest some specific individuals or WGs you should consult with.

   It may turn out that it is unclear in which area the proposed work
   best fits. In such cases, when approaching multiple ADs, it is
   best to approach the ADs approximately simultaneously, state that
   you are unsure in which area the work fits, and ask for advice
   (e.g., by stating "I'm not sure which area this work best fits
   under, but it looks like it might be Internet or Security or
   both"). When contacting multiple ADs, it is strongly advised that
   you inform them of which other ADs you are conversing with. In
   particular, it is usually counterproductive and not advisable to
   go "AD shopping", where if one AD gives you an answer you don't
   like, you go to another, without telling him/her what the first AD
   said, in the hopes of getting a more favorable answer.

   To summarize, steps 1) and 2) involve a lot of "socializing an
   idea", that is, having discussions with a number of different
   people to attempt gaining agreement on the problem and the need
   for and appropriateness of having a BOF. How much such discussion
   is needed is very subjective, but it is critical in terms of
   getting agreement that a BOF is appropriate. One way to tell if

       you are close to getting it right: when talking to someone about
       your idea for the first time, they quickly agree that a BOF seems
       in order and don't have any major concerns.

       Timeline: Steps 1-2) can easily take 1-2 months; hence, begin 3-4
       months before an IETF meeting.

   3) Create a public mailing list and post a "call for participation"
      for the proposed BOF topic on various mailing lists (e.g., the
      IETF list). The call for participation advertises that a
      "community of interest" is being formed to gauge whether there is
      sufficient interest to host a BOF. The goal is to draw in other
      interested potential participants, to allow them to help shape the
      BOF (e.g., by giving them time to write a draft, ask for agenda
      time, help scope the work of the proposed work, argue that a BOF
      is (or is not) needed, etc.).

      Timeline: This step can easily take 1 month or longer; it also
      needs to be started well before the Internet-Drafts cutoff (to
      allow participants to submit drafts); hence, begin 2.5-3.5 months
      before the IETF meeting.

   4) Have substantive mailing list discussion. It is not enough for a
      handful of people to assert that they want a BOF; there needs to
      be broader community interest. A public mailing list allows ADs
      (and others) to gauge how much interest there really is on a topic
      area, as well as gauge how well the problem statement has been
      scoped, etc. At this phase of the BOF preparation, the emphasis
      should be on getting agreement on the problem statement;
      discussions about specific solutions tend to be distracting and
      unhelpful.

      Timeline: this step can easily take 1 month or longer; hence,
      begin 2.5 months before the IETF meeting.

   5) Submit a formal request to have a BOF. Instructions for
      submitting a formal request can be found at
      http://www.ietf.org/instructions/MTG-SLOTS.html and
      http://www.ietf.org/ietf/1bof-procedures.txt. Note that as part
      of making a formal request, the organizers must identify the area
      in which the BOF will be held (the Area Directors of that area
      will be required to approve the BOF), include a proposed BOF
      agenda, estimate the attendance, list conflicts with other
      sessions that should be avoided, etc.

      If the previous steps have been followed, the Area Directors (ADs)
      should be in a good position to gauge whether there is sufficient
      interest to justify approval of a BOF.

Note: it almost goes without saying that without one or more
Internet Drafts at this point, it is generally pointless to ask an
AD to approve a BOF.

Timeline: The Secretariat publishes an "important meeting dates"
calendar along with meeting information. There is a firm deadline
(about six weeks prior to the meeting) for submitting a formal BOF
scheduling request. Note that at the time of the deadline, an AD
will need to have sufficient information about the BOF to approve
or reject the request, so all of the previous steps will need to
have completed.

6) During the 2-4 weeks before an IETF (assuming a BOF has been
   approved and scheduled), the focus (on the mailing list) should be
   on identifying areas of agreement and areas of disagreement.
   Since disagreement, or "lack of consensus", tends to be the main
   reason for not forming a WG, focusing on those specific areas
   where "lack of consensus" exists is critically important. In
   general, only after those disagreements have been resolved will a
   WG be formed; thus, the main goal should be to find consensus and
   work through the areas of disagreement. Alternatively, a specific
   case should be made about why the charter, as it is written, is
   the best one, in spite of the stated opposition.

7) Prior to the BOF, it is critical to produce a proposed charter and
   iterate on it on the mailing list to attempt to get a consensus
   charter. Ultimately, the most important question to ask during a
   BOF is: "should a WG with the following charter be formed?". It
   goes without saying that a charter with shortcomings (no matter
   how seemingly trivial to fix) will not achieve consensus if folk
   still have issues with the specific wording.

8) Decide what questions will be asked during the BOF itself. Since
   the exact wording of the questions is critical (and hard to do on
   the fly), it is strongly recommended that those questions be
   floated on the mailing list and to the ADs prior to the BOF. This
   will enable people to understand what they will be asked to
   approve and will allow the questions to be modified (prior to the
   BOF) to remove ambiguities, etc. Likewise, discussing these
   questions in advance may lead to refinement of the charter so that
   the questions can be answered affirmatively.

9) At the meeting, but before the BOF takes place, plan a meeting
   with all of the presenters to have them meet each other, review
   the agenda, and make sure everyone understands what is expected of
   them (e.g., what time constraints they will be under when

presenting). Use this time to also work through any disagreements
that still remain. Do the same "in the hallway" with other
interested parties!

10) Consult the tutorial schedule and consider attending relevant
tutorial sessions ("Working Group Chair Training", "Working Group
Leadership Training", etc.). This is especially the case if you
are considering being the chair of a proposed WG. Since the role
of the WG chair and BOF chair have a number of parallels, a
number of the topics covered in the tutorial apply to hosting a
BOF and developing a charter.

3. The Importance of Understanding the Real Problem

   Throughout the process of chartering new work in the IETF, a key
   issue is understanding (and finding consensus) on what the real,
   underlying problem is that the customer, operator, or deployer of a
   technology has and that the WG needs to address. When a WG finishes
   an effort, the WG's output will only be useful if it actually solves
   a real, compelling problem faced by the actual user of the technology
   (i.e., the customer or operator). Unfortunately, there have been
   more than a few IETF WGs whose output was not adopted, and in some of
   those cases the cause was a lack of understanding of the real problem
   the operator had. In the end, the WG's output simply didn't address
   the right problem.

   Another issue that can happen is discussions about specific (or
   competing) solution approaches effectively stalemating the WG (or
   BOF), making it unable to make progress. In some of those cases, the
   arguments about the appropriateness of specific technologies are
   actually proxies for the question of whether a proposed approach
   adequately addresses the problem. If there is a lack of clarity
   about the actual underlying problem to be solved, there may well be
   unresolvable arguments about the suitability of a particular
   technical approach, depending on one's view of the actual problem and
   the constraints associated with it. Hence, it is critical for all
   work to be guided by a clear and shared understanding of the
   underlying problem.

   The best description and understanding of an actual problem usually
   comes from the customer, operator, or deployer of a technology. They
   are the ones that most clearly understand the difficulties they have
   (that need addressing) and they are the ones who will have to deploy
   any proposed solution. Thus, it is critical to hear their voice when
   formulating the details of the problem statement. Moreover, when
   evaluating the relative merits of differing solution approaches, it
   is often helpful to go back to the underlying problem statement for
   guidance in selecting the more appropriate approach.

4. The BOF Itself

   For the BOF itself, it is critically important to focus on the bottom
   line:

      What is it that one is attempting to achieve during the BOF?

   Or, stated differently, after the BOF is over, by what criteria will
   you decide whether or not the BOF was successful?

   A good BOF organizer keeps a firm focus on the purpose of the BOF and
   crafts an agenda in support of that goal. Just as important,
   presentations that do not directly support the goal should be
   excluded, as they often become distractions, sow confusion, and
   otherwise take focus away from the purpose of the BOF. If the goal
   is to form a WG, everything should lead to an (obvious) answer to the
   following question:

      Does the room agree that the IETF should form a WG with the
      following (specific) charter?

   One of the best ways to ensure a "yes" answer to the above, is by
   performing adequate preparation before the BOF to ensure that the
   community as a whole already agrees that the answer is "yes". How
   does one do that? One good way seems to be:

   1) Have a public discussion with sufficient time to allow iteration
      and discussion. (Hence, start a minimum of 3 months prior to the
      IETF meeting.)

   2) Work with the community to iterate on the charter and be sure to
      address the significant concerns that are being raised. (One can
      address the concerns in advance -- and get advance agreement -- or
      one can have those concerns be raised (again) during the BOF -- in
      which case it is likely that the proposed charter will not be good
      enough to get agreement during the actual BOF).

   3) During the BOF, keep the agenda tightly focused on supporting the
      need for the WG and otherwise making the case that the group has
      identified a clearly-scoped charter and has agreement on what the
      set of deliverables should be.

   Another important reason for holding a BOF is to establish an
   understanding of how the attendees (and the larger community) feel
   about the proposed work. Do they understand and agree on the problem
   that needs solving? Do they agree the problem is solvable, or that
   new protocol work is needed? To better understand the degree of
   agreement, it is useful to ask the audience questions.

Whenever asking questions, it is important to ask the right ones --
questions that show where there is agreement and questions that probe
the details around where agreement is lacking. Good questions
typically focus on aspects of the problem in a piecewise fashion,
establishing areas of consensus and identifying areas where
additional work is needed. Poor questions do not serve to focus
future discussion where it is needed. The following are examples of
questions that are often useful to ask.

1) Is there support to form a WG with the following charter? (That
   is, the charter itself is ready, as shown by community support.)

2) Does the community think that the problem statement is clear,
   well-scoped, solvable, and useful to solve?

3) Can I see a show of hands of folk willing to review documents (or
   comment on the mailing list)?

4) Who would be willing to serve as an editor for the following
   document(s)? (BOF chairs should take note of individuals who
   raise their hands, but it is also a useful gauge to see if there
   is a critical mass of editors to work on all the documents that
   are to be produced.)

5) Does the community think that given the charter revisions
   discussed during the BOF (subject to review and finalization on
   the mailing list), a WG should be formed?

6) How many people feel that a WG should not be formed? (If the
   number of no responses is significant, it would help to ask those
   saying no why they are opposed.)

7) Before asking a particular question, it is sometimes very
   appropriate to ask: Do people feel like they have sufficient
   information to answer the following question or is it premature to
   even ask the question?

Unfortunately, it is also easy to ask the wrong questions. Some
examples are given in a later section.

5. Post-BOF Follow-Up

After the BOF has taken place, it is advisable to take assessment of
how well things went and what the next steps are. The ADs should be
included in this assessment. Some things to consider:

   1) Did the BOF go well enough that the logical next step is to focus
      on refining the charter and becoming a WG before the next IETF
      meeting? If so, there will almost certainly be additional
      discussion on the mailing list to refine the charter and work out
      a few remaining items.

      Note that it can be difficult to determine in some cases whether a
      WG is a feasible next step. Much will depend on details of how
      the BOF went and/or whether the contentious items can either be
      resolved on the mailing list or simply be excluded from the
      charter and dealt with later (if at all). Much will also depend
      on the relevant AD's assessment of whether the proposed work is
      ready to move forward. Sometimes even a seemingly contentious BOF
      can result in a WG being formed quickly -- provided the charter is
      scoped appropriately.

      If the next step is to attempt to form a WG, the charter needs to
      be finalized on the BOF-specific mailing list. Once done, the
      IESG can be asked to formally consider the charter. The IESG then
      (usually) posts the proposed charter to the IETF list for
      community feedback and makes a decision based in part on the
      feedback it receives.

   2) It may be the case that enough additional work still needs to take
      place that aiming for a second (and final) BOF makes more sense.
      In that case, many of the steps outlined earlier in this document
      would be repeated, though at a faster pace.

      The expectations for a second BOF are generally higher than those
      for an initial BOF. In addition to the work done up through the
      first BOF, the first BOF will have highlighted the key areas where
      additional work is needed. The time leading up to the second BOF
      will need to be spent working through those outstanding issues.
      Second BOFs should not be a repeat of the first BOF, with the same
      issues being raised and the same (unsatisfactory) responses
      provided. The second BOF needs to show that all previously
      identified issues have been resolved and that formation of a WG is
      now in order.

6. Pitfalls

   Over the years, a number of pitfalls have been (repeatedly) observed:

   1) Waiting too long before getting started. It is very difficult to
      prepare for a BOF on short notice. Moreover, ADs are placed in a
      no-win situation when asked to approve a BOF for which the
      community has not had a chance to participate. Steps 1-4 in
      Section 2 above are designed to show the ADs that there is

community support for a particular effort. Short-circuiting those
steps forces an AD to make a judgment call with (usually) too
little information. Moreover, because the community has not been
involved, it is much more likely that significant (and valid)
objections will be raised. Often, those objections could have
been dealt with in advance -- had there been sufficient time to
work through them in advance.

2) Too much discussion/focus on solutions, rather than showing that
   support exists for the problem statement itself, and that the
   problem is well-understood and scoped. The purpose of the BOF is
   almost never to show that there are already proposed solutions,
   but to demonstrate that there is a real problem that needs
   solving, a solution would be beneficial to the community, it is
   believed that a solution is achievable, and there is a critical
   mass of community support to actually put in the real work of
   developing a solution.

3) Asking the wrong question during the BOF. Often, BOF organizers
   feel like they need a "show of hands" on specific questions. But,
   unless a question is clear, well scoped, focused enough to
   establish where there is agreement (and where not), etc., asking
   such a question serves little purpose. Even worse, asking poor
   questions can frustrate the BOF participants and lead to
   additional questions at the microphone, derailing the focus of the
   BOF.

   Examples of unreasonable questions to ask:

   - Asking folk to approve or review a charter that is put on screen
     but has not been posted to the mailing list sufficiently in
     advance. (You cannot ask folk to approve something they have
     not seen.)

   - Asking multi-part questions in which it is not clear (in
     advance) what all of the exact questions will be and which
     choices a participant needs to choose from.

4) Poorly advertised in advance, thus, the BOF itself does not
   include the "right" participants. This can happen for a number of
   reasons, including:

   - giving the BOF a "cute" but unintuitive name (or acronym),
     preventing people from realizing that it would be of interest to
     them.

      - failing to advertise the BOF in advance to the community of
        people that might be interested. At a minimum, the existence of
        a proposed BOF should be advertised on the IETF list as well as
        on specific WG lists that are somewhat related.

   5) Providing agenda time for the "wrong" presentations. There is an
      (unfortunate) tendency to give anyone who requests agenda time an
      opportunity to speak. This is often a mistake. Presentations
      should be limited to those that address the purpose of the BOF.
      More important, presentations should not distract from the BOF's
      purpose, or open up ratholes that are a distraction to the more
      basic purpose of the BOF. An example of problematic
      presentations:

      - presentations on specific solutions, when the purpose of the BOF
        is to get agreement on the problem statement and the need for a
        WG. Solutions at this point are too-often "half-baked" and
        allow discussion to rathole on aspects of the solutions.
        Instead, the focus should be on getting agreement on whether to
        form a WG.

   6) Poor time management, leading to insufficient time for discussion
      of the key issues (this is often closely related to 5). When
      presentations run over their allotted time, the end result is
      either squeezing someone else's presentation or having
      insufficient discussion time. Neither is acceptable nor helpful.
      BOF chairs need to give presenters just enough time to make key
      points -- and no more. It may well be helpful to go over a
      presenter's slides in advance, to ensure they are on-topic and
      will fit within the time slot.

7. Miscellaneous

7.1. Chairing

   BOF organizers often assume that they will be chairing a BOF (and the
   eventual WG). Neither assumption is always true. ADs need to ensure
   that a BOF runs smoothly and is productive. For some topics, it is a
   given that the BOF will be contentious. In such cases, ADs may want
   to have a more experienced person chairing or co-chairing the BOF.
   Also, those interested in organizing the BOF often are the most
   interested in driving a particular technology (and may have strongly
   held views about what direction an effort should take). Working
   Groups are often more effective when passionately involved parties
   are allowed to focus on the technical work, rather than on managing
   the WG itself. Thus, do not be surprised (or offended!) if the AD
   wants to pick one or more co-chairs for either the BOF or a follow-on
   WG.

7.2. On the Need for a BOF

   This document highlights the need for allowing for and actively
   engaging in a broad public discussion on the merits of forming a WG.
   It might surprise some, but there is no actual process requirement to
   have a BOF prior to forming a WG. The actual process requirement is
   simply that the IESG (together with the AD(s) sponsoring the work)
   approve a formal charter as described in [RFC2418]. In practice,
   BOFs are used to engage the broader community on proposed work and to
   help produce an acceptable charter.

   There are two observations that can be made here. First, BOFs are
   often held not because they are (strictly speaking) required, but
   because it is assumed they are needed or because ADs feel that a BOF
   would be beneficial in terms of getting additional public
   participation. Hence, those interested in forming a WG should give
   serious consideration to using the steps outlined above not just for
   the purposes of creating a BOF, but to convince the IESG and the
   broader community that a BOF is not even needed, as there is already
   demonstrated, strong consensus that a WG should be formed. Second,
   the IESG should not forget that BOFs are simply a tool, and may not
   even be the best tool in every situation.

8. Security Considerations

   This document has no known security implications.

9. Acknowledgments

   This document has benefited from specific feedback from Jari Arkko,
   Brian Carpenter, Dave Crocker, Spencer Dawkins, Lisa Dusseault, Pasi
   Eronen, John Klensin, Tim Polk, Mark Townsley, and Bert Wijnen.

10. Informative Reference

   [RFC2418] Bradner, S., "IETF Working Group Guidelines and
              Procedures", BCP 25, RFC 2418, September 1998.

Author's Address

   Thomas Narten
   IBM Corporation
   3039 Cornwallis Ave.
   PO Box 12195 - BRQA/502
   Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-2195

   Phone: 919-254-7798
   EMail: narten@us.ibm.com