

A Formula for Success: Committee E53 on Property Management Systems

BY PAT PICARIELLO

The new ASTM Committee E53 on Property Management Systems has demolished preconceptions about consensus standards taking “too long” to develop. With three committee standards approved and published in a year’s time, ASTM has altered notions of the prohibitive time factor in developing consensus standards. ASTM Staff Manager Pat Picariello describes how the combination of an industry sector’s need with the society’s technological aids made for lightning-speed standards development.

Have you ever heard anyone make a joke about how long it takes to get a standard through the ASTM process? Maybe you’ve been at a coffee break during Committee Week talking to some friends, and feeling somewhat sorry for yourself because your draft just caught seven more negatives on its latest trip through a committee ballot. At that moment the thought may have crossed your mind that the ASTM process, though one of the best in the world, can be fairly difficult to navigate.

Now what if I told you that a committee was able to take three never-before-seen drafts, format them according to ASTM form and style, gain general acceptance on the relevant issues prior to ballot, complete a successful round of sub balloting, resolve all negative votes, and complete a successful main committee ballot resulting in three approved, full-consensus standards in one calendar year? You might chuckle and recall fond memories of your childhood when the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy seemed as real as the ground under your feet.

What if I then told you that the committee that spawned these three standards didn’t even exist at this time last year? No, I didn’t sell swampland before I came to ASTM, but Committee E53 on Property Management Systems wasn’t officially organized until June 2000.

How was it possible for this committee to obliterate the average amount of time it takes for a revision (let alone an entire standard) to be approved? How were they able to accomplish this goal working within a process known to move at a very deliberate pace?

The answer can be distilled into a simple formula:

Need + Technology = Goal

Industry need combined with thorough and precise organization and ASTM’s technological advancements

resulted in Committee E53 being initiated, structured, organized, and populated within one year. This formula allowed three standards to be written, circulated, formatted, balloted, and approved in that same year. This story, in and of itself, is remarkable. What is even more remarkable is the fact that many of the tools that enabled E53 to operate this efficiently are currently available to everyone and just might be able to help you improve your time to market as well.

First Contact

In January 2000, ASTM was contacted by representatives from the National Property Management Association (NPMA) with a problem. The property/asset management industry had matured to a point where the need for standards was a marketplace reality, but a strategy to help meet that need was proving difficult to establish - could ASTM help in this area?

This question is asked of ASTM many times per year. Typically, a response will include an additional series of questions to help flesh out the complete picture. Is the need real or perceived? What is the breadth of the activity? Are all of the key stakeholders represented? Has the activity been attempted before and if so, what were the results? What is the degree of urgency inherent in the need for standards?

Nature of the Need and Breadth of Activity

The property industry is fairly diverse. Every corporate entity (industrial, educational, or governmental) that owns something must account for and report that its assets are being managed efficiently and effectively. How do the shareholders of ITT know that the corporation’s assets are

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being managed appropriately? How do the taxpayers of a state or local government know that their particular municipality is fiscally healthy? These questions are answered by the development of consistent and uniformly applied industry practices. The CFO of ITT can then point to a practice for the inventory of ITT's assets. The state auditor for Alabama can then demonstrate compliance with a practice for assessing lost or damaged property. The development of these types of standards provides reassurance and accountability, both of which are critical to the long-term success of any industry segment.

The problem with the property industry was that no such standards existed. Were there ways of recording this information? Of course there were. In fact, there were many different ways of recording this information - so many that it was quite impossible to determine if anyone was performing as well as they could be. This industry desperately wanted a consistently applied series of documents developed via input from the widest possible percentage of their industry. They wanted a process to aid in the promulgation of a standardization strategy for their industry and they came to ASTM for help.

Key Stakeholders in Place?

All of the right people in the right place at the right time. Is this possible? How frequently can it be achieved? Issues such as logistics, notice, promotion, apathy, and urgency can all play a part in whether all key stakeholders are at the table when the work begins. From the very first conference call, it was apparent that the NPMA met these criteria as well as could be expected. As an industry association (vs. a trade association), the NPMA represented an ideal microcosm of the property industry. Participants in the early discussions included representatives of industry (ITT, Raytheon, Honeywell, Sandia Labs), federal government (Department of Energy, Department of Defense, Department of Labor), state government (Texas, Alabama, Florida, Georgia), and academia (Stanford University, Worcester Polytechnic University, University of California-Berkeley). This diverse nature of industry segments, combined with the common goal of standards development, helped to ensure a solid and broadly based foundation for the development of this activity.

Prior Attempts and Urgency

Early discussion and research quickly revealed that while the need for property and asset standardization had existed for some time, no cohesive or concerted effort had been made to develop a standardization strategy for this industry. This conclusion was made even more surprising

by the obvious urgency displayed by the industry during our initial discussions and the communication of a very simple goal - a series of approved, full consensus standards in one year.

Ambitious? Certainly. Unprecedented? Possibly. Possible? Absolutely!

Development of the Game Plan

Remember the formula for this success story:

Need + Technology = Goal

With the depth of the need having been established, the implementation of a sound organizational philosophy was critical to any chance for success. The major component of this philosophy was the development of a timeline with a series of defined objectives that captured every element necessary to meet the newly established goal.

- 1/00 ASTM initially contacted by NPMA
- 2/00 Draft document deliverables to ASTM
- 4/00 Establishment of Interactive Standards Development Forums
- 6/00 Organizational meeting of Committee E53 on Property Management Systems
- 6/00 Development and balloting of E53 bylaws
- 7/00 Initiation of subcommittee ballots for draft standards
- 9/00 Submission of E53 scope and bylaws to COTCO for review and approval
- 10/00 Submission of title, scope, and organizational structure to ASTM Board
- 11/00 Initiation of main committee ballot for draft standards
- 1/01 Approval of E53 standards

Timelines are wonderful tools and on paper. Almost anything can be made to appear conceivable from a theoretical standpoint. However, it is the difference between the theoretical and the practical that would determine the fate of Committee E53's plans. The timeline set a series of very ambitious goals and in order to accomplish them on time and to the requisite degree, alternative approaches would need to be employed - approaches made possible due to the technological capabilities of ASTM.

Technology Makes the Difference

The first century of ASTM's standards development was almost entirely dependent upon two things – paper and the U.S. Postal Service. Without these key elements, the bulk of ASTM's 11,000 standards would never have been written, and this organization would not have reached the preeminent status it currently enjoys.

With complete reverence toward these founding principles and without any plan to abandon them or diminish

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their significance, ASTM recognized that in order to continue to compete (and win) in the standards development arena, the changing needs of the global marketplace needed to be recognized and embraced. This sensitivity would ensure ASTM's continued participation as a major contributor in the SDO environment and help guarantee the prolongation of our exemplary level of service.

The mid-1990s saw ASTM invest sizable capital toward the improvement of the technological capabilities inherent in the changing needs of industry. The increased utility of the ASTM Web site (www.astm.org) elevated standards development to a level unimaginable to our constituency of a generation ago. Tools such as draft standard templates (see Standards Development Tools under Technical Committees/Membership) enable new documents to be created in ASTM format. Interactive Standards Development Forums (see Standards Development Tools) provide an online, globally accessible, 24/7 location to post documents, receive and discuss feedback, and gain a general degree of consensus prior to initiating actual ballot activity. Broadcast e-mail communication from the home page of an ASTM committee has taken the dissemination of information to an entirely new level and electronic balloting will serve to revolutionize the current philosophy of standards development by eliminating the delays inherent in a postal-reliant process, broadening the availability of the material in question, and quickening a review process occasionally seen as lethargic.

Technology and Committee E53

Committee E53 realized that if they stood any chance of meeting their goal of producing approved, full consensus standards in one year, they would have to avail themselves of every technological advancement ASTM had to offer. They began with the draft standard templates and, with some up-front editorial support from ASTM, produced four draft documents that were posted as Interactive Standards Development Forums. Each Forum held a roster of approximately 10 people and within six weeks every document had received multiple comments and had been revised several times.

A series of conference calls with the initial contact group helped facilitate the organizational meeting in June 2000. A home page for the committee (complete with contact information and a request for participation) was posted immediately upon establishment of the activity, and the bylaws for E53 were developed, distributed, and ultimately approved via purely electronic means. The committee completed a successful round of subcommittee balloting and was the inaugural participant in ASTM's electronic

balloting pilot program during which they conducted a multiple-item main committee ballot. The ballot closed in December 2000 and the first three standards produced by Committee E53 on Property Management Systems were ultimately approved on time and in compliance with their original goal set one year earlier.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Was this activity representative of the average ASTM scenario? Probably not. The members of Committee E53 come from an industry completely new to the standards development activity of this Society. The process and the guidelines they established for themselves worked (in part) because they are comfortable with communicating in an electronic environment. They had no preconceived expectations, nor did they have to unlearn any specific process or procedure.

Can the technology employed by Committee E53 to hasten their standardization objectives work in a similar fashion for other ASTM activities (new or existing)? Absolutely. The results obtained by E53 highlight one key element of standards development within ASTM – the ASTM process is entirely capable of moving as quickly as the need driving the process dictates. Need and urgency are wonderful motivators. If they are sufficiently present in a specific activity, the ASTM process will not stand in the way of achievement - in fact, it might just serve to hasten it.

Approved Standards:

Committee E53 on Property Management Systems

E 2131, Standard Practice for Assessing Loss, Damage, or Destruction of Property

E 2132, Standard Practice for Physical Inventory of Durable, Moveable, Property

E 2135, Standard Terminology for Property and Asset Management ◆

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