

## **The NISO Board of Directors’ Response to the Report of the Strategic Planning “Blue Ribbon” Panel**

The Board of Directors of the National Information Standards Organization gratefully acknowledges the work of the Strategic Planning “Blue Ribbon” Panel it commissioned to provide an external evaluation of the organization’s progress, current challenges, and prospective developmental trajectories. The NISO Board also wishes to thank The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for the grant provided in support of the Blue Ribbon Panel and related activities. The fact that such an impressive roster of community leaders agreed to participate in NISO’s strategic planning exercise is an indication of the continuing importance of standards to the information world that NISO serves, and an acknowledgement that if NISO did not exist that some sort of standards body would need to fill its place.

The information environment in which NISO operates is in a period of unprecedented change. In parallel with these changes, the whole environment for standards development and deployment has evolved rapidly in recent years. Throughout this time of change, however, the Board of NISO has been consistent in its view that the long-term value proposition of information standards and standardization is stronger and clearer today than it has ever been.

Any period of dramatic change presents significant threats and opportunities for organizations that provide essential infrastructure. To ensure that NISO evolves in an optimal manner to maximize its opportunities, and also to build on its historic strength as a neutral zone for creating cross-community standards, the NISO Board proactively engaged in a wide-ranging strategic planning exercise. Part of this exercise was to seek independent confirmation of the Board’s understandings about the organization and the environment it operates in, as well as the changes needed going forward. The Report of the Strategic Planning Panel is the result. Incorporating the Panel’s findings, the Board will complete the strategic plan after reviewing and re-defining NISO’s operations from top to bottom in order to address the changing landscape. The Board believes the output of the strategic plan is not only critical to NISO, it is critical to the entire community.

### ***The Panel Report***

The Board and the Panel are in complete agreement:

NISO is at a crossroads.

Our community's choice of standards to develop is critical to the long term viability of information-centered business. Standards must be carefully planned and thought-through at each stage, and maintained as they continue to evolve.

The Panel's Report advises the NISO Board to take three actions:

1. Define the NISO constituency for the future and articulate the way that NISO will relate to that constituency
2. Develop a well-synthesized Framework that looks at the needs and priorities of that constituency, the technical standards landscape relevant to that constituency, and the ecology of other standards related organizations relevant to that constituency.
3. Address resource and funding constraints and needs.

Key themes also stand-out in the Report and the Panel offers a number of important observations, suggestions, recommendations and ideas. In this Response the Board will first address the three key conclusions. Then we will comment on the related topics that the Panel brought forward that are germane to NISO's strategic development.

### ***Action #1: Define the NISO Constituency***

The Panel's report pointed out the disparity between NISO's core membership and the much-larger constituency that NISO's work serves. The Board agrees with this assessment and believes that NISO will continue to serve a broader constituency that is represented by its direct membership. This gap is not unusual in the standards development community. It is one of the core realities of the standards world that the beneficiaries of standardization are a much larger community than the dues-paying membership of the standards developing body. All of us benefit from the fire and safety codes promulgated and maintained by the National Fire Safety Association. Yet no one of us is likely to directly support the NFSA as a member or contributor. The same holds true for the ASTM, the SAE, and the IEEE.

In 1977, under the leadership of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, the first major strategic review and analysis of the information community's standards interests was undertaken. This review led to the creation of NISO. The leaders in that endeavor were careful to observe that NISO brought together three distinct sectors: library, publishing, and information technology. A deliberate decision was taken to establish NISO as an independent entity rather than harboring the organization within one of the major professional organizations (such as ALA or the AAP) that served one of the communities.

That first board of directors took a risk in taking this approach, yet in many ways it was prescient. We see today that in this digital age the boundaries between NISO's original constituencies are becoming increasingly blurred. NISO's focus is moving away from sector-defined standards and towards function-based standards development. As the traditional barriers between libraries, publishers, and users continue to break down, the

interdependences of the rapidly evolving information landscape are exposing a common need for standards that will ensure the effective creation and interchange of persistent information.

The current Board took a step beyond the Panel's focus on a definition of NISO's constituency to a review of the Products and Services that NISO produces. The Board has struggled with the effort to define NISO's core constituency in an increasingly global, intertwined information environment, and over time found that a functions-based view of standards development provides a framework that allows NISO's constituency to be defined in a more inclusive manner. NISO products include formal Specifications, White Papers, and Best Practices; NISO services include education and standards maintenance. To see NISO as a provider of Products and Services allows the Board to begin to reformulate the standards development process as work in support of information functions that are no longer confined to distinct communities. A focus on what NISO *does* rather than *who* NISO serves allows the Board to identify gaps in the information infrastructure that NISO can address.

.Much like many developers, NISO's work benefits a wider audience than our membership. Serving this larger public and professional interest distinguishes the NISO organization and enables the organization to fulfill its nonprofit mission.

### ***Action # 2: Develop a Well-Synthesized Framework***

The Panel correctly points out that NISO's approach to building its standards portfolio has been opportunistic rather than strategic. Many standards migrated to NISO after they were fully-developed in member-organizations or, more-typically, NISO waited for new projects to "bubble-up" rather than pro-actively identifying new topics. The NISO Board supports the Panel's recommendation that a careful analysis of the current environment and future trends be undertaken which can be used to support decision-making. In the Board's view this Framework will enable NISO to be defined by its demonstrated interests and vision rather than its legacy standards. With the completion of the Strategic Plan the Board will appoint a team from the information community to layout the key components of this Framework. The NISO Board proposes regular review of the Framework, using it to evaluate the outlay of its resources for standards work and to identify new standards work to be undertaken.

### ***Action # 3: Address resource and funding constraints and needs***

The Board is in agreement that NISO's financial base must be sufficient to support a robust and proactive program of standards development. The Board is alert to the fact that growth for growth's sake may not be the best solution and are eager to seek new and creative business models. The Board is undertaking a review of NISO's business and market opportunities as part of the strategic review now underway.

To support the analysis of new activity areas the Board recommends that a general funding plan be drafted. This tool will help NISO leadership identify the need for sources

of support for new work and to understand the number of simultaneous activities the organization can support.

New models will also need to be considered in terms of staffing. In particular, NISO needs to find ways to acquire the time and expertise of those members of the broader community who have vision and can help direct NISO's involvement in the information technology environment.

### *Other Strategic Considerations*

As the NISO organization takes on its refocused mission the challenge will be to identify those things that NISO has done in the past but that do not currently advance this rearticulated mission, and to move those off of NISO's plate.

As we move forward in our planning we are grateful for the clearly articulated advice that the Panel offers in several areas:

#### *Standards development*

Given the global nature of today's information economy the Board has recognized for some time that NISO standards must accommodate global needs and perspectives. NISO will continue to be a focal point that embraces the global perspective. NISO must also continue to participate in the traditional international standards arenas such as those offered by the ISO. We consider NISO's relationship to the ISO to be one of the benefits of national accreditation by ANSI. In addition, the viewpoint that NISO – as a standards community – can offer at the international level is unique and cannot be replaced by a government agency.

The Panel is correct to point out that NISO must continually re-evaluate its standards portfolio and realign the portfolio accordingly. As a part of our strategic planning the Board is tasking the Standards Development Committee to review the current portfolio of standards and, in consultation with NISO staff and ANSI staff, suggest an appropriate model for re-scaling the organization's standards responsibilities so there is organizational capacity to support new endeavors.

NISO must also, however, be alert to identify and explore emerging areas of opportunity for standards development. We take note of the Panel's suggestions that opportunities may reside in the learning management sector and digital preservation. In addition, we also take note of the Panel's recognition of the value of NISO's community-based approach to standards development as in, for example, the Metasearch Initiative. We are hopeful this model can be adapted to other topic areas that span multi-standards needs.

#### *Organizational Business Model*

To be thought provoking, the panel suggested that various organizational mergers or confluences be considered within NISO's strategic plan. The Board considered these observations, however we believe that the independent nature of the standards program

must be preserved as the organization develops in order to preserve the cross-sector, neutral arena that has always been one of NISO's strengths.

NISO has been by tradition supported by its member organizations. We believe this model can continue to support the organization and, in fact, we foresee membership growth into the future as the discernible value of information standards grows. It is clear, however, that other project-oriented models can be integrated into NISO's business model and the Board is actively reviewing these possibilities.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the NISO Board and the Blue Ribbon Panel are united in their view that both the standards arena and the information industry are in a period of unprecedented change. The strategic planning exercise was initiated to pro-actively position NISO optimally within this rapidly changing landscape so that it can help guide its members and constituency to take advantage of new opportunities as they arise.

It is evident that the perceptible value of information standards will only grow in the years to come as ever-increasing numbers of individuals, enterprises and government agencies come to rely on rich information services. With this backdrop, it is clear that the stakes are high for all concerned in the information sector. With the strategic planning exercise well underway, the Board is confident that NISO will rise to the responsibilities and challenges ahead.