

How to join a W3C Working Group: our experience as editors of the Data on the Web Best Practices Working Group

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Introduction

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) is an international community where Member organizations, a full-time staff, and the public work together to develop Web standards.

Working Groups (WG) are created to develop the standards, which must be associated with a W3C activity (eg Data Activity). One of the members of the W3C team, the Team Contact, is responsible for defining the strategic direction of that Working Group in the creation phase. During work development, the Team Contact coordinates the communication as the liaison among the Chair(s), the Group Members, other Working Groups, and the W3C Team.

The Working Group coordination is carried out by one or more Chairs, responsible for facilitating discussions to achieve consensus among the participants, besides organizing the weekly agenda of the meetings and sending it to the group mailing list. In addition, they should ensure the members` active participation, as well as the smooth progress of the work, as Joseph Reagle explains in this text.

Each Working Group begins with a statement, the Charter, which outlines the scope of the WG, deliverables, success criteria, and the expected length of time to deliver the recommendation that will be a Web standard. Once the WG is created, after the Charter`s approval by the W3C members, participants can sign up to collaborate on the standard development. The documentation starts on the Wiki, which can be edited by any member of that Working Group.

Any document that will become a W3C recommendation and a Web standard should be built collaboratively by Working Group participants. Writing is also collaborative and there are always Editors, whose job is to contribute to the discussions and content, to make the text coherent and cohesive — in accordance with the group`s resolutions -, and ultimately to be responsible for the content of that document.

To participate effectively in the Working Groups, you must be a member of the W3C. This way, affiliated institutions appoint participant(s) to join the groups according to their own interests. Participants` responsibilities range from attending weekly virtual meetings, Face to Face meetings to actively participate in the process, fulfilling tasks and contributing to the WG resolutions. There may be a language barrier, because the process — documentation and meetings — is all in English, but it is an “international English” and not everybody is native, which makes communication easier.

It is important to emphasize that anyone can contribute to the standards development, since the Working Groups can receive external contributions, which must be analyzed by the editors. In addition, the entire process is documented on the Web.

Based on our experience as editors of Data on the Web Best Practices, we describe below the participation process, rules, and tools used by W3C members to collaborate on web development.

Weekly meetings

The weekly meetings are coordinated by the WG Chairs, who are responsible for sending the agenda 24 hours in advance, facilitating meetings and helping members achieve consensus.

Face to Face meetings

Face to Face meetings usually take place twice a year, depending on the availability of WG members. It is a two-day meeting and the work is very intense, aiming to solve the maximum number of Issues and actively work on the development of the Recommendation. In general, one of the meetings takes place during the TPAC, the W3C Technical Plenary, and the other is usually organized by one of the WG members.

Issues and Actions

Issues are raised by group members or by outside contributors, they should be resolved during the weekly meetings or through the mailing list. Actions are tasks that the participants take on and are related with the recommendation development.

Proposals and Resolutions

Once the Issues are resolved, Proposals are created, voted, and approved. They will later become Resolutions to be incorporated into the document by the publishers.

Consensus

The Art of Consensus is an important part of the Web standards building process, focusing on achieving consensus among participants in each Working Group. This means that each resolution is voted on during the weekly meeting, but if someone votes against it, that resolution will not be approved until all the participants come to an agreement.

Rules

Active participation

Upon joining a Working Group, the participant is required to comply with the W3C participation rules; such as actively participating in meetings, contributing to the document, and complying with the designated actions and meeting deadlines.

Active communication

Communication among the WG participants occurs through the mailing list and meetings. All communication is documented and available to the public. In addition, the public can send suggestions and communicate with the WG members via to a special mailing list.

Products Delivery

The Charter of each WG has a list of deliverables, for which all participants are responsible. A deliverable can be a Note, which must be approved by the WG members, or a Recommendation, which may become a Web standard as long as it is approved by the Advisory Committee through a W3C process.

Tools

The Working Groups use tools to enable both collaborative communication and development of Web standards:

WebEx

It is used for virtual meetings. Participants connect through the link established for that meeting and activate the microphone and audio.

IRC

It is a communication tool used during Working Group meetings to record the minutes. At the beginning of each meeting, one of the participants will be elected as the scribe and will be responsible for recording all discussions that take place during that meeting.

At the end of the meeting the robot generates the Minutes. Thus, participants must always be online, preferably using a computer.

A robot called Zakim takes notes, identifies the participants, and manages the queue. The IRC helps to organize the meeting and achieve the established goals, for instance, by typing “q+” the participant indicates that he/she would like to speak.

Github

It is a web-based Git with different repositories for W3C Working Groups and activities.

We use it to organize the DWBP WG. The Best Practices document was written in HTML and used the ReSpec library to comply with the W3C recommendations and specifications.

In addition, it makes it possible for users to comment on the text or code and respond using the tool itself.

Wiki

It is the main tool currently used by W3C to document the WG files. It is collaborative; therefore any WG participant can create a page or update the existing content.

Mailing List

As the main communication means for the WG participants, it is used to encourage discussions and to receive outside collaborations from other W3C members, or from anyone interested in contributing to that recommendation. In addition, it is the Chairs` official communication channel.

Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct

W3C members and the Working Groups participants should comply with the Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct.

Conclusion

W3C members or anyone interested in contributing can participate in the development of Web standards, whose process is truly collaborative.

Since the entire process is open and web documented, in order to contribute, all you need to do is become familiar with the rules and tools.

Actively taking part in the Web development, contributing to creating the Web standards with ethics and respect, and constantly seeking consensus is extremely gratifying.