Not All RFCs are Standards

Abstract

   This document discusses the relationship of the Request for Comments
   (RFCs) notes to Internet Standards.

Not All RFCs Are Standards

   The "Request for Comments" (RFC) document series is the official
   publication channel for Internet standards documents and other
   publications of the IESG, IAB, and Internet community. From time to
   time, and about every six months in the last few years, someone
   questions the rationality of publishing both Internet standards and
   informational documents as RFCs. The argument is generally that this
   introduces some confusion between "real standards" and "mere
   publications".

   It is a regrettably well spread misconception that publication as an
   RFC provides some level of recognition. It does not, or at least not
   any more than the publication in a regular journal. In fact, each
   RFC has a status, relative to its relation with the Internet
   standardization process: Informational, Experimental, or Standards
   Track (Proposed Standard, Draft Standard, Internet Standard), or
   Historic. This status is reproduced on the first page of the RFC
   itself, and is also documented in the periodic "Internet Official
   Protocols Standards" RFC (STD 1). But this status is sometimes
   omitted from quotes and references, which may feed the confusion.

   There are two important sources of information on the status of the
   Internet standards: they are summarized periodically in an RFC
   entitled "Internet Official Protocol Standards" and they are
   documented in the "STD" subseries. When a specification has been

adopted as an Internet Standard, it is given the additional label
"STD xxxx", but it keeps its RFC number and its place in the RFC
series.

It is important to note that the relationship of STD numbers to RFC
numbers is not one to one. STD numbers identify protocols, RFC
numbers identify documents. Sometimes more than one document is used
to specify a Standard protocol.

In order to further increase the publicity of the standardization
status, the IAB proposes the following actions:

    Use the STD number, rather than just the RFC numbers, in the cross
    references between standard tracks documents,

    Utilize the "web" hypertext technology to publicize the state of
    the standardization process.

More precisely, we propose to add to the current RFC repository an
"html" version of the "STD-1" document, i.e., the list of Internet
standards. We are considering the extension of this document to also
describes actions in progress, i.e., standards track work at the
"proposed" or "draft" stage.

A Single Archive

The IAB believes that the community benefitted significantly from
having a single archival document series. Documents are easy to find
and to retrieve, and file servers are easy to organize. This has
been very important over the long term. Experience of the past shows
that subseries, or series of limited scope, tend to vanish from the
network. And, there is no evidence that alternate document schemes
would result in less confusion.

Moreover, we believe that the presence of additional documents does
not actually hurt the standardization process. The solution which we
propose is to better publicize the "standard" status of certain
documents, which is made relatively easy by the advent of networked
hypertext technologies.

Rather Document Than Ignore

The RFC series includes some documents which are informational by
nature and other documents which describe experiences. A problem of
perception occurs when such a document "looks like" an official
protocol specification. Misguided vendors may claim conformance to
it, and misguided clients may actually believe that they are buying
an Internet standard.

The IAB believes that the proper help to misguided vendors and
clients is to provide them guidance. There is actually very little
evidence of vendors purposely attempting to present informational or
experimental RFCs as "Internet standards". If such attempts
occurred, proper response would indeed be required.

The IAB believes that the community is best served by openly
developed specifications. The Internet standardization process
provides guarantees of openness and thorough review, and the normal
way to develop the specification of an Internet protocol is indeed
through the IETF.

The community is also well served by having access to specifications
of which have been developed outside the IETF standards process,
either because the protocols are experimental in nature, were
developed privately, or failed to achieve the acquire the degree of
consensus required for elevation to the standards track.

The IAB believes that publication is better than ignorance. If a
particular specification ends up being used in products that are
deployed over the Internet, we are better off if the specification is
easy to retrieve as an RFC than if it is hidden in some private
repository.

Security Considerations

    Security issues are not discussed in this memo.

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