Is Accreditation Important in Standards Work?1

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ABSTRACT

Among the hundreds, if not thousands, of organizations which develop standards there is a wide range of organizational structures, practices and policies, and levels of recognition or accreditation. But accredited and unaccredited standards organizations, commonly referred to as “SDOs” and “SSOs” respectively, are more alike than usually thought, and over the past decade have been converging in their practices and recognition of each others’ work. One may ask what the difference is between these organizations, as accreditation by itself is not a valid distinguishing feature – many unaccredited organizations are fully qualified to become accredited and would do so if only they saw the need or benefit. Standards used for such important technical advances as the World Wide Web come from unaccredited organizations, and users of standards seem to care little if the work was done in an accredited environment or not. So does accreditation matter?

Keywords: accreditation; consortia; convergence; SDO; SSO

INTRODUCTION

Standards are being developed today by a large number and wide variety of standards organizations. Every industry, whether high- or low-tech, seems to have its own organization or sometimes multiples of organizations. These organizations could be established specifically for the purpose of developing standards, or the standards could be developed as a sideline by professional organizations or vendor consortiums. Most countries have national standards bodies, which are in turn members of bodies at the international level that may have various levels of authority granted by agreement or government treaty. There are, of course, differences in all of these organizations in the scope of their missions, levels of membership or funding, business models, the quality and quantity of work produced, and their levels of recognition and accreditation by other organizations higher up the hierarchy.

Despite these differences, organizations that develop standards are fundamentally very similar. They seek to develop standards to benefit their industries and/or their members. They face the same issues of financing their operations, gaining and retaining members,
producing standards that meet specific needs, and having those standards adopted. And despite perceptions to the contrary, standards organizations that are accredited or recognized are quite similar to those which are not.

TERMINOLOGY

Any discussion of standards activities will inevitably use a particular terminology to refer to and classify the various types of organizations that develop, approve, and promote standards. The terms de facto, de jure, formal, informal, SSO, SDO, government, industry, sectoral, consortium, recognized, accredited, regional, national, etc. can all used to describe what could generically be called standards organizations.2

It is not the purpose of this article to add to the discussion of terminology; several good papers have been published on the topic.3 However, as the purpose of this article is to discuss the differences and similarities between what are commonly referred to as “Standards Setting Organizations” and “Standards Developing Organizations”, these terms must first be dispensed with.

The term “Standards Developing Organization,” or SDO, is generally meant to refer to an organization that is accredited or recognized at some level by some sanctioning body, such as a government-recognized or treaty organization at the international level such as ITU or WTO, internationally recognized organizations such as ISO and IEC, or the national bodies such as ANSI, AFNOR, BSI, or DIN, and the European regional bodies such as CEN or ETSI.5 SDOs would include, in the U.S., for example, the Accredited Standards Developer (ASD) organizations which are accredited by ANSI; this accreditation is obtained by applying for the accreditation, demonstrating compliance with the ANSI Essential Requirements, and submitting to occasional audits. While admittedly very broad, I will use the terms “accredited” or “recognized” to refer to all of these organizations, both the organizations who develop the standards as well as those who accredit and grant the higher levels of approval.

“Standards Setting Organization,” or SSO, on the other hand, generally refers to a consortium, forum, professional organization, or any private, closed group that develops and approves specifications that it calls standards or recommendations, etc. The most common and consistent use of the term has been to designate a standards organization that is not formal, recognized, or accredited as defined above. It is generally used as the opposite of “SDO,” and sometimes replaced simply with the term “consortium.”7 Consortia have generally not restricted themselves to national interests, but develop domain- or industry-specific standards without regard to national boundaries.

This article avoids using the SDO/SSO terminology because, despite general use, there is no clear and accepted definition of the terms, and more especially because the terminology is confusing and contradictory. In particular, both the accredited organizations and the unaccredited consortia organization will develop standards, so there is no useful or consistent distinction in saying that one sets (SSO) and the other develops (SDO). And while an accredited organization will develop standards, a sanctioning body such as ANSI, which would normally be included in the SDO category, does not develop standards but rather approves or sets standards; it would thus more appropriately be called a “standards setting organization” rather than a “standards developing organization.”

When the SDO/SSO terms are ever defined, the definitions are usually along the lines of whether the organization is accredited by a recognized body or not. And as this accredited/unaccredited binary is perfectly understandable and considerably more accurate than SDO/SSO, these are the terms which will be used in this article together with other specific terms such as consortia, recognized, national body, etc.

The premise of this article is that while the accredited/unaccredited binary is valid, it is not a complete description of the differences between standards organizations but that the
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