Considerations for Having a Successful "Bar BOF" Side Meeting

Abstract

   New work is typically brought to the IETF by a group of interested
   individuals. IETF meetings are a convenient place for such groups to
   hold informal get-togethers to discuss and develop their ideas. Such
   side meetings, which are not reflected in the IETF meeting agenda and
   have no official status, are often half-jokingly referred to as "bar
   BOF" sessions to acknowledge that some of them may eventually lead to
   a proposal for an official IETF BOF ("birds of a feather" session) on
   a given topic.

   During recent IETF meetings, many such "bar BOF" get-togethers have
   been organized and moderated in ways that made them increasingly
   indistinguishable from official IETF BOFs or sometimes even IETF
   working group meetings.

   This document argues that this recent trend is not helpful in
   reaching the ultimate goal of many of these get-togethers, i.e., to
   efficiently discuss and develop ideas for new IETF work. It
   encourages the organizers to consider the benefits of holding them in
   much less formal settings and to also consider alternative means to
   develop their ideas. This document also recommends that the
   community abandon the term "bar BOF" and instead use other terms such
   as "side meeting", in order to stress the unofficial nature of these
   get-togethers.

Status of This Memo

   This document is not an Internet Standards Track specification; it is
   published for informational purposes.

   This document is a product of the Internet Engineering Task Force
   (IETF). It represents the consensus of the IETF community. It has
   received public review and has been approved for publication by the
   Internet Engineering Steering Group (IESG). Not all documents
   approved by the IESG are a candidate for any level of Internet
   Standard; see Section 2 of RFC 5741.

Information about the current status of this document, any errata, and how to provide feedback on it may be obtained at http://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc6771.

1. Introduction

   A typical IETF meeting is full of sessions of different kinds. In
   addition to official IETF and IRTF sessions listed in the meeting
   agenda (such as working and research group meetings, area meetings,
   or plenaries), many other unofficial meetings take place. These
   include meetings between IETF participants from one organization or
   company, design team meetings, Internet-Draft editing sessions,
   interoperability testing, directorate lunches, and many others.

   Some of these unofficial get-togethers are organized by individual
   participants with a common interest in initiating new IETF work of
   some kind. New IETF work often fits into an existing working group
   and does not require an official "birds of a feather" (BOF) session
   [RFC5434] to determine community consensus. Nevertheless, the phrase
   "bar BOF" has commonly been used in the community when talking about
   such informal get-togethers that are held to discuss potential new
   work. [RFC4677] (which has been obsoleted by [RFC6722])
   characterizes a "bar BOF" as

      an unofficial get-together, usually in the late evening, during
      which a lot of work gets done over drinks. Bar BOFs spring up in
      many different places around an IETF meeting, such as restaurants,
      coffee shops, and (if we are so lucky) pools.

   During recent IETF meetings, "bar BOFs" have become increasingly
   indistinguishable from official IETF BOFs or sometimes even IETF
   working group meetings. The symptoms of this trend are unofficial
   "bar BOFs" that are held in regular IETF meeting rooms with

classroom-style seating, agendas with lengthy slide presentations,
use of microphone lines, and even formal consensus calls. And,
perhaps most importantly, such meetings have a distinct lack of
drinks.

This document argues that this trend is not helpful in reaching the
ultimate goal of many of these get-togethers, i.e., to brainstorm
about a technical topic that may eventually lead to new IETF work.
It encourages the organizers of these unofficial get-togethers to
consider the benefits of holding them in much less formal settings.

This document also recommends that the community abandon the term
"bar BOF". The distinction between a BOF, i.e., an official IETF
activity, and a "bar BOF", i.e., an unofficial get-together, is lost
on many IETF participants, especially newcomers. The similarity in
terms has even caused confusion to the point where some participants
believe that a "bar BOF" is a required step in the IETF process in
order to apply for an official BOF, which is obviously false. For
these reasons, the remainder of this document will use the term "side
meeting" instead and recommends that the community do the same, in
order to stress the unofficial nature of these get-togethers.

Before going into more detailed advice on how to hold side meetings,
it is important to remember that many participants are extremely busy
during an IETF meeting. Although having a side meeting to discuss an
idea in an informal face-to-face setting is attractive, the
scheduling of such meetings is very difficult and needs to happen
weeks, if not months, prior to the meeting itself. Conference calls,
email discussions, wikis, jabber group chats, and other ways for
interacting are also effective at developing ideas and easier to
schedule.

2. How to Invite

A good rule of thumb is that a side meeting to discuss and develop a
proposal for new IETF work should include the necessary participants
to achieve that purpose and no more. Smaller meetings are usually
more successful than larger meetings.

Hence, it is often useful to limit attendance carefully. Publicly
broadcasting an announcement for a side meeting on a particular
topic, e.g., on an IETF mailing list, is therefore not usually a good
method of inviting the desired set of participants.

One reason is that if the announcement happens to attract a large
response, the logistics of organizing a side meeting for a larger
group quickly becomes very difficult. Small groups fit comfortably
around a table at a bar or a restaurant or can find a quiet corner in

an IETF hallway for a discussion. Larger groups require dedicated
meeting facilities, which are limited during IETF meetings, and they
generally require much more careful planning in order to get work
done.

When publicly announcing a side meeting, it is often not even
possible for the organizers to determine how large the resulting get-
together will be, forcing them to over-provision for the "best case"
of a substantial attendance, even in cases where this turns out to be
not necessary. And even when a large group comes together, it often
mostly consists of "tourists". Tourists usually do not actively
participate in the get-together at all, or they participate with an
intent to learn about a topic, which can derail a planned discussion
of specific issues and turn it into a tutorial. The attendance of
tourists requires finding a larger room and makes the interactions
between the active participants more cumbersome, e.g., because
microphones need to be used in larger rooms. There are times to
expose new ideas to a broader community, but think carefully before
publicly announcing a side meeting.

So while publicly announcing a side meeting can be useful in order to
gather interested people for a discussion, it often makes sense to
still limit attendance. For example, an announcement could say, "We
have a table reserved at restaurant X for Y people. If you are
interested in attending, please briefly explain how you will
contribute to the discussion we are planning to have". If more than
Y people respond, the organizers make a selection.

Selecting or specifically inviting IESG or IAB members is not
necessary and may not even be advisable in many cases. Some ideas
need time to form before they result in anything cohesive, and a side
meeting is a good time to develop new ideas. It is usually most
useful to approach Area Directors (ADs) and IAB members for comments
after an idea has solidified enough so that an elevator pitch can be
given. Also, it should be clear that if an AD or IAB member attends
a side meeting, it is not necessarily a show of support. They may
simply be interested or often may be concerned or troubled with some
aspect of the potential work and relation to existing work. On the
other hand, when an AD or IAB member declines to attend a side
meeting, that is usually not a sign of disinterest or disapproval --
these people have busy schedules, especially during an IETF week.

In the initial stages of developing a proposal for new IETF work, the
ability for interested and experienced participants to brainstorm is
tremendously important. Brainstorming is facilitated by direct,
interactive, and high-bandwidth discussions. This is clearly much
more easily achieved in a smaller setting, where half-baked ideas can
be dissected and developed. This is often not possible in a larger

group. Even worse, a badly run large meeting can sometimes "poison
the waters" for a proposed idea by convincing the broader community
that the proposal is confused, not ready, or otherwise uninteresting.

Another reason to discuss new work proposals in smaller groups is
scope creep, i.e., the tendency of an initially rather tightly scoped
area of new work to expand, because people will argue that whatever
the initial topic was, it should be expanded to include their
particular item of interest. This is harder to control in larger
groups. Keeping the scope of new work items narrow is important,
because eventual chartering decisions are often much more difficult
for larger items of new work than for smaller ones.

It is important to understand that in the IETF, proposals for new
work are judged based on their technical merits and on whether there
is enough energy and interest in the community to complete the work
in a timely manner. This happens in the relevant working group, if
one exists, or else during an official BOF session. How many warm
bodies fill a room during an unofficial side meeting has no influence
on this decision and is not a good metric for reporting interest in a
topic to the community or to employers. Discussions about new work
are often controversial, and people will show up just to watch the
fireworks, learn about a new topic, or make sure the new work does
not interfere with work they are already pursuing, without being
interested contributing in some way to the actual proposal itself.

Some side meetings are organized to discuss a topic that is also
being discussed in an existing working group, either before or after
the working group itself meets. Some working groups call these side
meetings "ad hoc sessions". The fact that a side meeting is
organized by a chair or key participant of a working group in order
to discuss topics related to the working group does not make it any
more official than other side meetings. An "ad hoc session" is not
an official working group session, and no decisions relevant to a
working group can be made. Working group consensus can only be
established during official sessions or on the mailing list
[RFC2418].

3. Where to Meet

As the colloquial name "bar BOF" implied, such side meetings are
traditionally held in bars or restaurants. Recently, there has been
a distinct shift towards holding such get-togethers in regular IETF
meeting rooms. One reason for this trend has been discussed in
Section 2, namely, that an uncontrolled broadcast announcement
requires over-provisioning of facilities.

A second reason for this trend is that some participants, e.g., non-native English speakers or participants with hearing difficulties, find it difficult to interact or follow a discussion in noisy environments, such as restaurants and especially bars. The organizers of side meetings are encouraged to take this factor into consideration when finding a meeting place. Quiet restaurants are not hard to find, and many offer private dining rooms at no extra charge for larger parties.

A likely third reason why side meetings are increasingly held in IETF rooms is that the booking of such a room currently requires approval by an Area Director. The reason for this practice is simply to make sure that IETF-paid rooms are used for meetings that are in the widest sense IETF-related. However, the approval of a room request for a side meeting has been known to sometimes be reported as Area Director "support" for the topic of the meeting to the community or to employers. No such support is expressed or implied when Area Directors approve room requests! Many routinely say "yes" to every incoming request as long as there are meeting rooms available (and there are typically lots of meeting rooms available outside of normal working group meeting slots).

Holding side meetings in IETF meeting rooms does not make them any more official or valid than get-togethers that happen in other places. Participants have recently begun to list the times and locations of some side meetings on a wiki page, but that does not make them part of the official IETF agenda or otherwise change their unofficial status.

IETF meeting rooms clearly do not provide the most supportive environment for side meetings that require brainstorming on a new technical proposal. One reason is that the classroom-style seating often present in IETF meeting rooms tends to spread people out in rows, all facing towards a front presenter, which is good for presentations but bad for discussion. Because IETF meeting rooms tend to be large and people have a natural tendency to spread out, holding a meeting in one often requires microphone use, which is cumbersome, slows a discussion down, and leads to "question-answer" dialogs between two people, which is much less effective than a group discussion around a restaurant table.

Another reason is more pragmatic. Because the organizers of unofficial get-togethers can only use IETF meeting rooms during times when they are not otherwise in use, such side meetings often happen during breakfast, lunch, dinner, or later in the evening. This prolongs the time during which IETF participants are stuck in the same rooms they're stuck in for the rest of the day, and it prevents them from having a regular and at least somewhat relaxed meal.

Anecdotal evidence exists that at least one Area Director has not
been able to set foot outside the IETF hotel for a stretch of several
days during IETF 77. (IETF 77 was held in Anaheim, CA, and the food
options in and near the hotel were, let's say, of severely limited
quality.) It is unlikely that participants in the consequential
mental and bodily state will make productive contributions to a side
meeting or, in the case of Area Directors, will be extremely
receptive towards new work proposals.

Food, drink, and a relaxed atmosphere in which to have a discussion
are an essential part of a successful side meeting, because they
often need to happen during meal times. IETF meeting rooms offer
neither.

4. How to Meet

Several of the recent side meetings that were held in IETF meeting
rooms emulated official IETF meetings to a degree that made them
indistinguishable from a regular working group meeting for the
average IETF attendee. This included detailed agendas, lengthy
presentations, organizers who refer to themselves as "bar BOF
chairs", emulating blue sheets (see Section 4.5 of [RFC4677]), and
even hums and other consensus calls (see Section 5.2 of [RFC4677]).

It is not clear as to why this has been happening. One attempt at an
explanation may be that holding a get-together in an IETF room and
having the organizers behave like chairs behave during regular IETF
sessions is causing a Pavlovian stimulus in the attendees. Another
explanation attempt is that an IETF meeting room simply does not
allow many other forms of discussion. Finally, some organizers may
find the process to apply for an official BOF too complex or
troublesome (and probably rightfully so) and so decide to simply
mimic one, or they had applied for an official BOF, got turned down,
and then decided to hold the same meeting as a side meeting.

Whatever the reason for this development, it is reasonably obvious
that running a side meeting with a focus on making quick progress on
a technical proposal in a way that emulates running a working group
session is not very productive. Working group sessions follow
certain procedures due to larger audiences, the need to establish
formal consensus, etc., that a side meeting can do without.

Having side meetings mimic working group meetings is also confusing
to attendees. In at least one case, some side meeting participants
believed that they were attending an actual working group meeting,
and incorrect press announcements were generated. When side meetings
take place at restaurants or elsewhere away from IETF meeting rooms,
the chance for confusion is much lower.

Because the reasons for organizing such a get-together are diverse,
this section is not making more specific suggestions, other than to
note that meeting outside of an IETF meeting room is likely going to
shift the dynamics sufficiently so that better interactions and
results become possible.

5. When to Meet

Side meetings are often scheduled following IETF evening plenaries,
which sometimes end before the time indicated on the meeting agenda
but have in the past also ended much later. It is therefore useful
to avoid scheduling side meetings that follow IETF plenaries at a
fixed time. Instead, it is recommended to schedule them relative to
the end of the plenary, i.e., "X minutes after the end of the
plenary". That way, attendees do not need to wait around if a
plenary finishes early and do not need to leave a plenary should it
run late.

Section 3 of [RFC5434] raises the issue that it is essential to
understand all angles of a given problem for which IETF work is
proposed. This means that input from the community that can be found
at IETF meetings is not all that should be considered. It can be
argued that input from other communities -- operator, research,
regulatory, etc. -- is at least as important. Hence, organizers
should consider the value of holding side meetings at venues where
such input can be more easily gathered, such as operator fora (RIPE,
NANOG, etc.), research conferences, or other events.

6. Conclusions

Side meeting organizers are encouraged to rekindle the original
spirit behind them and organize them outside IETF meeting rooms, at
venues with food and drink, for smaller groups, and in a way that
does not needlessly mimic the way official IETF sessions are
conducted.

It can often be useful to discuss proposals for new IETF work face-
to-face in an informal setting, but conference calls, email
discussions, wikis, and other means for interactions are also
effective at developing ideas, especially given the scheduling
difficulties when busy individuals are involved during an IETF
meeting.

Finally, it is important to remember that all side meetings during an
IETF week are purely informal and have no official status whatsoever.

7. Security Considerations

   A security AD pointed out that people have been known to forget their
   laptops after side meetings held in real bars. The organizers of
   side meetings should therefore remind any attending security ADs (and
   possibly others) to take their belongings with them after the side
   meeting ends or the bar closes, whichever happens first.

8. Acknowledgments

   The name and title of this document have been chosen to resemble
   those used by Thomas Narten for his guidelines document on holding a
   successful BOF [RFC5434], as a sign of appreciation for a document
   that has proven to be invaluable many times over.

   Several folks provided feedback and input on this document, including
   Jari Arkko, Fred Baker, Scott Bradner, Ben Campbell, Jorge Contreras,
   Spencer Dawkins, Ralph Droms, Wesley Eddy, Frank Ellermann, Adrian
   Farrel, Stephen Farrell, David Harrington, Russ Housley, Cullen
   Jennings, John Klensin, Al Morton, Robert Sparks, and Dan Wing.

   Lars Eggert was partly funded by [TRILOGY], a research project
   supported by the European Commission under its Seventh Framework
   Program.

9. Informative References

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