



For many technology associations, the success of their technical work group (TWG) is central to the group's mission. But if you ask many board members about the quality of TWG meetings, for instance, they'll often roll their eyes and say, "Oh, those meetings....they're good as long as I don't have to go."

If your TWG needs a tune-up, here are a few habits that will keep the technical engine running smoother—and ensure your association is able to deliver on its mission.

1 Leverage technology.

When addressing "technical" working groups, the use of technology should be a given, right? Well, not always. In our work with TWGs, we've encountered many organizations that still manage business communications using clunky, anarchized distribution lists; manage documents via email; and conduct voting with no records whatsoever. With the range of tools available today to manage working groups, there's absolutely no excuse to not take advantage of them.

Emails need to be archived—not just for current group members, but to enable future working group participants to come in and quickly get up to speed on group activities, priorities, and past decisions. A solid document management platform with version control, document check in/check out, and comment-tracking features is a must.

Balloting should use a tool that automates the process and tracks results. There are a number of excellent solutions out there—Kavi Workspace (Kavi.com) is one we've seen deliver consistently good experiences. Kavi is an industry leader, and is used by scores of ANSI-accredited standards organizations.

2 Know your place.

And your role. And your charter. Without a well-defined charter, clear deliverables and deadlines, the work of a TWG can rapidly spin out of orbit. Unstructured TWGs often start doing work that, while interesting, may not be relevant to the mission of the organization. Regular sessions and frequent communication between the TWG chair and the association board can help keep boundaries clear and deliverables on target.

3 Reserve decision-making for those who show up.

A surprising number of TWGs lack "good standing" requirements that mandate attendance as a requirement for voting. These provisions are critical. Decisions need to be made by the people who have been participating in the process, doing the work, and who have proper context around the questions at hand. Attendance requirements help keep work on track, create a strong engagement incentive, and provide more ROI for dues-paying members.

4 Show them the ropes.

Senior team members should help younger, less experienced participants learn the ropes. Training and mentorship can go a long way. For example, make sure you provide training to TWG chairs on meeting facilitation, organizational "rules of engagement," and general tips on driving consensus in a consortia environment. Just because someone is a technical expert doesn't mean he or she is well-versed in running a group or has strong communications skills. Accurate and approved minutes, as well as the ability to track action items, are critical to your committee's success.

5 Don't reinvent the wheel.

Your group may be working on cutting-edge technology, but the concept of a technical working group and the processes effective TWG use, certainly are not new. Be sure to borrow best practices from other organizations. Whether you need to establish IP policies or rules of procedure, don't waste cycles reinventing the wheel.

6 Get help.

When a technical problem arises in our everyday lives, most of us tend to call in technical experts. (Just think of any plumbing or electrical work that needs completion in your home.) The same holds true in TWG settings. When documents need to be written, call on a technical writer. When you need a solid facilitator for a delicate topic, or a project manager to track progress, call in someone with relevant experience. Far too many organizations try to go it alone—usually to their long-term detriment. Investing in experienced help is always a sound decision.

7 Leave your desk.

Email is easy. Conference calls are useful. Google Hangouts have their place, too. But there is no substitute for an old-fashioned, face-to-face meeting. Make sure your group creates a regular schedule of face-to-face meetings to supplement interactions via other media. Not only do face-to-face meetings provide a relatively distraction-free environment, they facilitate the development of long-term, trust-based relationships, which are critical to high-quality collaboration.

If you need help addressing one or more of these essentials, our AMC services can help. We provide strategic consulting and management services to associations, standard setting organizations, and technology consortia at all life cycle stages—from start-up through growth phase and maturity. Over the years, we have worked with dozens of organizations on all aspects of association management and operations.

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