

3.2.2 Consensus

Developing consensus standards is an inherently complex process. Interested parties need to become aware of a Standard under development, understand its contents, explore the potential consequences and provide reasoned feedback. There may be considerable negotiation between the stakeholders when striking a balance between competing factors.

Thus although there are ways to accelerate the development of standards²⁰, there are natural limits associated with the processes of transparency and consensus. It should be noted, however, that this is quite analogous to policy, strategy or system development processes, where good practice during the requirement analysis and development phases can circumvent much more time consuming and costly implementation issues.

Means of accelerating standards development in a consensus environment include sponsorship of the development process or targeted components of it e.g. initial drafting, consultation, enabling full-time resources to be deployed rather than the more usual volunteer-based, part-time efforts²¹. NEHTA is an example of this approach, by providing full-time resources to priority areas.

Further means of accelerating standards development include:

- Interim Standards, which are sometimes prepared where there are still some issues to be decided or where national consensus has yet to be achieved. They provide both a guide to the direction that future standardization may take, and a mechanism to collect public feedback on the subject;
- Technical Specifications, which are normative²² documents that do not have full consensus. They may be prepared where the subject matter is undergoing rapid technical development and speed of delivery, rather than full consensus, is of paramount importance;
- Technical Reports, Handbooks, Rulings and Interpretations and other miscellaneous publications are informative documents that contain supplementary information.

The speed of standards development is not universally accepted as problematic, however. Swann, in a work on the economics of standardization produced for the British Department of Trade and Industry, notes that:

*"When the rate of change is rapid, producers need standards quickly, but customers need the confidence offered by high quality standardization. What appears to be undue slowness on the part of standards institutions could equally well be re-interpreted as excess haste by those who would set standards. There is a mismatch between the rate of innovation, the requirements for rapid standardization on the part of suppliers and the need for quality standardization on the part of empowered customers. Speeding up the standardization process is not necessarily the right answer to this mismatch."*²³

²⁰ The processes of developing standards broadly fall into six phases – identification of requirement; inclusion in a work program; development of a draft for public comment; public comment and reconciliation of comments; formal ballot; and preparation for publication. Lifecycle maintenance and management form a seventh, post-development phase.

²¹ Sponsorship was used to great effect by HL7 in the United States in the development of the EHR System Functional Model and Specification in 2003/04. The sponsors/funders for this project were the US Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS), the Veterans Administration (VA), and a private philanthropic organisation. This approach not only resulted in a greatly reduced development time, it also had the largest expert volunteer participation and the largest ballot response of any standard in the history of HL7. Other high priority e-health standards projects within HL7 have subsequently received funding from a variety of US government agencies.

²² That is, giving directives or rules. Normative documents are characterized by words such as "shall" or "must" rather than "should" or "may". Note, however, that compliance with Australian Standards is voluntary unless invoked via statute or contract. Accordingly, compliance with a normative but voluntary standard could be stated as "if you are going to comply with this standard, you shall ..."

²³ Swann, 2000, p. v.