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Corporate Aid Speeds Up Standards Process

BY WILLIE D. JONES

More than two years have passed since the first IEEE standard was produced by a working group that welcomed companies as voting members. Previously, only individuals—often at the behest of the companies that employed them—could draft and vote on standards. But the new approach is going gangbusters: new standards are being hammered out in two years or less, compared with the four years needed previously.

Four other standards have been approved in a similar fashion—on design automation languages, broadband communications over power lines, chip interconnects, and RFID—since the IEEE Standards Association (SA) Corporate Program yielded that first standard. In addition, eight working groups are drafting seven new standards and an update of that first one. This standard, IEEE Std. 1625, which deals with the manufacture of rechargeable batteries for mobile computers, was completed in just 16 months.

Other aspects of standards writing have also been sped up. "Companies proposing a standard are confident that they will know within 45 days whether their proposal is accepted or rejected," says IEEE Member Chuck Adams, chair of the Corporate Advisory Group that acts as liaison between industry and the IEEE Standards Association Board of Governors. Previously, a go or no-go decision could drag on for months. Companies are now motivated to ensure that the standard-writing process is carried out with product cycles in mind, Adams points out.

"The new approach is well accepted. The program is now proven," says Mary Lynne Nielsen, senior manager of the Standards Association's strategic programs, in Piscataway, N.J. "And we will continue to expand direct corporate involvement in IEEE standards in the future."

GROWING The IEEE-SA Corporate Program has grown rapidly, from 40 corporate members in 2004 to 75 today. Its ranks include large companies such as Intel, Lucent, Motorola, Panasonic, and Siemens, and smaller companies like Synplicity Inc., in Sunnyvale, Calif., and GridPoint Systems, in Ottawa.

The Corporate Advisory Group has also grown, from eight members at its inception to the 10 currently serving two-year terms. This group offers advice to corporate members on how best to translate technical innovations into standards and how the process will affect their bottom lines. It also sponsors standards for new and emerging technologies that may not fall within the traditional scope of the IEEE's 37 technical societies. An eleventh member will be added in 2007. This seat will be filled each year by a representative of a company in a developing nation to ensure that the group meets its self-imposed requirement for geographic and economic diversity, says Adams.

Oddly, a quicker pace was not the program's original intent. Industry leaders had asked the IEEE-SA to consider a new standards-writing process that would complement the century-old methodusual approach that involved individuals exclusively. Simply put, they wanted a more direct voice than their corporate memberships in the Standards Association—which gave them a certain number of individual IEEE-SA memberships for their employees—had previously allowed.

But company support is speeding things along, notes Nielsen, "often in the form of funds for project management, meeting space, and personnel to develop and maintain Web sites through which working groups communicate."

The IEEE-SA has not scrapped the traditional approach, where individuals comprise the voting members of a working group, she says. "The IEEE has been making standards that way for a hundred years, and we will continue to do so." Members of a standards working group can opt to give voting rights to both individuals and corporate entities or limit participation to one or the other.

For more information on the IEEE-SA Corporate Program, visit <http://standards.ieee.org>.

