

Making the Most of An IETF Meeting

First time at an IETF meeting? A newcomer offers helpful tips for raising your comfort level and getting the most out of your time there.



It all started when Internet expert and long-time IETFer John Klensin asked whether I had ever attended an IETF meeting. Until then, I hadn't even considered attending one as they are generally held in North America, which is far from my home in Mauritius. Noticing my dilemma, John introduced me to the ISOC Fellowship programme, which aims to help people from developing countries participate in IETF meetings. After making it through the fellowship selection process, I was on my way to IETF 70 in Vancouver.

As a newcomer, the number of people at the meeting might at first take you aback. Picture more than a thousand people milling about discussing Internet protocols and speaking in acronyms, some of which you may recognise, others you may not. The atmosphere is informal; in fact, most participants don't wear a suit.

If English is not your first language, you might feel shy about speaking. Don't be. The people are approachable and understanding of non-English speakers. It's useful to get to know the Working Group (WG) attendees prior to the meeting by participating in the WG mailing lists. If you see a familiar name, walk up to that person and introduce yourself; you won't be brushed off.

An IETF meeting is one of those events where free wireless is available throughout the venue, from your hotel room to the corridors outside the meeting area. You'll see participants sitting on the floor typing away on their laptops. Generally the ritual is to open your laptop at the beginning of a WG session. I was told that in the old days the terminal room was lined with computer terminals. Today the terminal room is mainly a place where you can find a network and power socket to plug in your laptop. So leave your tie at home and bring your laptop.

The WG sessions are where most of the work gets done. The sessions are far from the heated discussions you might see on the IETF mailing lists. People are friendly and they wait in line for a chance to make their points at the microphone. Keep in mind, though, that taking a turn at the microphone is an art form that many long-time attendees have mastered. Watch others

and see how they voice opinions. By observing how it's done, you'll quickly learn how to voice your views in front of the group.

While the WG sessions are where most of the action is, a lot of work gets done in the hallways. There you might overhear a long-winded mailing-list discussion get resolved. It's also the ideal place to catch someone you want to talk to. In fact, some people attend the IETF meetings for this reason alone.

Perhaps the only times you'll find the entire group in one room is during the Plenary discussions. Following the presentations is an open microphone session, which is a good example of democracy in action. It's a good time to raise questions that are appropriate for the entire group. These days, the plenary discussions are when the chicken-and-egg protocol, also known as IPv6, generally comes up.

The Internet Society staff members are friendly and helpful. They're happy to introduce you to other IETF participants. The staff is there to help make your IETF meeting experience successful. And they can only do that if you speak up and tell them how they can help.

Finally, what makes IETF meetings valuable are the people you get to meet. It is up to you to make the most out of this face-to-face experience by reaching out to other participants.



IETF MEETING NEWCOMER RESOURCES

- IETF Home Page
<http://www.ietf.org>
- The Tao of IETF: A Novice's Guide to the Internet Engineering Task Force <http://www.ietf.org/tao.html>
- Newcomers slides and audio
<http://www.ietf.org/proceedings/05mar/slides/newcomer-0/sld1.htm>
- IETF Journal
<http://isoc.org/tools/blogs/ietfjournal/>
- IETF mailing lists
<http://www.ietf.org/maillist.html>
- Pointers to active Internet Drafts, WG agendas and other useful WG resources
<http://tools.ietf.org/>
- ISOC Fellowship Programme
<http://www.isoc.org/educpillar/fellowship/>