

1.4 Deliberations and Recommendations: Pre-Launch Activities

Pre-Launch Activities		
1.4.1	Applicant Guidebook	Work Track 1
1.4.2	Communications	Work Track 1
1.4.3	Systems	Work Track 1

1.4.1 Applicant Guidebook

a. What is the relevant policy and/or implementation guidance (if any)?

There is no specific recommendation about an Applicant Guidebook, though the 2007 Final Report notes that there will be a “Request for Proposals” (RFP): “This policy development process has been designed to produce a systemised and ongoing mechanism for applicants to propose new top-level domains. The Request for Proposals (RFP) for the first round will include scheduling information for the subsequent rounds to occur within one year.¹”

b. How was it implemented in the 2012 round of the New gTLD Program?

The “Request for Proposals (RFP)” became the Applicant Guidebook, which was effectively the implementation of the 2007 GNSO recommendations on new gTLDs. The Applicant Guidebook served as the roadmap for applicants, a guide for staff developing operational practices and procedures, and a source of program information for other interested parties.

The Applicant Guidebook was developed through an iterative process that took into account public comments, explanatory memoranda and other sources of feedback collected over the course of three years and nine versions.

c. What are the preliminary recommendations and/or implementation guidelines?

¹ See 2007 [GNSO Final Report](#) Preamble to the discussion of the Terms of Reference.

1. The Work Track generally agreed that an Applicant Guidebook (“AGB”) of some form should continue to be utilized in future waves of applications. The Work Track generally agreed, however, that the Applicant Guidebook should be made more user friendly.
2. The Work Track generally agreed on a number of specific, implementation-oriented changes to enhance the user experience of the Applicant Guidebook as described below.
3. In order to enhance accessibility for ease of understanding, especially for non-native English speakers and those that are less familiar with the ICANN environment, the Work Track believes that the AGB should:
 - Be less focused on historical context and to the extent it is included, concentrate this content in appendices if possible.
 - Be less about policy, with a stronger focus on the application process.
 - Be focused on serving as a practical user guide that applicants can utilize in applying for a TLD. For instance, step-by-step instructions, possibly by type of application with a ‘choose your own adventure’ methodology.
 - Have an improved Table of Contents, include an index and in the online version contain links to appropriate sections, definitions, etc.
 - The online version could have sections that apply specifically to the type of application being applied for with the ability to only print those related sections
 - In conjunction with the above, the online version should allow for advanced indexing of an omnibus text. A core set of standard provisions may be applicable to everyone, but additional provisions may only be applicable to some. If the text is tagged and searchable, users could more easily locate the parts of the text that are relevant to them.
 - Any Agreements/Terms of Use for systems access (including those required to be “clicked-through” should be finalized in advance and included in the Applicant Guidebook with the goal of minimizing obstacles and/or legal burdens on applicants (see Systems in section 1.4.3)².

d. What are the options under consideration, along with the associated benefits / drawbacks?

None [being considered at this time.](#)

e. What specific questions are the PDP WG seeking feedback on?

None [being proposed at this time.](#)

f. Deliberations

In considering the topic of the Applicant Guidebook, there was early agreement that some form of an Applicant Guidebook made sense for subsequent procedures. However, many in the Work

² This refers to terms and conditions that must be executed in addition to the Applicant Terms and Conditions and the ICANN Registry Agreement. For example, in the 2012 Round, Applicants or Registry Operators were required to accept additional terms and conditions to access the applicant submission portal, the Trademark Clearinghouse system, the customer support portal, etc.,

Track felt that the Applicant Guidebook could be made more user friendly. A theme that arose was that to the extent possible, the Applicant Guidebook should be more audience-driven. As currently drafted, the Applicant Guidebook serves as a single comprehensive guide for all users, though it is divided into six modules.

Some Work Track members felt that the module concept made sense and that it could be expanded upon to serve as part of the solution to make the Applicant Guidebook more audience-driven. For instance, parts of the Applicant Guidebook could be dedicated to Registry Service Providers, to Escrow Providers, to various attributes of the application (e.g., community-based, geographic), as well as for aspects relevant to parties interested in the program (e.g., rights protection mechanisms, objections, GAC Advice, etc.). Essentially, modules allow the Applicant Guidebook to be scalable and that format should be continued. There was general agreement within the Work Track that there should not be multiple versions of the Applicant Guidebook. This sentiment was particularly strong in Community Comment 2, where many felt that a single Applicant Guidebook made sense. Developing multiple versions of the Applicant Guidebook was seen to be more likely to cause confusion and create inconsistency between versions.

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The Work Track widely agreed that the Applicant Guidebook should be made more easily searchable (e.g., make it available online or in addition to a PDF). There was support for a more comprehensive table of contents and an index. There was wide agreement that the Applicant Guidebook should continue to be made available in multiple languages.

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As noted, the discussions focused on making the Applicant Guidebook more user friendly. To that end, there was support to make it more of a step-by-step, user guide oriented experience.

Finally, the Work Track recognizes that there is work ongoing in the full working group and other work tracks that may have an impact on any final recommendations on the Applicant Guidebook. For instance, the creation of a Registry Service Provider (RSP) program or additional application types could be impactful.

g. Are there other activities in the community that may serve as a dependency or future input to this topic?

This section is more focused on the structure of the AGB and how it can be made more usable. The Work Track notes that while there may be external efforts that may ultimately affect the drafting of the AGB during implementation (SSAC's work on name collisions, the PDPs on rights protection mechanisms and IGOs, etc.), it is not anticipated that these efforts would alter the structure of the AGB itself.

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1.4.2 Communications

a. What is the relevant policy and/or implementation guidance (if any)?

Implementation Guideline C: "ICANN will provide frequent communications with applicants and the public including comment forums which will be used to inform evaluation panels."

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Implementation Guideline E: "The application submission date will be at least four (4) months after the issue of the Request for Proposal and ICANN will promote the opening of the application round."

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Implementation Guideline M: "ICANN may establish a capacity building and support mechanism aiming at facilitating effective communication on important and technical Internet governance functions in a way that no longer requires all participants in the conversation to be able to read and write English."

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Implementation Guideline O: "ICANN may put in place systems that could provide information about the gTLD process in major languages other than English, for example, in the six working languages of the United Nations."

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b. How was it implemented in the 2012 round of the New gTLD Program?

Communications efforts were implemented through three primary program elements:

- The New gTLDs Communications Plan,⁷ which was authorized by the ICANN Board⁸ to serve as the basis for ICANN's global outreach and education activities for the program.
- The Customer Portal, which facilitated communication between applicants and the ICANN Organization. ICANN also employed methods such as webinars, roadshows, and sessions at ICANN meetings to support dialogue between the community and ICANN.
- The Application Comments Forum, which was used to collect public comments.

Implementation Guideline E was interpreted to mean that the application submission period would open at least four months after ICANN approved the Applicant Guidebook (AGB), allowing ICANN to promote the program and applicants to become familiar with the AGB. The final Applicant Guidebook was released in November 2011.

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c. What are the preliminary recommendations and/or implementation guidelines?

The Work Track does not envision developing additional policy recommendations with respect to "Communications", but it has generally agreed on a number of specific implementation guidelines to improve the reach, timeliness, and accessibility of the communications strategy for the New gTLD Program. These include:

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Program Information, Education and Outreach:

- The Work Track believes that for the next round of new gTLDs there should continue to be a minimum of four (4) months from the time in which the final Applicant Guidebook is released and the time until which applications would be finally due.

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⁷ <https://archive.icann.org/en/topics/new-gtlds/new-gtlds-communications-plan-30may11-en.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.icann.org/resources/board-material/resolutions-2011-06-20-en>

- There should be a sufficient period of time available prior to the opening of the Application Submission Period to allow for outreach efforts related to Applicant Support and other program elements and execution of the Communication Plan (“Communications Period”).
 - The Communications Period for the next round of new gTLDs should be at least six (6) months.
 - In the event that following the next round of new gTLDs, application opportunities are organized as a series of application windows, the Communications Period may be shortened to three (3) months.
- Publish all program information on the main icann.org website (as opposed to <https://newgtlds.icann.org>), along with other related ICANN information and links to improve usability and accessibility.
- Leverage Global Stakeholder Engagement staff to facilitate interaction between regional ICANN Organization teams and potential applicants from these regions.
- For additional recommendations on outreach related to Applicant Support, see section **1.5.4**.

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Communications with Applicants:

- Provide a robust online knowledge base of program information that is easy to search and navigate, updated in a timely manner, and focused on issues with wide-reaching impact. Offer an opt-in notification service that allows applicants to receive updates about the program and their application in real or near real time.
- Display and provide updates in a timely manner on expected response times on the website, so that applicants know when they can expect to receive a reply, as well as information about how applicants can escalate inquiries that remain unresolved.
- Facilitate communication between applicants and the ICANN Organization by offering real-time customer support using a telephone ‘help line,’ online chat functionality, and other online communication tools.

d. What are the options under consideration, along with the associated benefits / drawbacks?

None being considered at this time.

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e. What specific questions are the PDP WG seeking feedback on?

- Do you have any suggestions of criteria or metrics for determining success for any aspects of the New gTLD communications strategy?
- The communications period prior to the 2012 Round of New GTLDs was approximately six months. Was this period optimal, too long or too short? [Please explain.](#)
- If ICANN were to launch new application windows in regular, predictable windows, would a communications period prior to the launch of each window be necessary? If so, would each communications period need to be the same length? Or if the application windows are truly predictable, could those communication periods be shorter for the subsequent windows?

f. Deliberations

There was early agreement in the Work Track that there are opportunities for improvement in the way the ICANN Organization communicates with applicants and shares information about the program more broadly. The Work Track noted that in the 2012 round, while there were some metrics available⁹ related to communications efforts, the New gTLD Communications Plan did not define “success,” so it is difficult to evaluate if related initiatives within this plan accomplished program goals. There are a number of information sources available to support development of recommendations for subsequent rounds. The Work Track drew on the Program Implementation Review Report, observations from community members with first-hand experience in the 2012 round, and input received through CC2 to develop implementation guidance.

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One issue that Work Track members raised, and CC2 comments reinforced, is that predictability for applicants is essential. In particular, there was support for the idea that there must be sufficient time allotted prior to the opening of the Application Submission Period for ICANN to perform outreach related to Applicant Support and other program elements and execute its Communications Plan (“Communications Period”). Further, applicants must have sufficient time to review the finalized Applicant Guidebook and other materials related to the program before the next application window opens. Some Work Track members felt that in the context of events related to the 2012 round, there was not enough time between the publication of the Applicant Guidebook and the opening of the application window.

The Work Track considered that the next application opportunity is likely to be in the form of a round. Work Track members tended to support a Communications Period of at least six (6) months for the next round. Some Work Track members noted that if additional application opportunities are organized as a series of application windows, the Communications Period could be shorter for subsequent windows. Work Track members tended to support continuing to provide a minimum of four (4) months between the time in which the final Applicant Guidebook is released and the opening of next application window.

The Work Track discussed extensively ways to improve communications between applicants to the New gTLD Program and the ICANN Organization. The Work Track agreed that communications need to be comprehensive, timely, and easily accessible to all applicants.

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The Work Track discussed having an online resource that provides program information, updates, and answers to questions. A knowledge base was available in the 2012 round, but the Work Track felt that it was difficult to navigate and not sufficiently comprehensive. The Work Track also discussed that it could have been updated more quickly to reflect new information and developments. The Work Track agreed that in subsequent procedures, there should be an online knowledge database that is up-to-date, complete and searchable.

Members of the Work Track who were involved in the 2012 round, expressed their experience in having t to visit ICANN websites and portals to read updates about their application and the program, and in some cases needed to visit multiple sites to find the information they were seeking. The Work Track agreed that having one single site for the New gTLD Program where all program information would be available on a single website along with other ICANN information to improve accessibility and usability. This is consistent with recommendations in the Program Implementation Review Report.

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⁹ See Section 8.4 for the Program Implementation Review Report.

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The Work Track determined that it would be helpful to offer opt-in push notifications to ensure that applicants receive timely updates on new program developments, processes, and procedures, including information relevant to their own applications along with any related information that should be dispersed equally amongst all applicants to avoid any type of unfair advantage.

The Work Track agreed that it would be helpful for applicants to have easily accessible channels for reaching real-time customer support in subsequent rounds. Work Track members suggested that customer support should be available by phone, online chat, and possibly through additional means to ensure that applicants can quickly resolve inquiries. The prioritization of cases and system issues should also be considered.

Noting that the topic of Predictability is also addressed as a distinct issue area within this Working Group, the Work Track agreed that it is important for applicants to have predictability in their communications with the ICANN Organization. The Work Track suggested that the ICANN Organization display information about expected response times to inquiries as well as information about how applicants may escalate issues that remain unresolved.

In addition to considering communications with applicants, the Work Track discussed communications efforts related to outreach about the New gTLD Program. The Work Track agreed with the Program Implementation Review Report, which assessed¹¹ that the Global Stakeholder Engagement (GSE) Team may be a valuable resource for promoting regional awareness about the New gTLD Program. Additionally, GSE staff may be particularly well positioned to provide outreach in underserved regions to increase awareness about the New gTLD Program including the Applicant Support Program. For recommendations regarding the Applicant Support Program, see [1.5.4](#).

The Work Track agreed that it is important for any future Communications Plan to have a clear definition of success related to the communication elements, as well as metrics to support evaluation of their effectiveness. While the Work Track is not proposing how to define success at this time, members encourage further work on this issue.

g. Are there other activities in the community that may serve as a dependency or future input to this topic?

None identified by the Work Track at this time.

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1.4.3 Systems

a. What is the relevant policy and/or implementation guidance (if any)?

Implementation Guidance Q: ICANN may put in place systems that could provide information about the gTLD process in major languages other than English, for example, in the six working languages of the United Nations.

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¹¹ See Section 8.4 of the Program Implementation Review Report.

Other than the above, there is no guidance specifically related to technical systems in the 2007 Final Report.

b. How was it implemented in the 2012 round of the New gTLD Program?

The ICANN Organization developed and deployed applicant-facing systems to facilitate application submission and communications between ICANN operational staff and applicants. The two primary systems were:

- TLD Application System (TAS) - used by applicants to submit applications and receive results of evaluation procedures, such as Financial Capability, Technical/Operational Capability, Registry Services, and overall Initial Evaluation Results.
- Customer Portal - used by applicants to submit questions and receive responses from the ICANN Organization, issue clarifying questions, respond to GAC Advice, submit documentation during the contracting phase, etc.

Additional solutions developed to support the program included Digital Archery¹², Centralized Zone Data Service¹³, and the Application Comments Forum.¹⁴

c. What are the preliminary recommendations and/or implementation guidelines?

The Work Track is considering proposing the following high-level implementation guidelines:

- The ICANN Organization should ensure that enough time is provided for development and testing before any system is deployed.
- Systems should undergo extensive, robust Quality Assurance (QA), User Interface (UI) and Penetration testing to ensure that they are stable and secure, and that data is properly protected and kept confidential where appropriate.
- Applicant-facing systems should be usable and integrated, ideally with a single login.
- Once a system is in use, the ICANN organization should be transparent about any system changes that impact applicants or the application process. In the event of any security breach, ICANN should immediately notify all impacted parties.
- The ICANN Organization should offer prospective system end-users with the opportunity to beta-test systems while ensuring no unfair advantages are created for individuals who test the tools. It may accomplish this by setting up a Operational Test and Evaluation environment.
- As stated in Section 1.4.1 above, "Any Agreements/Terms of Use for systems access (including those required to be "clicked-through") should be finalized in advance and included in the Applicant Guidebook with the goal of minimizing obstacles and/or legal burdens on applicants.

The Work Track provided additional specific implementation guidance regarding technical systems:

- Applicants should be able to enter non-ASCII characters in certain fields.

¹² For additional information about Digital Archery, please see section 1.6.1 on Application Queuing.

¹³ See <https://czds.icann.org/en>.

¹⁴ Subsequent to the application process, the ICANN Organization changed platforms for live registry operators that included additional functionality including customer support, submission of Registry Services Evaluation Process requests, etc.

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- Applicants should be able to access live (real time) support using tools such as a phone helpline or online chat to address technical system issues.
- A single applicant should be able to submit and access multiple applications without duplicative data entry and multiple logins.
- Applicants should be able to receive automated confirmation emails from the systems.
- Applicants should be able to receive automated application fee related invoices.
- Applicants should be able to view changes that have been made to an application in the application system.
- Applicants should be able to upload application documents in the application system.
- Applicants should be able to update information/documentation in multiple fields without having to copy and paste information into the relevant fields.
- Applicants should be able to specify additional contacts to receive communication about the application and/or access the application and be able to specify different levels of access for these additional points of contact. The systems should provide means for portfolio applicants to provide answers to questions and then have them disseminated across all applications being supported.
- The systems should provide clearly defined contacts within the ICANN Organization for particular types of questions.

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d. What are the options under consideration, along with the associated benefits / drawbacks?

None being considered at this time.

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e. What specific questions are the PDP WG seeking feedback on?

None being proposed at this time.

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f. Deliberations

In its discussions, the Work Track carefully considered the tools used in the 2012 round and feedback about these systems received through Work Track discussions and CC2 comments. The Work Track also reviewed the Program Implementation Review Report as an additional input to discussions. The Work Track understands that different systems are likely to be used in subsequent procedures but sees value in drawing on "lessons learned" from the tools used in the 2012 round to make recommendations for the development and deployment of future systems.

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High-level discussions focused on concerns about usability, security, and stability of systems used for the 2012 New gTLD application process. With respect to user experience, the Work Track identified several challenges. To access TAS, users first had to log into the Citrix ZenApp layer, which provided a browser agnostic environment, and then had to log into TAS itself. Users reported a number of usability problems with this system. One significant issue was that users had to manage multiple logins for different systems that were not integrated resulting in a fragmented user experience. Work Track members also considered usability challenges with the

knowledge base in the Customer Service Portal, while noting that improvements in user experience were made over the course of the round.

Security was another issue discussed by the Work Track. Work Track members recalled that less than 24 hours before the 2012 application window closed, the TAS was taken offline due to a security issue.¹⁶ It was discovered that some users could view the file names and user names of other users in some scenarios.¹⁷ It took over a month to investigate and resolve the issue causing the application deadline to be extended for over 45 days.¹⁸ Work Track members agreed that systems handling applicant information should be tested extensively to ensure that these tools will keep user data safe and private.

The Work Track considered the fact that there were seven months between the completion of the Applicant Guidebook and the opening of the 2012 application window, and noted that this relatively short time frame combined with the fact that development of the systems did not start prior to the approval of the Applicant Guidebook, may have been factors in the challenges experienced with systems developed during this period.

The Work Track agreed that in subsequent procedures, the ICANN Organization must leave sufficient time for system development and testing, including robust usability and security testing. Systems should be effectively integrated to promote a better user experience. The Program Implementation Review Report similarly recommended that in subsequent procedures, application development timelines should leave time to allow for best practices in systems development. The Work Track is not stating that there needs to be more time in between the approval of the final Applicant Guidebook and the start of the application window, but rather that development and testing begin prior to the absolute finalization of all elements of the new gTLD Program.

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The Work Track further supported the idea that it might be useful to allow prospective users to beta test applications before the systems are fully deployed to identify usability issues. Some Work Track members suggested that the ICANN Organization in 2012 believed that such testing could give some applicants an unfair advantage by providing an early preview of tools to be used in the application process. Work Track members agreed that any beta-testing program should not unfairly advantage individual applicants. Recommendations about a beta testing program were also included in the Program Implementation Review Report.

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The Work Track discussed additional, specific pain points experienced by users in the 2012 round. For example, Work Track members noted that applicants were not able to receive invoices related to applications fees required to for financial processing within their respective organizations. The specific application guidance provided on application functionality reflects discussions about specific issues experienced by Work Track members and other community members using the TAS and the Customer Portal.

¹⁶ <https://newgtlds.icann.org/en/announcements-and-media/announcement-12apr12-en>

¹⁷ <http://newgtlds.icann.org/en/applicants/tas/interruption-faqs>

¹⁸ <https://newgtlds.icann.org/en/announcements-and-media/announcement-21may12-en>

g. Are there other activities in the community that may serve as a dependency or future input to this topic?

| None identified at this time.

